Search for Common Ground

Key Info

Social Entrepreneur
Susan Collin Marks, John Marks

Year Awarded
2006

Issue Area Addressed
Peace and Human Rights

Sub Issue Area Addressed
Human Rights, Peace

Countries Served
Bahrain, Belgium, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, Congo (Democratic Republic), Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Liberia, Libya, Macedonia, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Myanmar, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Palestinian Territory, Russian Federation, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, United Kingdom, USA, Yemen

Website
http://www.sfcg.org
About the Organization

Founded in 1982, Search for Common Ground works to transform the way the world deals with conflict – away from adversarial approaches and towards collaborative problem-solving. They work with local partners to find culturally appropriate means to strengthen societies’ capacity to deal with conflicts constructively: to understand the differences and act on the commonalities.

They have developed a broad array of operational methods. These include well-known conflict resolution techniques, such as mediation and facilitation, and less traditional ones, like TV productions, radio soap operas, and community organizing.

Search for Common Ground works at all levels of society to build sustainable peace through three main avenues: dialogue, media, and community. They bring people together across dividing lines to discover and achieve shared goals; use media to stir up discussion about the root causes of violence and how to overcome differences, and provide a safe space for people to work out their conflicts at the local level.

Impact

- In 2017, Search for Common Ground operated peacebuilding programs in 44 countries with 953 partners. Through training, events and other programs, it directly reached roughly 420,000 people in 2017.
- Search for Common Ground conducts approximately 40 project-specific evaluations annually. Examples of project impact include: increasing peace-oriented attitudes among target communities in Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan, reducing human rights abuses in Democratic Republic of Congo and fatalities in a Tanzanian mining community, and improving intergroup relations in Nigeria and Myanmar.
- In 2015, after five years of focused advocacy, Search for Common Ground and its partners helped push through UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security, which shapes international norms about youth engagement in peace processes and stipulates that all governments prioritize their inclusion and empowerment in peacebuilding and violence prevention. In 2016, Search's grassroots campaign and direct advocacy contributed to the Sri Lankan Parliament's decision to introduce a 25 percent quota for women in local government, a twelfold increase from representation levels at the time.

Path to Scale
Build Media Audiences

In parallel with broader and deeper involvement in more countries, SFCG seeks to achieve learning and attitude change at a global scale through its media programs.

Social Entrepreneur

John Marks founded Search for Common Ground (Search) in 1982, at the height of the Cold War, to build bridges between the US and the Soviet Union. Operating from the basic belief that the world is running out of space, resources, and recuperative capacity to deal with wasteful conflict, he built Search into one of the world’s largest nonprofit organization dedicated specifically to ending violent conflict. Prior to founding Search, John served as a Foreign Service officer, as lead staff to Senator Clifford Case, and co-authored bestselling book, The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence. John is Visiting Scholar in Peacebuilding and Social Entrepreneurship at Leiden University in the Netherlands, an Ashoka Senior Fellow, and a Fellow at Harvard's Institute of Politics and a Visiting Scholar at Harvard Law School.

Susan Collin Marks joined in 1992 as Senior Vice President of Search and helped stimulate its major expansion throughout Africa, the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and the U.S. A native South African, she worked as a peacebuilder during her country's transition from apartheid to democracy. For over 20 years, Susan has facilitated dialogues and offered one-on-one coaching for political, institutional, and civil society leaders worldwide. In 2006, she launched Search's Leadership Wisdom Initiative. She serves on multiple boards, including the Advisory Council of the Woodrow Wilson International Center Project on Africa and Leadership, and the Abraham Path Initiative. She was portrayed in the PBS documentary Peace X Peace: Women on the Frontlines. Her honors include a Jennings Randolph Peace Fellowship at the United States Institute for Peace, the Institute for Noetic Science’s Creative Altruism Award, and an Honorary Doctorate from the University for Peace in Costa Rica.

In 2014, John and Susan transitioned into Advisory roles, handing over leadership to Shamil Idriss, who has been engaged with Search for over twenty years.

Equilibrium Overview

Current Equilibrium

More than one in four people on the planet, around two billion total, live in countries affected by fragility, conflict, and violence.[1] Responses to natural disasters used to make up 80% of humanitarian aid funding; but today, violent conflicts drive 80% of all humanitarian needs.[2][3] 1.3 million people die violent deaths every year.[4] Violent conflict prevents progress on all other development issues; it accounts for 75% of the world’s
malnourishment. [5] 77% of the children not in primary school, 71% of deaths of children under 5 years old, and 70% increases in women’s and children’s risk of disease. [6] These combine for a cycle of deprivation that perpetuates violent conflict. From an economic standpoint, violent conflict costs exceptionally more than stability across the board. The global economic cost of violence was $14.3 trillion in 2016. [8] If violence containment spending was represented as a discrete industry, it would be the largest industry in the United States economy, larger than construction, real estate, professional services, or manufacturing. Violence containment spending in the U.S. amounted to $1.7 trillion, equivalent to $5,485 per year per person. [9] In a country, after the end of a typical war, absolute poverty increases by 30%, and incomes are 15% lower. [10] Conflict also fuels major refugee crises that destabilize entire regions. The World Bank now considers violent conflict the primary driver of global human suffering. [11][2]

**New Equilibrium**

In the new equilibrium, peacebuilding is built into societies. Inclusive, non-adversarial approaches to deal with differences are institutionalized within government bureaucracies and other institutions, expanding the options for governments when responding to conflict. Social norms around celebrating difference have shifted such that collaborative problem-solving, rather than adversarial advocacy, has become the default approach. Markets have emerged to resource such approaches out of a recognition and true-pricing of the real costs of adversarial approaches and violence. These approaches enable populations to achieve and preserve social, political, and cultural stability even in the face of conflict, preventing it from erupting into violence. This stability sets the foundation for economic growth, investment, health, education, and environmental protection, leading to a healthier, safer, more just world.

**Innovation**

Search partners with governments, NGOs, and communities to build conflict resolution programs in regions at risk of destructive conflict or violence. Operating off of the belief that while conflict is inevitable, violence is not, Search works to help citizens of conflict-ridden countries see possibilities for interethnic harmony by deploying a wide variety of programs in a number of key issue areas. Search bases its work on its theory of enduring change (see attachments), which identifies three primary scopes of operation: Transforming the world's most destabilizing and destructive conflicts; Popularizing the Common Ground Approach to conflict beyond Search’s physical presence; Advocating for policy-makers and influencers to choose, support, and fund peacebuilding processes. 1. Address the most destabilizing and destructive conflicts Search’s local staff, 98% of whom are working in their home country, collaborate with over 1200 international, national, and local partners in 43 countries to build conflict resolution programs to prevent, reduce, and resolve destructive and violent conflict. Due to the differences in the conflicts and cultures in which they work, there is no single operating model or prototype. All programs are designed to fundamentally shift people’s relationship with conflict away from adversarial approaches toward cooperative approaches that engage all sides in a solution. To accomplish this, Search empowers local teams to creatively identify the best programmatic activities for the context in order to achieve concrete outcomes. Activities include the following: Dialogue Facilitation: The first program step within any new country or region is to build multiple partnerships with governments, civil society organizations, the business sector and international
organizations. Dialogue facilitation happens at local and national levels, with example tactics being: formal mediation, training youth leaders, and back-channel diplomacy. Media and Pop-Culture: Search uses media to move beyond a select group of stakeholders to large-scale engagement. Through media, they encourage productive conversations across societies about the root causes of violence and how to overcome differences. Example tactics are: TV dramas, call-in radio shows, music videos and feature films created by Common Ground Productions. Community Engagement: Search builds safe spaces for people to work out their conflicts at a local level - essential for solidifying conflict resolution and peace among society's individuals. Some example tactics include soccer matches, participatory theater, and shared farming projects. Using these same tactics over the coming ten years, Search plans to shift their strategies to focus on the world's most destabilizing conflicts by taking a regional approach, defined by the boundaries of a conflict system not the borders of a country, as it currently operates. Search will continue to target a wide variety of issues which include: conflict sensitivity, disarmament and reintegration, free and fair media, security sector reform, prisoner reintegration and recidivism, refugees and internal displacement, sexual and gender-based violence, human rights abuses, weak governance, gender inequality, violent extremism, education reform, and corporate-community relations. 2. Popularize the Common Ground Approach Each of these on-the-ground activities is rooted and bound together by Search's unique approach to conflict transformation, the Common Ground Approach. The Common Ground Approach was developed in 1982 and has been iterated upon through theory and experimentation since then. The key components of the approach include the following: Long-term intervention: Search makes long-term commitments to communities in conflict, understanding that it often takes a full generation to build the solutions that address root causes and drivers of violent conflict and consolidate peace. Locally-led: Search builds and supports local teams and broad-based partnerships that reflect and reach across the dividing lines that underlie a society's conflict, including ethnic, religious, political, ideological, racial, or otherwise. Search works to build local capacity and multi-stakeholder partnerships to do the work so that each country can successfully manage its own conflicts. This is intended to both help ensure program sustainability and empower local actors to own the conflict resolution process; thereby increasing the ability of all stakeholders to engage peacefully. Their programs endeavor to take a neutral, nonjudgmental approach that informs all elements of engagement builds a safe space for participants. Innovative and adaptable approaches: Search encourages and supports innovation and creative experimentation by local teams to bring divided parties together, limited only by the boundaries of a Do No Harm approach. Search’s experimental approach allows their programs to adapt quickly and mould specifically to participant needs. Search places a strong emphasis on evaluation and learning, enabling them to adapt approaches in real-time based on quality data, publishing many of those learnings for public benefit. Concrete outcomes: Search seeks to generate practical and sustainable cooperation and collaboration, not just dialogue or compromise, out of conflict. They specifically target partnerships and relationships that can catalyze systemic change. Anchored in their theory of enduring change, Search strives to innovate with new technologies, develop new partnerships, and codify methodologies for broader use. One example of a new innovation is Soliya, Search’s virtual student exchange arm, which brings together thousands of college students across the U.S., Europe, and Muslim-majority countries each semester for small group, facilitated conversations where they explore the differences on increasingly controversial topics. MIT-based research has indicated that these dialogues inoculate young people against prejudice. 3. Advocate for peacebuilding policy and resources Finally, Search works to shift the current equilibrium in institutions, social norms, and markets through: Policy advocacy: Search seeks to inform and influence policy-making in situations where policymakers are responding to conflict in order to advocate approaches that
prevent violence or consolidate peace. Search works with senior policymakers across the UN system, multilateral institutions, and a wide variety of the municipal, regional and national government agencies and ministries in the countries and regions where it works. This work is often most effective when coupled with work on the ground, allowing Search to act as a bridge, connecting local peacebuilders with international policymakers to identify the most appropriate responses. For example, in March 2013, a political crisis broke out into violence in the Central African Republic (CAR). Search maintained a presence in the country during the conflict and was credited as being among the few groups to raise the alarm internationally that a political conflict was taking on interreligious dimensions and was likely to escalate. In international policy centers, Search coordinated a coalition of the leading humanitarian, human rights, and conflict resolution organizations to advocate for a robust international response. Search worked to bring people together across religious lines using arts, sports, community events, mediation, media, religious leaders, and more to remind people about their past peaceful coexistence, showcase hope for the future, and provide tools for demobilization. The local team organized peace marches, discussions, soccer games, and festivals involving tens of thousands of people to bring communities together regardless of religion. A review by the CAR Ministry of Economy and Planning confirmed that anti-Balaka militia groups had disarmed as part of Search’s work and encouraged local government offices to adopt Search’s approaches. Supporting the maturation of the violence prevention and peacebuilding field: Search is an open-source organization, focused on sharing methodologies and materials that have proven effective with peer organizations and researchers. Search continues to publicly posts all internal and independent evaluation reports on its programming, in an effort to contribute to the knowledge-base of the field and to set a standard for transparency.[2][3] In 2017, Search also convened all the major peacebuilding organizations in a multi-day hackathon to identify greater synergies in advocacy and communications, with the goal of better coordination and thus increased impact in raising awareness and support for the field. Creating enduring change: Search’s theory of change further states that when the outcomes of the above activities, specifically, the Common Ground Approach, are effective in satisfying the needs of individuals, communities, and institutions, there is a strong incentive for them to adopt the approach into their daily behaviors and practices. When this happens, change can endure without any ongoing reliance on third-party intervention; the stakeholders themselves make it sustainable. This enduring change occurs when it takes on one of the following three forms: When INSTITUTIONS reflect the change: when a stable public or private sector institution adopts a Common Ground intervention as their own and perpetuates its application independent of Search’s involvement. When SOCIAL NORMS encourage and celebrate the change: when a new concept or approach to conflict has become sufficiently popularized across entire communities that a shift in social norms has been achieved. When MARKETS resource the change: when a peacebuilding approach is deemed to be of such value that local individuals or institutions demand and pay for it, creating a local market for the product or service. Examples of enduring change in these areas are further described in the Equilibrium Change section.

Ambition for Change

Countries around the world recognize that while conflict is inevitable, violence is not, and take constructive steps to achieve inter-ethnic harmony.