

# “Winning for peace”

## by Janet Bloomfield

(A discussion document on the current state of UK peace and security NGOs and some suggestions as to how to improve their effectiveness)

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*“You got to fight everyday to keep mediocrity at bay.”*  
*Van Morrison.*

Recently some UK peace activists met together. One of the items on their agenda was a general discussion of where the world situation was leading. One question that was asked was *“why do you think that the peace movement is much less successful than the development movement in raising awareness and gaining public support and political influence?”* This group of seasoned peace activist from all around the country whose ages ranged from their early twenties to their sixties all talked about a variety of outside causes – the media, the apathy and ignorance of the public, lack of funding, the difficulties of the issues being dealt with, the political climate of fear. Not one of them mentioned that there might be some internal obstacles to success. This seems to be symptomatic of a lack of willingness to engage in the kind of self-examination that is needed if the majority of peace and security NGO’s are to become as effective as development, environment and human rights groups.

There are some examples of good strategic thinking and effective communication and advocacy within our community but these are fewer than one would hope for.

Why? Chris Rose, formerly of Greenpeace, identifies a similar syndrome in his recent book *“How to Win Campaigns”*<sup>1</sup>. He offers some excellent guidance as to how to improve performance. But most groups appear to think that they do not

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<sup>1</sup> HOW TO WIN CAMPAIGNS pub April 7 2005 Earthscan by Chris Rose see [www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/1853839620/ref=ed\\_ra\\_of\\_dp/202-6151204-2796606](http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/1853839620/ref=ed_ra_of_dp/202-6151204-2796606) or at a discount from [www.earthscan.co.uk](http://www.earthscan.co.uk) Chris Rose also produces a very useful e-mail newsletter. To subscribe or to this free newsletter visit [www.campaignstrategy.org/newsletter\\_index.html](http://www.campaignstrategy.org/newsletter_index.html).

need to take professional advice about the latest communication techniques or organisational strategies.

There are a number of obstacles that groups put in their own way.

### **What model of social change?**

There are so many unarticulated and implicit assumptions about how social change happens that it seems like the elephant in the room that everybody knows is there yet no one talks about. Incremental, revolutionary, grassroots based, top down, broadly based and party political are all approaches that are and have been taken... But it is very rare to have a consciously chosen discussion about the underlying assumptions behind what groups do. It is also probable that society has changed so fast in the last ten years that people (particularly the older generation i.e. those over 40) are genuinely bewildered about how to make an impact. Groups need help in navigating this new world of the web, blogs and 24 hour news channels.

### **Effectiveness means more funding not the other way around.**

Lack of funding is a permanent complaint in the sector. Experience suggests that those who have engaged in a thoughtful and coherent way with the new political and media environment have done a lot better than those who are passionate about the rightness of what they are doing and see it as a moral failure of funders and supporters that they have not seen this too!

### **Lack of quality control.**

There is a certain suspicion of professionalism in some parts of the peace and security community. Some see it as a sell out to the dominant culture; some unconsciously cling to the tradition of British amateurism. The overwhelming desire to “do something” about a problem leads to too much energy being put into activities that are not thought through and under resourced and often only appeal to those already within the “internally referenced” world of those organising the activity. Again those groups that apply more rigorous thinking to organising do better but those that don’t exhibit resentment of this and cling to their ineffective ways.

### **Poor communication of too much information**

The amount of time and effort groups put into research and writing of briefings far outweighs the amount of time and effort that they spend in communicating their content to a wider audience. Standards of design and presentation have improved recently but the full range of expertise available about communications is still not being applied coherently. A recent report from the US PR company Fenton Communications<sup>2</sup> outlines this problem and suggests many effective approaches that can be taken to developing a communications strategy that will work. Bludgeoning people with facts and not understanding the value of the visual are two of the main blind spots.

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<sup>2</sup> “Now Hear This” available for download at [http://www.fenton.com/pages/5\\_resources/nowhearthis.htm](http://www.fenton.com/pages/5_resources/nowhearthis.htm).

Another obstacle to effective communication is the imbalance between research groups and campaigning groups. There is no doubt that the UK Charity Laws create difficulties for both research groups and campaigning groups. Research groups benefit from charity status but are restricted in their advocacy because of them. Campaigning groups can speak out but their resource base is limited because they cannot apply to most trusts and foundations and gain benefit from the tax breaks given to charities. But it is not just money. Campaigning groups constantly fall into the trap of moral self righteousness and blame those who apparently refuse to take notice and act upon their wonderful ideas rather than examine if they are communicating in a way that engages with a wider audience.

### **Lack of training, mentoring and proper support for the new generation.**

There is a whole generation of bright and energetic young people who are eager to work for peace and security NGO's. Whenever an organisation offers internships they are usually overwhelmed with applications from outstanding candidates. Yet there is little done to harness this enthusiasm and consider ways of expanding the number of jobs available. It is very sad that most of the interns and young volunteers who work in the peace and security arena do not end up working in the field. Most of them take the expertise and skills they gain into NGO's working on other issues simple because they are better developed and have more jobs available.

### **Some suggestions to raise the game of the peace and security community:**

The picture is not all negative. Considerable progress has been made in recent years in collaboration and engagement between NGO's. Groups like the Missile Defence Working Group, the Nuclear Issues Working Group, the Peace and Security Liaison Group and the WMD Awareness Programme have built trust between previously competing groups. Some have proved very effective in improving engagement with government, opinion formers and civil society.

However a lot more needs to be done for the peace and security community to gain the same clout as the human rights, development and environment movements. The following agenda could have appeal for funders

#### **Invest in capacity building.**

The one thing that could really help with the problems outlined here is some coherent and consistent support for capacity building for groups working in the peace and security field. Training programmes, support for staff development, workshops on planning and implementing communications strategies are three areas that could all add immense value to what the various groups are doing at the moment.

#### **Develop some commonly agreed standards.**

This could be a very controversial idea but the incredible range of quality in the work of the peace and security groups is a real obstacle to effective engagement with policy makers, opinion formers and the public. It leaves us vulnerable to criticism and sows confusion amongst key audiences. Would it be possible to set

at least a few minimum standards and benchmarks that could be set to identify those groups that need more training and support to get up to level they need to be to make their efforts more productive?

**Take a more holistic view.**

The peace and security community could benefit from some well-facilitated off the record dialogue about the underlying assumptions of the world view that we think we share and our different models of social change. This would help us to discern if there are any opportunities for developing a more coherent shared vision that could feed into the eventual development of a “Make Poverty History” style initiative. If such a consultation showed that this was not a realistic possibility at least it would remove a lot of the suppressed frustration that so many feel about the apparent lack of a breakthrough for “our issues”. But we may not be tapping as deeply as we could into the well of vision and imagination that is available to us because we are all too focussed on the short term and our own organisational maintenance.

**A final point.**

Many funders, in particular the volunteer trustees, are not that knowledgeable about the issues that peace and security groups deal with. It seems that their agenda is taken from the mainstream media. Is there a case for approaching peace and security funders with an offer of running off the record seminars to educate them?

*Janet Bloomfield, January 2006*