Basque Country

Experiences of the Social Forum to invigorate peace
Paul Rios

Sunday 20 October 2013 marked two years since the armed organisation Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) announced the definitive cessation of its armed campaign, in response to a call made by international leaders at the San Sebastian Conference three days before.

Since then all reports have indicated that ETA’s use of violence has effectively ceased, although ETA still retains its weapons and organisational capabilities. This, together with the subsequent legalisation of the Basque pro-independence abertzale (‘patriot’) Left, whose parties had been banned for 10 years, has allowed the Basque Country to enter a new phase. Today the basic conditions are in place for a more substantial peace process, with an absence of violence and broadly inclusive political participation.

But there is currently no peace process for the Basque country in the conventional sense – ie a political dialogue between the government and the armed group. The Basque process has had to be innovative, mainly because of the very limited contact between ETA and the Spanish or French governments. Much of Basque society understands it as a peace process, but the Spanish government does not want to be a partner in this and many issues that Basque society sees as vital to progress are not being addressed.

The question of who or what has been driving change in the Basque process is very sensitive in Spain. But seen from within Basque society, the key actors have been ETA, the pro-independence Left – some of whom decided to push a new, non-violent strategy – some international facilitators who have worked independently, and a number of social movements in the Basque Country.

Basque social movements during the conflict
Basque social movements worked for peace during the worst years of the conflict. Basque society has mobilised intensely to propose ways of solving the problem, marking out a route for political parties and articulating the desires of the majority – an end to violence, respect for human rights, and dialogue as a tool for solving political problems.

Since the late 1980s the pacifist organisation Gesto por la Paz has mobilised thousands of people against all forms of violence, including ETA’s. Elkarri – a social movement for dialogue and agreement in the Basque Country and the immediate predecessor to my own organisation, Lokarri – stressed the primacy of dialogue and pluralism. These organisations have been able to call on wide-ranging and diverse support in Basque society. For example, in 2004 Elkarri managed to get 150,000 signatures (five per cent of the population of the Basque Country) in a petition to support a citizens’ dialogue to solve the conflict. In this way Basque society has played a major role in creating the social conditions that have enabled the peace process to move forward.

More recently, an opinion poll conducted in spring 2013 by Euskobarometro (Basque barometer, a sociological statistical survey run by the Public University of the Basque Country) indicated broad consensus in Basque society on the way to consolidate peace: 80 per cent supported conversations between the Spanish government and ETA; 80 per cent called for recognition of all victims; 80 per cent wanted ETA to disarm; and 70 per cent supported prison reform for ETA prisoners (around 550 at the time of writing).

Basque society and peace
The basic problem for achieving peace in the Basque Country is the stalemate between ETA and the Spanish
government. ETA is not moving towards disarmament, and the government refuses to enter into dialogue or to take steps on key issues like prisoners, countenancing only the dissolution of ETA.

The Spanish government’s refusal to modify its prison policies has been part of a hard line, justified by the “war against terrorism”, that ignores contentious issues relating to ETA prisoners such as their dispersal around the country, away from their families, or their need for reintegration into society. It has not responded to arguments presented by the Basque government. Nor has ETA made progress on disarmament: while it is open to discussing the matter with the Spanish government, it has disregarded the will of Basque society on moving forward on disarmament and disbandment.

This situation reflects an outdated model of peace negotiations whose protagonists are exclusively a government and an armed group locked in a conflict of mutual destruction. There have been processes like this in the past. Talks in Algiers in 1989 or the 2006 peace process were both bilateral negotiations, and both were marked by belligerence and a lack of transparency – and failure.

Such “classic” peace processes are not participatory and lack channels through which other stakeholders can participate. This is more than a question of principle: the effectiveness of the peace process is at stake. When citizens have no role to play or are marginalised, they have no ownership of the results of the process, and therefore do not get involved in working towards coexistence or creating a safety net to prevent a return to violence.

Basque society needs to be a key player in defining and constructing peace in the Basque Country. For Basque society, this is the starting point for an effective peace process. It also has the potential to unblock the current situation. In this respect, the Spanish government should modify its prison policies, not because ETA is asking for it, but because Basque society is calling for it. And ETA should take steps towards disarmament, not because the Spanish government is demanding it, but because Basque society needs it to eliminate any kind of threat.

Although major ETA decisions, such as to end violence, have been made largely outside negotiations with the Spanish government, they were not unilateral. Basque society, alongside international and other groups, has been a key player for some time.

The permanent, general and verifiable ceasefire announced by ETA in January 2011 was a response to the 2010 Brussels Declaration, signed by a number of international Nobel Prize winners and experts in peace processes, which called for an ETA ceasefire and urged the Spanish government to respond. The commitment of and relationships between the signatories and promoters of that declaration was critical.

Likewise, the decision to put an end to the armed struggle was a response to the Declaration of Aiete, the result of the

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San Sebastian Conference involving major international figures and almost all the political parties and trade unions of the Basque Autonomous Community, Navarre and the French Basque Country – the territories that make up the cultural mosaic of the Basque Country. As a result, a bilateral relationship was set up between these groups and ETA.

These relationships are not easy. One challenge is the apathy in Basque society today. Most Basques have moved on from the peace process, or are preoccupied by the current economic crisis. The failure of the 2006 peace process, in which great hopes had been placed, led to considerable frustration. There is no longer the powerful critical mass of people willing to mobilise and participate that there was 10 years ago.

A second challenge lies in the lack of consensus among the Basque political parties. This is ironic at such a potentially propitious moment for making progress towards peace, with no elections on the horizon, without violence and with all political sectors represented in parliament. But differences among the parties have become very pronounced.

**The Social Forum**

Harold Good, a Protestant clergyman who was a witness for the disarmament of the Irish Republican Army, has stressed that when the Northern Ireland peace process became blocked it was important to provide opportunities for citizens’ dialogue to generate an undercurrent that could help motivate progress.

The Social Forum of March 2013 sought to strengthen the role of Basque society in the peace process and generate new ideas on key challenges. The initiative was created by Lokarri, *Red ciudadana por la paz* (Citizens’ Network for Peace), *Bake Bidea* (a peace organisation in the French Basque Country), *Ahotsak* (a network of political women who work on the peace process), and groups of young people of all ideologies. International organisations and NGOs also provided support.

More than 700 people took part in two sessions, with 12 international experts speaking on subjects such as disarmament, reintegration of prisoners, human rights, and dealing with the past, memory and reconciliation. The organisers opened different channels of participation so that all interested people and groups could contribute. In addition to the event’s web page, there was intensive work on social networks like Twitter and Facebook. The experience and knowledge that international experts brought was crucial for helping to define solutions and overcome obstacles. The aim was not to copy other peace process, but to generate new ideas by learning from other experiences.

The promoters of the Social Forum worked hard to ensure a wide range of perspectives were represented: victims, groups defending human rights of prisoners, pacifist groups, associations that work on memory or reconciliation, and representatives of the main trade unions. Nationalist and left-wing political parties sent official representation, while socialist party activists participated on a personal basis.

Unlike official national dialogue processes, the Social Forum has not had a direct mandate from state institutions and political parties. The Social Forum has not set out to replace institutions and political parties, but rather to urge them to find new solutions for dialogue. The ultimate objective of the forum has not been to become a formal arena itself, but to contribute to setting up a formal space for dialogue.

Some political parties think that legitimate dialogue can only take place in parliament and decline to participate in any other forums. In response, the Social Forum tried to be transparent, sharing information about the content of the forum and how it was organised with the political parties, and giving them the opportunity to comment on draft recommendations coming from it. The basic principle was to work with those who were willing to work with the forum, and leave the door open to those who were not.

Some of the parties that did not participate argued that the forum was the product of the pro-independence Left. And it is true that many people associated with the Left took part in the forum and publicly supported it. But overcoming stereotype and prejudice has been one of the objectives of the forum, and this can only happen through open communication and information sharing among groups with different perspectives. In fact, the recommendations from the forum tried to reflect the concerns of people who did not to participate – even we as organisers disagreed with some points in the document.

**Recommendations from the forum**

Some 500 groups and citizens made submissions to forum discussions. After the forum the organisers worked with the main political parties and with international experts to try to develop recommendations that could really add momentum to the peace process. Twelve recommendations were published in May 2013.

The recommendations have tried to be constructive. Their basic premise calls for “an exercise of dialogue and reconciliation that establishes a solid basis for future coexistence through the wide-ranging and active participation of institutions, political parties and civil society”. In other words a commitment to a peace process in which Basque society plays a key role.
One recommendation urges designing a process to disarm ETA and dismantle its military structures, which suggests a controlled, orderly and agreed process, carried out to a reasonable timescale and involving independent facilitation to promote security of state institutions and public safety.

Another recommendation relates to “integration of prisoners and people ‘on the run’”. This promotes seeking consensus on a comprehensive solution to this issue as an essential part of building stable and lasting coexistence. It suggests as a starting point revising aspects of prison policy that contravene human rights or the humanitarian treatment of prisoners – for example, those relating to prisoners who are seriously ill, measures that deny release to prisoners who have served their sentences, and the dispersion of prisoners away from their families. Prisoners for their part would need to show commitment to a “new scenario for peace”, renounce violent means, and where relevant acknowledge the harm they caused. But they would be seen as active agents for peace and normalisation, through facilitation of contact and dialogue between prisoners, Basque society and competent institutions.

Other recommendations relate to the promotion of human rights, for example through relevant legislative reform, and preserving “truth and memory to deal with the past” – to recognise and provide reparation for victims and acknowledge all harm that has been caused. This would involve “facilitating different ways of narrating and remembering what happened, encouraging self-criticism in every social and political sector and an honest exercise of recognition of the serious mistakes made”.

What has the forum achieved?
Despite its weaknesses and challenges, from my perspective as someone involved in organising the Social Forum, I believe it has major potential to contribute to peace in the Basque Country.

It has sought to identify and focus an agenda on the main challenges involved in the Basque peace process. Key issues of disarmament or the reintegration of prisoners were not being addressed rigorously, but they are now being debated in a way that looks for concrete solutions. In a context in which space for dialogue has been missing, both officially and informally, the Social Forum has provided an opportunity for participation between people of different ideologies.

Both ETA and the main groups of its prisoners have indicated that they will respond to the recommendations of the Social Forum. This opens up a new opportunity for progress in the peace process. Nevertheless, the Spanish government has not responded, nor are there any indications that it will do so.

The results or the potential of the Social Forum should not be underestimated in a situation where the consolidation of the peace process faces major difficulties. The Social Forum is not the solution to all the problems for the Basque Country, but it can be a milestone in bringing together social sectors willing to cooperate to boost the peace process. In the same way that Basque society has tried to challenge indifference among the population, it has also contributed new solutions and initiatives like the forum to motivate the will to transform the situation so that this historic opportunity is not wasted.

The Social Forum has helped add legitimacy to an agenda for the Basque peace process, at least by ensuring that key issues for Basque society are represented in discussions. While the forum was broad-based, it could not be said to have been fully inclusive. There are a number of reasons for this – including that victims groups did not feel comfortable with the language and the framing of the discussions. Others do not perceive the social organisations that convene these types of initiative as neutral.

Overall, I am optimistic that peace can come for the Basque Country. I think that the Basque peace process, with all its difficulties, is opening a more democratic and legitimate track to move forward. Dialogue and agreement are needed between Basque political parties, along with social participation, to add legitimacy to the process and press states to become involved; there are many difficulties – the result of so many years of disagreement – but I do not see any other way forward.

This article presents an insider’s perspective of civil society efforts to bring peace to the Basque Country, in particular the Social Forum organised in March 2013.

Paul Rios is the founder of Lokarri, a citizen network for peace in the Basque Country. Lokarri has played a significant role in mobilising citizen support for the resolution of the Basque conflict, organising key conferences that influenced ETA to announce a definitive end to violence in 2011. Paul holds a law degree from the University of Deusto, Bilbao.