



Coexistence International at Brandeis University

Complementary Approaches to Coexistence Work

What is Coexistence and Why a Complementary Approach?

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During much of the 20th century the term coexistence was used in international relations and political-science disciplines when referring to peaceful but limited relations between states. The term was most commonly used in the context of the Cold War and U.S.-Soviet relations. In the late 1980s, the policy of peaceful coexistence included principles such as “nonaggression, respect for sovereignty, national independence, and noninterference in internal affairs.”¹

This definition of coexistence is nowadays problematic in its focus on the negatives of nonaggression and noninterference, as well as in its state-centric approach. In these respects it lacks ambition and vision both in terms of the potential for relationships between states, and the potential for relationships among groups within states, where in fact most current violent conflicts take place. A new definition became essential as the need to positively manage inter-group relations and the growing diversity within states became a key challenge faced by state leaders and communities across the globe, including in the Balkans, El Salvador, India, Indonesia, the Middle East, Nigeria, and Sri Lanka. Diversity within states in the 21st century is now more the rule than the exception, and most states are facing significant difficulties in responding to conflicts among the cultural, religious, linguistic, ethnic, and political groups within their societies. In addition, many of these differences are now being played out at a global level, and are leading to an increasingly fearful world.

A new and expanded definition of coexistence, and one that responded to this new reality, began to emerge towards the end of the 20th century. In 2002, Oxfam Great Britain defined coexistence as “recognizing each other’s status and rights as human beings, developing a just and inclusive vision for each



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community's future, and implementing economic, social, cultural or political development across former community divides."²

Coexistence describes societies in which diversity is embraced for its positive potential, equality is actively pursued, interdependence between different groups is recognized, and the use of weapons to address conflicts is increasingly obsolete. As we examine pre-conflict, conflict, and post-conflict situations around the globe it is clear that for relationships between different ethnic, religious, or social groups to be positive and sustainable we need to move beyond the notion of mere tolerance, to a definition of coexistence that incorporates equality, diversity, and interdependence. Coexistence is evidenced in relationships across differences that are built on mutual trust, respect, and recognition, and is widely understood as related to social inclusion and integration. The term coexistence has a particular focus on inter-group relations. Other language that seeks to describe a similar vision includes social cohesion, social inclusion, and social integration.

Relations between groups in numerous contexts—those that are more and less challenging—can be understood and analyzed through the lens of coexistence:

- In Ghana, where there are over 51 ethnic groups and an equal number of languages, peaceful and positive relationships among groups have been sustainable over a number of years, with the exception of a localized conflict in the north.
- In Rwanda, genocide, perpetrated mainly by one ethnic group on the other, demonstrated an immeasurable breakdown in coexistence, with horrific consequences.
- In Sri Lanka, for over 25 years there has been violent conflict between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils. The country's Tamil-speaking Muslims, perceived as a separate group, have also been impacted by the violence.
- In Israel, where Jewish and Arab/Palestinian Israeli citizens lived for years without overt violence, a recent clear demand by Arab Israelis for more equal rights as citizens within the country has forced on to the discussion table a fuller definition of coexistence with equality.
- Within Western Europe, many countries struggle with how best to integrate first- and second-generation

immigrants in a way that is welcoming, creates opportunities for these communities, and allows for both retention of their cultures and traditions and for assimilation into other traditions through choice or through marriage.

- In Northern Ireland, it took nearly 30 years of strong coexistence policies on equality and diversity issues, including integrated education and Equality and Good Relations legislation, to ensure a sustainable peace agreement among the political parties.
- In the Baltic states, which achieved independence in the 1990s, the legislative and social coexistence activities of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) helped address the difficulties of assimilating extremely large percentages of Russian citizens into the social and economic life of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania

What is coexistence work? What does it include?

Of the 194 states in the world today, "few are ethnically homogenous; nearly all bear the mark of ethnic and cultural heterogeneity. The structure of this pluralism varies considerably in terms of the number of ethnic communities, their respective sizes, the depth of their differences and similarities, and their histories of inter-communal relations."³ Among the 194 sovereign states, there are about 4,000 ethno-cultural entities; 40% of states have five or more such groups; less than a third have ethnic majorities; some states, including India and Nigeria, possess over one hundred such groups each; others, including Belgium, Fiji, Guyana, Northern Ireland, and Trinidad and Tobago, are split between two ethnic groups.⁴

This rich diversity, full of promise and possibilities, also presents some of the most common and difficult challenges facing states today. Governments continue to wrestle with coexistence issues such as the dimensions of citizenship, constitutional and political designs that reflect the diversity within state borders, language and minority rights, land management, equality and cultural issues, and democratic participation. In the post-9/11 world, tensions between what some see as the demands of state security, juxtaposed with

the civil rights of minorities, have led to grave threats to the latter, and unprecedented legal, constitutional, and social challenges for the U.S., Canada, and European countries. Responses to this challenge of coexistence will determine whether or not the world has political stability and security in the coming decades. Our ability—and our willingness—to engage in such work may mean the difference between a future of social equity and harmony, and one of endemic social discontent highlighted by an increasing number of civil and global wars.

Coexistence International understands coexistence work to cover the range of initiatives necessary to ensure that communities and societies can live more equitably and peacefully together, including conflict prevention and management, post-conflict and conflict transformation work, conflict-sensitivity, peacebuilding, reconciliation, multicultural, and pluralism work. Coexistence practice and policy activities can find their institutional homes within governments and governmental institutions, IGOs, NGOs, community-based organizations and foundations, business, work, cultural, social, and religious institutions. Many types of activities or strategies can fall under the rubric of “coexistence work,” including: mediation or reconciliation of conflicts, equity and diversity work, people-to-people programs, advocacy around issues of immigration, ethnic, or cultural rights, coexistence-related research, and development of coexistence-sensitive policies at local, national, regional, or international levels.

Examples of international organizations and inter-governmental institutions carrying out coexistence work include: the United Nations Development Program Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery, International Alert, International IDEA, the Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities of the OSCE, and Search for Common Ground. At the local level there are organizations such as the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress, Berghof Foundation, Seeds of Peace, the Community Relations organizations in Northern Ireland, the Abraham Fund Initiative, Peace Child Israel, and many hundreds of others. There are also significant networking groups such as Global Platform for the Prevention of Armed Conflict and its regional partners.⁵ Many of these organizations emphasize different tools to achieve coexistence, but all are working towards similar goals of peace with justice.

What is a complementary approach and why is it important?

Coexistence International and a growing number of other institutions and colleagues believe that a complementary approach to contributing to peaceful, just, and sustainable societies is most effective. Very similar and often interchangeable terms for complementary approach include holistic approach, integrated approach, or meta-approach. What these terms highlight is that resolving conflicts and achieving sustainable coexistence in divided societies requires integrated, complementary efforts across relevant fields and between levels, i.e. grassroots to structural and local to international. The causes of conflict are many, and the responses should be strategic and multi-pronged. Working across various disciplines such as governance, human rights, gender, and development—many of which have an explicit focus on *justice* and share a similar world vision—allows the many facets of a conflict to be addressed. It therefore makes sense to encourage learning and cooperation between these areas of work. Without such cooperation between disciplines, key players often work in isolation from one another, which can lead to missed opportunities or unsustainable outcomes. It is important that the coexistence perspective and values should inform these other areas of work, and that we learn how the approaches and strategies of other fields can have a positive impact on coexistence efforts.

Coexistence International believes that enhancing linkages within the coexistence field and between coexistence and related fields—such as development, education, the environment, governance, human rights, security, the arts—contributes to the peaceful, just, sustainable world that all these fields aspire to. While this belief does not necessitate that all practitioners or policymakers must employ the same tactics, or fully share perspectives, it does argue on behalf of increased awareness of the elements of the vision, and of the strategies and knowledge needed to achieve peaceful and just relationships among different groups. In concrete terms, this means ensuring that agencies operating in these fields use a coexistence lens through which to view their policies, in addition to, for instance, a gender or environmental lens. Without such a lens their work on development, security, or education, etc., can easily divide, rather than connect communities: “Clearly, no single actor or institution is able to address change at all these levels. A wide variety of actors need to be involved, locally and internationally, with complementary roles and mandates.”⁶

A more strategic and complementary approach is now emerging—one that recognizes the different spheres that need to be linked up to help a country successfully move away from war, and one that's manifested in the approaches of a range of agencies, from major development organizations down to grassroots initiatives. An interesting example of such complementary work is the conflict-sensitive approaches that have been developing within the aid and development fields. Increasingly, agencies have been combining development and humanitarian needs with the need for conflict-sensitive work within and between communities. Within the United Nations family, the UN Development Programme has been working to ensure that the development dimension of crisis situations can also, where possible, lead into long-term development agendas, integrated with conflict-management and prevention measures. Complementarity is also becoming more important in the approaches of some U.S. agencies, such as the U.S. State Department's Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization, whose strategic document on the essential tasks for post-conflict reconstruction include the necessity for security, governance, humanitarian assistance, economic stabilization, and justice and reconciliation to work in a complementary fashion. Organizations working in the field of development, such as the World Bank, are also learning to ensure that their economic- and social-development programs do not foster divisions within the benefiting communities but rather create more positive and cooperative connections between them.

Insights on collaboration across fields

Since its founding in 2005, Coexistence International has convened a series of gatherings aimed at providing opportunities for organizations to strengthen collaboration and linkages between the coexistence field and other areas of work, and to consider possibilities for increasing complementarity between these areas. These meetings have brought together individuals with multiple loyalties and identities as practitioners, activists, political figures, artists, feminists, academics, and scholar-authors, among others.

Some initial conclusions from these sessions include:

- The coexistence field needs to adapt a holistic approach to effecting social change that includes integrating and linking governmental-level work with grassroots processes, in order to maximize its impact.
- International coexistence work needs to draw deeply on local knowledge and support locally articulated priorities and solutions.
- In addressing questions about the nature of coexistence work (as a profession or vocation) and the professionalism of the field, it is important to distinguish between the initiatives of citizens working for change within their own societies and those who work in cultural contexts other

than their own. Efforts to professionalize the field should in no way disempower people from advocating for inclusion or working to strengthen inter-group relations in their own communities.

- The coexistence field needs to increase its visibility and build its record through use of effective and relevant evaluation tools and methodical documentation of its practices, successes, and failures. Some outcomes are measurable and should be documented; other outcomes may not be measurable, but nevertheless can and should be documented using appropriate methods.⁷
- An integrated coexistence field rooted in values of inclusion and participation needs to effectively embody its commitment to diversity and equality and make allowances for many different approaches to the work.

Additional Resources On This Topic

Coexistence International Reports and Publications

- *Complementary Approaches to Coexistence Work* series*
- *Exploring the Possibilities and Limits of Collaboration: Commonalities and Differences in Coexistence and Related Fields**
- Pieces of the Coexistence Puzzle: Democracy, Human Rights, Gender and Development, a conference overview*

Other Papers and Publications

- Abu-Nimer, Mohammed. *Reconciliation, Justice, and Coexistence: Theory and Practice* (Lexington Books, 2001)
- Babbitt et al., *Imagine Coexistence – Findings and Recommendations for UNHCR* (Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, 2002)
- Church, Cheyanne and Rogers, Mark. *Designing for Results: Integrating Monitoring and Evaluation in Conflict Transformation Programs* (Washington, D.C.: Search for Common Ground, 2006): <http://www.sfcg.org/documents/manualintro.pdf>
- Cohen, Cynthia. "Engaging with the Arts to Promote Coexistence", in *Imagine Coexistence: Restoring Humanity After Violent Ethnic Conflict*, eds. Martha Minow and Antonia Chayes (2003)
- Fitzduff, Mari. *Meta-Conflict Resolution**
- Ricigliano, Rob. *Networks of Effective Action: Implementing an Integrated Approach to Peacebuilding**
- Schirch, Lisa. *The Little Book of Strategic Peacebuilding* (Good Books, 2005)
- Weiner, Eugene. "Coexistence Work: A New Profession." In *The Handbook of Interethnic Coexistence*, ed. Eugene Weiner (New York: The Abraham Fund, 2000)

Web Sites and Publications by Organizations

- Alliance for Peacebuilding: www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org
- International Alert: 2004. Chapter 2 in *Conflict-sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and peace building*: http://www.conflictsensitivity.org/resource_pack/chapter_2__266.pdf
- International Alert Diagram of Strategic Peacebuilding: <http://www.international-alert.org/pdfs/palette.pdf>
- United States Institute of Peace, "An Integrated Framework for Peacebuilding" *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*.

* Document available at www.coexistence.net

Endnotes

- 1 Weiner, Eugene. "Coexistence Work: A New Profession." In *The Handbook of Interethnic Coexistence*, ed. Eugene Weiner (New York: The Abraham Fund, 2000), 13-24.
- 2 Babbitt et al., *Imagine Coexistence – Findings and Recommendations for UNHCR* (Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, 2002), 17. (<http://fletcher.tufts.edu/chrcr/pdf/imagine.pdf>).
- 3 Premdas, Ralph. *Public Policy and Ethnic Conflict*, <http://www.unesco.org/most/premdas.htm#introduction>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 <http://www.gppac.org/>.
- 6 International Alert: Local Business, Local Peace: The Peacebuilding Potential of the Domestic Private Sector, <http://www.international-alert.org/>.
- 7 See, for example, *An Approach to DAC Guidance for Evaluating Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities March 2007*, <http://www.adb.org/Documents/Papers/DAC-Guidance/Approach-DAC-Guidance.pdf>.

About Coexistence International

Based at Brandeis University since 2005, Coexistence International (CI) is an initiative committed to strengthening the resources available to policymakers, practitioners, researchers, advocates, organizations, and networks promoting coexistence at local, national, and international levels. CI advocates a complementary approach to coexistence work through facilitating connections, learning, reflection, and strategic thinking between those in the coexistence field and those in related areas.

What is Coexistence?

Coexistence describes societies in which diversity is embraced for its positive potential, equality is actively pursued, interdependence between different groups is recognized, and the use of weapons to address conflicts is increasingly obsolete. Coexistence work covers the range of initiatives necessary to ensure that communities and societies can live more equitably and peacefully together.

About the Series

Fragmentation within the coexistence field, as well as divisions between coexistence and related areas, impede the achievement of effective, sustainable peace. Without cooperation and a recognition of complementarity, key players often work in isolation from one another—a situation that leads to missed opportunities or incomplete responses to conflicts.

With this publication series, Coexistence International examines where and how certain fields intersect with coexistence work. What challenges and opportunities exist when disciplines work together toward the common goal of a more peaceful, just world? This series illustrates the possibilities of effecting positive coexistence through cooperation among related fields.

Other CI Publications

Complementary Approaches to Coexistence Work

What is Coexistence and Why a Complementary Approach?

Focus on Coexistence and the Arts

Focus on Coexistence and Democracy-building

Focus on Coexistence and Natural Resources

Focus on Coexistence and Security

Country Studies

This series describes the state of coexistence within different countries around the world—including the Czech Republic, Ecuador, Latvia, Mauritius, and Poland—and compares their diversity and coexistence policies.

Publications can be accessed online at www.coexistence.net/pubs/publications.html.



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