

The peace builders of Northern Kenya; Successful, research-led model spreads to other African nations

Founded in aftermath of 2007-08's national post-election violence, Kenya's Shalom Centre pioneers successful, research-led formula for preventing conflict

NAIROBI, NAIROBI COUNTY, KENYA, July 3, 2017 /EINPresswire.com/ -- An innovative research-led model for building peace has been pioneered by an Irish Catholic priest and his [Shalom Centre](#) colleagues working in areas of Northern Kenya where assault rifles are as common in households as cooking pots.



AK47 Weapons: As Common as Cooking Pots in Northern Kenya

Lawlessness is prevalent in the isolated areas of Kenya bordering Uganda, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia, and family possessions include, on average, 1.6 AK-47s, the weapon of choice also of organized cattle-rustling gangs.

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*Fr. Patrick Devine, Founder,
Shalom Centre*

Weak institutions, porous borders and climate change, meanwhile, combine to make conditions harsher, nurturing historic, sometimes violent competition over scarce resources between the 11 ethnic communities of Northern Kenya with which the Centre works.

More recently, conflicts over official positions and new administrative boundaries driven by politics have become commonplace. Of immediate concern to the peace makers: the Aug. 8 Kenya general elections. In 2007-08, post-election violence nationwide, fuelled by political in-fighting, retaliation and power struggles, left roughly 1,300 Kenyans dead, 60,000 maimed and 600,000 displaced.

The Shalom Center for Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, founded by Fr. Patrick Devine in 2009, which works as well in the slums of Nairobi, has cultivated a unique approach to conflict resolution, its success recognized and celebrated with a host of international awards.

And the model is expanding into other parts of Africa, starting with Côte d'Ivoire, Tanzania and the Central African Republic, with further plans to establish centres as well in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The model's success is founded on extensive research into areas of complaint and issues that drive conflict then working with key community opinion-shapers -- elders, women, youth and influential chiefs -- to reach a common understanding of both the history and current definition of a conflict's source, while building trust and co-operation to reach solutions.

Through workshops, Shalom is creating a legacy of conflict resolution, training to date more than 9,600 community leaders as peacemakers.

Strategies also include sustainable human development in conflicted communities through projects. Lasting results include the building of solar-powered inter-ethnic and inter-religious schools, medical centres and water projects.

The philosophy of Fr. Devine, a 29-year veteran of African ministry: Conflicts are created by unmet human needs and the inability of weak institutions to help people actualize their potential. Shalom's peaceful coexistence goal is simple: "To help the people become the architects of their own future."

Shalom's grassroots-based methodology, he says, embraces prevention and transformation -- "delving deep into the social, economic, historical, cultural and religious factors that contribute to extremist behaviours that cause significant destruction and trauma to individuals and communities. Conjecture and speculation are no basis for policy making."

Conflict in the region can be linked to several primary causes: scarcity and mismanagement of core environmental resources, infrastructure insecurity, weak institutions and the political economy of governance, historic tribal land and cultural conflict, all contributing to an unhelpful proliferation of illegal small arms.

"Every conflict has a memory," says Fr. Devine, honoured in 2013 with the [International Caring Award](#), and recently nominated for Ireland's prestigious Tipperary International Peace Prize. "When the causes of conflict are not only identified, but also agreed upon by those involved, peace-building techniques create a way to look forward to a constructive future."



Fr. Patrick Devine with a group of parents, Northern Kenya



Research: the foundation of Shalom Centre's peace building and training

Nairobi-based Shalom Centre's international research and field staff are expert in conflict management theory and practice. All have at least a masters' level education. "And I have never met a group with the persistence, commitment and consistency of Shalom staff," says Fr. Devine.

The goal is not what he calls "negative peace," or just an end to fighting but rather "positive peace," where both sides in a conflict see the benefits of protecting the others' security and wellbeing.

"There's more than enough in the environment for everyone's need," he says, "but not enough for everyone's greed."

Fr. Devine explains why he founded Shalom: "I didn't want to spend another 25 years just dealing with the symptoms of conflict and poverty, nor just putting money through a sieve without substantial enduring results."

"Our centre helps people in this region emerge from patterns of ongoing conflict, an environment in which people are persistently killed, maimed and displaced, preventing social and religious values, such as truth, justice, peace, mercy and reconciliation, from taking deep root. Nor can development be sustained if schools, hospitals, programs, and religious centres are regularly made inoperable due to conflict."

Fr. Devine underlines the non-sectarian nature of the centre's work. "Shalom should not be owned by any one religious tradition," he says. "If we can bring about peace in the world, we can all find our path to God."

At a May EU meeting in Brussels to address the humanitarian situation in Africa, Yemen and Syria, Joe McHugh, Ireland's Minister of State for the Diaspora and Overseas Development, noted the impossibility of sustainable development without peace.

He singled out Shalom's "great work" and lauded the centre for making inroads in "interethnic conflict reconciliation where, for the first time in a particular region even with drought and massive challenges, the peace is holding."

"If there are examples working we should look to them and support them."

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The Shalom Centre for Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation is supported by partner organizations and a network of visionary donors, primarily from the United States, United Kingdom and Ireland.

With a budget of less than \$1M US per year and low (7%) overhead costs, Shalom leverages the donations of its supporters to maximize its work on the ground in tribal areas, particularly in the semi-arid terrains, and in the largest slum settlements in urban centres of Eastern Africa.

Full release: https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2017-07/tca-tpb062617.php

Terry Collins
Shalom Centre
+14168788712
email us here

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