

Transcript of the interview with Inge Vanfraechem

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This is one of the eight interviews partly used in the final film of the ALTERNATIVE project, produced by KU Leuven in collaboration with the European Forum for Restorative Justice. All films are published in an online platform: <http://alternativefilms.euforumrj.org/>. To view this video as well as other interviews, click 'INTERVIEWS' on the home page.

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What is ALTERNATIVE?

ALTERNATIVE is a European research project, where we look at conflicts in intercultural settings and how we can look differently at security and justice in those settings. So we look at questions such as: When and how do people feel safe? When do they feel secure? What do they regard as being just in their world?

And we do that through implementing action-research in social housing in Vienna, in small communities in Hungary, and then looking at broader conflicts in both Northern Ireland and Serbia.

Why focusing on conflicts in intercultural settings?

We in our project address conflicts in intercultural settings and we term in as such because we think not the difference in culture as such between people can be a conflict, but the way people see a conflict or how they interpret it. For example, if you look at conflicts in social housing, they can be about garbage, which is just a common conflict between neighbours. But if it is in the intercultural settings, people could name it as: 'It is always the Turkish that put out their garbage.' So the setting can make people define their conflict in a different way.

Why focusing on justice and security?

In ALTERNATIVE, when we look at security, we in the first place look at ‘How do people feel personally safe?’ So that’s the first part of security. The second part can then be: ‘Can I be sure that there will not be a conflict, or more importantly, a violent conflict, again?’ So: ‘Is our society free from violent conflict?’ And then again a step further, it can be about: ‘Do I have a secure job? Can I count on the welfare system?’ So actually, being socially secure in our societies.

Now, when we look at justice, this has more to do, in our project at least, with what people consider as fair and just. So not just the justice system, the criminal justice system, but what people actually feel as ‘This is a just reaction to conflict’ or ‘This is a just way of dealing with conflict.’

Restorative Justice and ALTERNATIVE

In the beginning, when we started with ALTERNATIVE, we were really linking restorative justice to the criminal justice system because this is where most of the partners and we here in Leuven started from: we have experience with how to link restorative justice to criminal justice. What we try to do with ALTERNATIVE is to broaden it up and look at conflict as broader than crime and criminal justice. That means that the concept of restorative justice has also changed in looking at how to apply it to conflicts as more broadly than just things related to criminal justice.

So if we try to broaden up in ALTERNATIVE from crime to conflict, we can then also pose the question what the justice aspect of restorative justice entails, because if it is linked to the justice system that becomes very clear. It is our challenge in ALTERNATIVE to look at how to define justice when it has to do with these broader conflicts.

If ALTERNATIVE was a journey...

When we started with ALTERNATIVE, we really wanted to look at: how can we apply restorative justice in intercultural conflicts. And to do that, we looked at Europe, we wanted to have micro, meso and macro conflicts – the individual, community and macro level. And we wanted to apply restorative justice methods or practices such as mediation, conferencing and circles in those different settings. We were hoping, after four years, to have a look at how to apply it throughout Europe in intercultural conflicts. That was the starting-point.

If we look at how the project has developed over the years, we see that we had to step away from different concepts and ideas that we had in the beginning. So rather than looking at restorative justice and how to apply it for intercultural conflicts, we looked at the importance of preparing the ground in the different intercultural settings: how can we teach and learn people how to communicate in a different way and how can we in that sense have them open up to apply methods of dialogue and communication? That was one important finding.

Another important finding is that you cannot really define a conflict as micro, meso and macro, in the sense that a conflict can change from one level to another. I give a concrete example: you can have a conflict between neighbours in Serbia, where it is really an individual conflict and defined as such, but because you have a post-conflict situation, it might also be broadened up to the macro conflict and being framed or defined as 'It is a conflict between a Serb and an Albanian.' So we could not stick to the strict distinction between micro, meso and macro because it changes throughout.

An important lesson that we have learned in ALTERNATIVE is that while in restorative justice we really stress the importance of dialogue and communication, we found out that in different settings silence might be a culture, or people might prefer to remain silent and not openly address a conflict. So to restorative justice practice, that is really a challenge. Because you can only start to approach people or try to communicate about harm, if people are willing to open up and really speak about that harm.

European challenges and ALTERNATIVE

What I see as challenges for Europe today and where I think ALTERNATIVE can provide an answer, at least the beginning of an answer, is that we tend to have exclusionary approaches to conflicts, for example on how we deal with Roma or with socially marginalised people or people in prison. We tend to exclude them, so what we try to do with ALTERNATIVE is see if we can have more inclusionary approaches to conflict and if we can really start dialogues by including people rather than excluding them. And I see that as a possibility for different marginal populations, but also to broaden it up to for example schools or workplaces. Actually, everywhere where conflict occurs, it will be more and more important to stress the dialogue and communication part, rather than excluding and separating people.



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What might be important to stress as well is that when you look at restorative justice and how you deal with conflicts, it really is about taking a normative standpoint, on where you want to go and what society you want to live in: do you want to just separate people and live in your separate communities or do you really want to try and reach out to people and make the difference work? Work together rather than against one another.

A final message

When looking at what we have learned throughout the ALTERNATIVE project, an important message for society would be to embrace your conflicts rather than looking at them as ‘Woo, were scared of them and we don’t want to deal with them.’ Really look at them as an opportunity for change. And look at diversity and interculturality as an enrichment for your society, rather than something to be fearful of.

