



Where in The World Should We Look for Solutions to The American 'Divide'?

July 29, 2016



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The acute violence our country has experienced over the last months saddens us. The repeating cycle of injustice, intolerance, and retribution



witnessed in Orlando, Baton Rouge, Minneapolis, Kansas City, and Dallas is distressing and unacceptable. As Americans who spend significant time outside the United States to encourage good governance, inclusive leadership, and peace, we see an opportunity to “export” lessons from other countries to positively influence the situation here at home. Exclusion, systematic racism, and mistrust between citizens and police are all issues in the United States, just as they are in Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and El Salvador where the [Purdue Peace Project](#) actively engages with partners to promote peace through local action.

We believe the country is facing an ideological divide, not a racial divide. As [Slate Magazine](#) put it: “Either you’re on the race war team, or you’re against it.” At the memorial service for the fallen Dallas police officers, President Obama [said](#): “We are not as divided as we seem”. This is true: most Americans reject racism, intolerance, and violence. Yet divisions and tensions have surfaced in a more overt and aggressive way than at any other time in recent history. Right now, trust needs to be rebuilt, and injustices addressed. We need to turn this moment into an opportunity for real and lasting change.

We do not discount the historical legacies, structural racism, and inequality that are drivers of the violent conflicts taking place in our country. In places we work, similar factors are at play. For example, in Liberia there are long-standing divides between those who “settled” the country centuries ago and those that were already there. This divide in many ways seeded the country’s civil war. In El Salvador, decades after the end of that country’s civil war, an extreme gulf remains between the “haves” and “have-nots”, and is a contributing factor to its high rate of current violence. People experience these and other obstacles all over the world, yet they also seek to build nonviolent ways forward, transcending those challenges and producing change, even at the policy level. All over the world, people lead for peace at community and national levels.

What do our violence prevention and peacebuilding efforts in West Africa and Central America teach us? Here are the three most important lessons we think America can learn:

1. Invest in building relationships of trust: Take a chance and try, even among groups that you don't think would agree to be together in the same room. In our [work](#) in El Salvador around access to clean water, groups of people from varied political ideologies that were once at war with one another agreed to hear each other out and trust a process they saw as credible. Repairing their relationships led to the possibility of collaboration to protect key rivers in their community, a problem that affects them all.

2. Create opportunities for inclusive dialogue: Talk is not easy – dialogue is tense, disruptive, and conflictive- but it's a critical step. Space must be created for people to engage in (conflictive) talk and listen to each other's perspectives. People must be willing to engage in dialogue. We were once told that citizens from disputing communities in [Delta State, Nigeria](#), who for years had not spoken with one another and were on the verge of violence, would never come together. They are now on speaking terms and are collaborating.

Dialogue will be most effective, and its outcomes most durable, if it's inclusive. Sometimes people just need to be invited to participate, particularly if they have spent years feeling ignored. Since 2013, we've been [engaging](#) with Pen-Pen motorcyclists in Liberia – many of whom were ex-combatants from the civil war. These motorcyclists were known to be disruptive, violent, and susceptible to being manipulated during political campaigns to incite violence. They have said to us "No one ever asked us to work with them before. No one ever cared what we thought." Now the Pen-Pen riders are working with the Liberian National Police, the National Elections Commission, and other groups to help rebuild relationships and create a climate for peaceful elections in 2017. They now talk about their responsibility to make their communities more peaceful and cohesive.

3. Take action: Action can be achieved by anyone, regardless of one's station in society. Sometimes "positional leaders" may do better to step back and allow everyday citizens, who are experiencing the lived reality, the opportunity to lead toward an effective solution. In Ghana, a group of young soccer players who we supported to play a series of friendly football matches to help build peace in their

community [took the lead](#) to fill a void. Upon realizing that people in their District, many of who are illiterate and did not go to school, did not know the voter registration process, they designed and led a civic education program. Lack of knowledge is one reason why young people are often used by political parties to spark violence during election seasons. So the soccer players designed a community outreach program to educate them. Elders, chiefs, men, women, and children are now coming together to learn about productive citizenship.

We do not believe that talk can address all injustices. Nor do we believe that structural change follows from all local action. But our experience tells us that (re)building trust, creating opportunities for inclusive dialogue at the most local level, and inspiring meaningful locally-driven action is an approach our country must consider. We are heartened to learn this [happened](#) recently in Kansas City, when members of the Police Department shared a cookout with Black Lives Matters protestors as a way to start “building trust and respect in the community.” We hope to see more of the same moving forward.

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