

Words of Welcome at the  
IIDEA Reconciliation Expert Network (REN) Meeting

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Good morning to you all and welcome. It is a great pleasure for IDRC to be co-hosting what we hope will be the first of a series of meetings for the Reconciliation Expert's Network. On a more personal note, it is particularly gratifying for me, as a former Board Member and long-time supporter of International IDEA to be a part of this event. My congratulations to IIDEA for bringing together such an impressive group of scholars, practitioners and advocates.

At IDRC we have been working for several years to support research on issues of peace building and democratic governance. And yet, the tumultuous state of world affairs and the challenges being faced by an increasing number of countries emerging from violence and psycho-social trauma have pushed us to re-examine what is it we do and to ask ourselves how we can do it better. It is part of a wider Canadian commitment to the peaceful resolution of conflicts, to multilateralism and a strong belief in human rights for all.

The difficult questions and dilemmas you will be discussing over the next few days are questions that have been very much at the forefront of our thinking of late. We have learned some important lessons about re-building political peace in the aftermath of violent conflict; We understand that democratic institutions and free and fair elections are important for guaranteeing people their rights as citizens; we know that demobilized combatants need gainful employment and that landmines need to be cleared from acres and acres of farm land if there is to be any hope for food security and economic recovery.

It is "soft" side of peace building which continues to elude us: How to heal human relationships, rebuild bonds of trust and set countries upon the path to the future — without getting lost in the legacy of the past. As we know, reconciliation in countries affected by war or authoritarianism is an excruciatingly long-term process. It requires patience, humility and "stick-to-it-ness" — traits that aren't always in great supply among international actors working in conflict-affected countries.

Much of reconciliation hinges upon truth and historic memory. Foucault would tell us that each society creates a "regime of truth" according to its beliefs, values, and mores. Put another way — and to quote the Reconciliation Handbook that will be discussed over the next few days — "the past has many layers".

I'd like to take just a moment to discuss one of the building blocks of long-term reconciliation that is mentioned in the handbook – but which receives less attention than some of the other instruments such as reparation schemes and truth commissions. I'm talking about public education and the crucial role it can play in dispelling collective memories and manipulated versions of the past.

A concrete example of this is a public education and dialogue campaign that IDRC has been supporting with the Guatemalan-based Center for Mesoamerican Research (CIRMA). The campaign which is called “Why are we the way we are?” examines the evolution of inter-ethnic relations in Guatemala and tries to help Guatemalans counteract racism by focusing upon the rich tapestry of the country's cultural and linguistic diversity. It consists of a number of activities including the release of university textbooks on inter-ethnic relations and a series of focus group discussions with university students and professors.

However, as CIRMA's Executive Director has said: “Thousands and thousands of books have been written about this and are clearly are not making a difference in dealing with racism”. CIRMA decided that more radical and creative measures needed to be taken. With the help of an Argentinian artist who was involved in the creation of the Holocaust museum in Washington, they have designed a traveling exhibition that is prompting a long-overdue national dialogue between the country's dominant non-indigenous population and the Maya.

The 500 square-foot show, which occupies about half of a football field, can be packed up on the back of a flatbed truck. After rave reviews in Guatemala City, it will spend the next 18 months in some of the most far-flung parts of the country. As a result, the show is almost devoid of the objects or artifacts that are the backbone of most museum shows. Rather, it relies on life-size photography (providing some visitors with their first experience of looking eye to eye with an indigenous person), graphics, video, audio, short texts and interactive tools.

The CIRMA exhibit is based on scholarly research on inter-ethnic relations funded by IDRC and other donors for the last four years. It is a typical example of why good social science research matters and how it can contribute to building a more positive collective historic memory that can be handed down from generation to generation. More importantly, it demonstrates that the medium is often as important as the message. With a little creativity, CIRMA is proving that there are many ways to deal with racism, a social ill that 500 years of history has rendered acceptable and even invisible to much of the population, indigenous and non-indigenous alike.

There is nothing left for me to say except to wish you a productive meeting. Thank you so much for taking the time to be with us today. Some of you have travelled a great distance to be here. It is my hope that the time spent together will usefully inform International IDEA's work and your own work as researchers, policy makers and

activists who are dedicated to improving women's and men's lives and re-building trustful relations in societies who are struggling to come to terms with the past.

Mark Salter who is with IIDEA's Democracy Building and Conflict Management Program and is one the architects of this meeting, will now walk you through the objectives and plans for the next two days.