**Background Paper for
The Shared Homeland Paradigm Project:**

Transformative Border Zones: A View from Cyprus

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Introduction

This background paper focuses on the interconnected organizations Association for Historical Dialogue and Research (AHDR) and Home for Cooperation (H4C) as successful outcomes of a local bicommunal movement for peace and reconciliation. The choice for focusing on these two organizations lies in the fact that they form sustainable examples of cooperation in urban contexts that have transformed the buffer zone in the urban center of Nicosia into a space of community formation, exchange and conflict resolution from below. Moreover, we suggest that their foundation and sustenance provide an overall good example for identifying important lessons of local and international factors that enable the transformation of border zones into spaces of encounter and, why not, into potential commons.

Historical and institutional context: the Cyprus problem and the bi-communal movement

Cyprus became an independent republic in 1960. It was formerly a British colony with two main ethnic communities, Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, counting respectively around 78% and 18% of the population at the time.[1] The Republic of Cyprus (ROC), the constitution of which granted equal status to the two communities, was characterized as 'a reluctant republic' (Xydis, 1973) given that its foundation was a negotiation between maximalist Greek-Cypriot aspirations of union with Greece (*enosis*) and Turkish-Cypriot aspirations for partition (*taksim*).[2] These divisive tendencies and ideologies continued post-independence and led to intercommunal clashes and interethnic violence from 1963 to 1967, prompting the establishment of the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) in 1964 (Richmond 1998), which is still stationed on the island, and the effective division of Nicosia into Greek and Turkish sectors, south and north of a 'Green Line'. This border was later to extend across the island following a coup in 1974 against the democratically elected president, Archbishop Makarios, and a military invasion by Turkey in response which partitioned

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[1] The census also counted minority groups (Armenians, Maronites, Latins, Roma, and British) under racial, national, religious and linguistic criteria (Republic of Cyprus Statistics Service archive at https://library.cystat.gov.cy/Documents/KeyFigure/POP_CEN_1960-POP(RELIG_GROUP)_DIS_MUN_COM-EN-250216.pdf, last accessed 18 October 2025).

[2] The demand for *enosis* formed the backbone of the Greek-Cypriot anti-colonial struggle, which was simultaneously a nationalist campaign that targeted both the colonisers and Greek-Cypriot communists disagreeing with the armed campaign. The Turkish-Cypriots were also in disagreement, since unification with Greece left the community little viable options for long-term security on the island. While initially opposing the change from colonial status, Turkish-Cypriot demands came to cohere around the call for a separate state connected to Turkey, with various levels of autonomy under different plans, ranging from double unification (one part to Greece and the other to Turkey) to two separate states (partition). One of the most famous US proposals tabled by US Secretary of State Dean Acheson in 1964, envisioned a combination of *enosis* with minority rights for Turkish-Cypriots and offer of a military base to Turkey.

of island into a Turkish-Cypriot managed north and a Greek-Cypriot managed south, with a UN-administered Buffer Zone in the middle.

The war caused extensive displacement of people, claimed lives[3], and resulted in the formation of a second political entity by Turkish Cypriots in the north, which unilaterally declared independence in 1983 and remains unrecognized except by Turkey. In 2003, in the culmination of efforts of accession of Cyprus to the EU as a single member state and following extensive demonstrations by Turkish Cypriots to this end, borders opened for the first time since 1974, and people could cross 'to the other side' after approximately 30 years of strict physical division (see Demetriou 2007). A plan for a bizonal, bicommunal federation was proposed at the time by the United Nations (UN), known as 'the Annan Plan', and was submitted to simultaneous communal referenda a year later; 65% of the population in the north approved of the plan, and 76% of the population in the south rejected it, prompting negotiations anew. In 2004, the ROC joined the European Union (EU) as a whole, however, EU legislation is effectively applied to this day only to the areas south of the Buffer Zone, where the government of the ROC exercises effective control, while it is suspended in the north pending the conclusion of a negotiated agreement to what has come to be known nationally and internationally as 'the Cyprus problem'.

Overall features of the normative/historical context that facilitated the creation and sustenance of the organizations

As mentioned above, 2003 was a landmark year in the history of the Cyprus conflict when borders opened for the first time and a comprehensive plan for a 'bizonal bicommunal federal' state (as it has come to be accepted under several framework agreements) was tabled. The Association for Historical Dialogue and Research (Henceforth AHDR) was founded at that time. However, its foundation as well as the very opening of the borders must be understood in a broader context of a combination of grassroots and institutionally-supported efforts towards reconciliation that started in the 1980s, as well as broader developments on a global scale enabled by antiauthoritarian social movements.

During the late 1980s and especially in the 1990s, a nascent civil society started to make efforts towards reconciliation in the UN controlled buffer zone, especially in Nicosia. What is now known as the Bicommunal movement started through conflict-resolution workshops that involved citizens initiated by Cypriot, American and British academics and diplomats. Donors such as United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the European Union (EU) and USAID, as well as certain national governments through their Cyprus-based embassies funded bicommunal meetings and exchanges for

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[3] Rough estimates are in the regions of 200,000 for the displaced and 4000 for war casualties (Demetriou 2018).

different groups of the population such as businessmen, youth, environmentalists, teachers and women, among other (Loizos, 2006; Economidou, 2003). Groups of academics and other individuals also organized meetings abroad as it was not always possible to meet in the border zone in Cyprus. This was due to nationalist stigmatization of people prone to reconciliation as traitors (Papadakis and Bryant, 2012), or because authorities at times hardened the requirements for exchanges, especially after the failure of rounds of high-level negotiations (Loizos, 2006; Hadjipavlou 2004).

The stigmatization was something done on both sides since both were aiming to present themselves as the victims of the conflict to local and international audiences. Therefore, any attempt at meeting the other and possibly acknowledging atrocities done by one's own community was seen as national treachery (Papadakis, 2006). The main difference between the approaches of the two sides was that the agents of stigmatization on the Greek-Cypriot side were mostly societal (e.g. media), even though the discourse of treason was supported by the state, while on the Turkish-Cypriot side stigmatization was done by the authorities, who in some instances placed people on 'black lists' and barred them from crossing the border on an individual basis, while in other instances they issued blanket bans for specific events on all prospective Turkish-Cypriot participants. Thus, while Greek-Cypriot reconciliationists faced castigation in the media after they had participated in activities but generally no outright bans by their authorities, Turkish-Cypriot reconciliationists faced more direct and totalizing barriers.

Despite these challenges, the above exchanges cultivated a community of young professionals and individuals prone to reconciliation. Such exchanges were extensively facilitated by the introduction of the internet in 1993. Simultaneously, in the 1980s and 1990s, antiauthoritarian and grassroots left-wing groups, not associated with political parties, started to form in both Nicosia and Limassol. These groups held strong anti-nationalist and pro-reconciliation views and contributed to the perspective of employing peace from below.

This perspective was enhanced in the late 1990s and early 2000s by global developments as well. The alter-globalization movement diffused practices of direct democratic decision-making and anti-hierarchical leadership to a global audience of left-leaning activists with repercussions in Cyprus as well (Christou, 2018; 2021). After the opening of the borders in 2003, and particularly the Ledra Palace checkpoint located just outside the old town of Nicosia, movement was facilitated and antiauthoritarian and radical left groups opened social centers, that they financed collectively by their own means, in which both Greek and Turkish Cypriots could meet for the first time and practice direct democracy in their assemblies. Social centres or

kafeneia (coffee shops), like *Kardaş*[4] founded by extra-parliamentary left youth from both communities, who in this case rented a space in the old city of Nicosia near the border, formed nodes of informal exchange and interaction between members of the two communities that helped create bonds beyond the UN controlled spaces in the buffer zone.

These initiatives should be understood within a context where the border came to acquire a strong symbolic status in Cypriot imagination as an aberrant structure that confined people and limited possibilities (Demetriou 2006; Navaro-Yashin 2016). In this regard, it resembled the Korean DMZ, the rehabilitation of which carries strong associations in the Korean imaginary with idealised forms of peace (Shin 2021). Marking the border that exists between the Koreas since 1945, the DMZ was set up by the Armistice Agreement in 1953 (Kim 2022) and has since become an emblem of militarisation and division. Since 1998, the DMZ has been constructed as an area of preservation in ecological terms, from where prospects of cooperation and eventual peace where thought to spring (Shin 2021: 339). In this sense, the indeterminate status of the DMZ functions as a repository of imaginaries of both a perpetual peace and "peacelessness"(Kim 2022: 15). This symbolic overdetermination also inhered in the Cypriot Green Line as it traversed the capital of Nicosia and cut urban streets in half through sand-bagged dead-ends. It was in these spaces that bicommunal *kafeneia* emerged as spaces of alternative sociality in the city.

Bonds in such community-friendly, pro-reconciliation *kafeneia* that opened along the Green Line, both in north and south Nicosia, helped sustain and enhance a local population that had reconciliation as a core value. These *kafeneia* are managed by private individuals and/or collectives of individuals who maintain a pro-peace ethic. In the premises of *Kardaş* a number of NGOs registered in the south, as well as less formal groups that were not officially registered, including what would later constitute the bicommunal AHDR, held their first meetings, thus reconciliation and peace efforts started to be established from below as possibilities to be cultivated. This challenged the long-held view that high-level negotiations were the only possible way through which peace could be achieved in Cyprus (Demetriou, Christou and Mavris, 2011), a view connected with Cypriots' strong historical association with political parties (Ellinas and Katsourides 2013; 2021) rather than a civil society ethic (Charalambous and Ioannou 2017). The existence of these groups and the visibility of their work, albeit limited to small circulation publications and events of limited audiences, helped to consolidate ideas about the peace process being a potentially inclusive process to which civil society actors could feed ideas, provide support, and organise networks. This

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[4] The Turkish word for 'brother', used as loanword in Greek to signal fictive kinship and solidarity.

approach to inclusivity was also shared by mediators and external actors, including funders like USAID and European embassies.

This approach resembles the Moldova-Transnistria case, where the conflict has remained unresolved since 1992, when conflict broke out between Russian-speaking separatists and the Moldovan government, ending in a ceasefire after Russian intervention that left the Transnistria region unrecognised, with Russian army presence, but claiming independence (Venturi 2011: 8-10). Various rounds of negotiation have involved different actors, the most recent one including Moldova, Transnistria, Russia, USA, EU, Ukraine, and the OSCE (ibid). Some of these actors, have also funded civil society NGOs in Moldova, who work on different themes without necessarily focussing exclusively on the conflict (Venturi 2011: 13). In Transnistria, civil society is weaker, and independent NGOs are generally supported by Moldova or international actors, albeit within a highly restricted environment (Venturi 2011: 15). International actors who have been involved in peacebuilding include the UK's DFID (Department of International Development) and the Austrian Development Corporation (Venturi 2011: 22-23). Other actors, like USAID, IOM, and various UN Agencies, the Soros Foundation, and foundations in Switzerland and the Netherlands have also funded projects that support civil society and contribute to peacebuilding through thematic work in an indirect way (Venturi 2011: 23-24). All of this activity, directly addressing peace, as well as indirectly targeting wider issues of development has enabled civil society actors, whether formally constituted as NGOs or not, to participate in initiatives on conflict resolution, as well as other initiatives that enable collaboration. This is indicative of the difference that international support can make, in frozen conflict environments with uneven civil society development and varying internal support. In Cyprus, a similar landscape was developed around the same time (early 2000s and 2010s) that then enabled the local initiatives described below to flourish by taking the driving seat in projects that were funded, but not driven, through international actors.

The next section summarises further aspects of the conflict that help contextualise the case-studies of AHDR and H4C, in regard to how their specific interventions developed and the factors that enabled them in the wider conflict landscape.

Contextualizing the case study

The cases presented of AHDR and H4C are positive examples of intervening in border zones in a transformative way through bottom-up initiatives. The actions described below provide possible lessons for implementation in other border zones, keeping in mind the specificities of the Cyprus situation but also its similarity to other conflict and post-conflict zones. Some of the most important ones are outlined below:

1. Conflict temporality and international actors: Cyprus is regarded as a frozen conflict, with little flare-up in the last 50 years and no casualties since 1996. Peace negotiations have never ceased throughout this time, and the efforts of the second longest-running UN peacekeeping mission are largely concentrated on the peace talks. This potentially provides opportunities for civil society to design actions by leveraging support from the UN and other peacebuilding actors on the island (e.g. via their embassies). Whether through national or international support, the important point here is that grassroots initiatives should be enabled and empowered in a bottom-up approach. The power brokers enabling this need to enjoy legitimacy on both sides, and also ensure that initiatives remain locally-rooted. In Cyprus, this was possible because of the presence of such actors on the ground, their long-term and active involvement in conflict resolution, and the connections they have maintained with peacebuilding civil society actors.

2. The Cypriot context also provides a relatively safe environment in which to implement the actions described above, at least in terms of participants' physical safety. This resembles the situation in the Moldova and Transnistria conflict, where reconciliation efforts were bolstered by support from actors like the UK, EU, and USAID (Venturi 2011).

3. Border infrastructure and physical presence: The border in Cyprus remains highly militarized by multiple armies (RoC, Turkey, UN, etc) but efforts to demilitarize the Buffer Zone have been undertaken since the late 1990s. These included de-mining, withdrawing troops from specific locations especially in the urban centre, and allowing civilians to cultivate fields and graze animals in the Green Line (Constantinou et al 2020), as well as eventually opening checkpoints. The opening of the checkpoints in 2003 was catalytic in the creation of both AHDR through easing meetings for dialogue and action and H4C in enabling the utilization of infrastructure within the Buffer Zone. This is a unique situation in global terms, where the rehabilitation of a border zone is happening despite the failure to officially reach an agreement (including on where the border exactly lies). The Korean DMZ (Shin 2021) offers some similarities in the ways it has offered venues for envisioning 'peace', but the achievements of AHDR and H4C as discussed below show the transformational possibilities of developing infrastructures in such zones.

4. Further to this point, the dynamics of negotiating *infrastructurally* peace, conflict, habitation, property and land use, and civilian and military coexistence in Cyprus are difficult to match. While the island overall remains highly militarised, with presence of forces from Greece, Turkey, the UK, and UN in addition to Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot armies, the demilitarisation of the Buffer

Zone in the 1990s has made it possible for parts of it to be handed over to civilian use over the years, chiefly for farming and agriculture. Within this context, the use of buildings within the Buffer Zone has been limited and subject to restrictions. In this sense, the achievement of H4C to claim and operationalize the space it currently uses in the Buffer Zone, as will be explained below, was arguably the simplest, but also the most innovative, most difficult, most daring, and most radical, of all its achievements to date. This is an indication of the high stakes involved in possible similar claims elsewhere.

5. Historical Narratives: AHDR began with the goal of shifting historical narratives towards a more reconciliatory approach to the past and away from hegemonic nationalist narratives. The various ways in which it continues to do this are based on separating out the two parts of this approach. Activities value a multi-perspectival approach to history that continues to add to what is known about the past rather than confronting existing narratives. This is crucial in gaining audiences within communities involved in the circulation of historical narratives (e.g. schoolteachers), but who may be unwilling to reject hegemonic perspectives. An important part of this approach, as will be explained below, has been the focus on micro-histories, through city walks that zoom in on the histories of neighbourhoods and buildings, and oral history projects that focus on village and first-hand memories. This approach presents similarities with many initiatives across conflict regions such as story-telling in Northern Ireland (Maiangwa and Byrne, 2015) or listening to stories in Rwanda (Breed and Uwihoreye, 2023), which are elaborated below. The continuities between this perspective and other activities that may not directly aim at historical understanding offers possibilities for navigating strategies in more permissive or more repressive environments.

Case-study: AHDR: description of features of the case-study and how it operates in practice

The increasing conviction that peace can be achieved from below, and that people can take reconciliation into their own hands, along with the ease of contact across the Buffer Zone that made bi-communal engagement more effective after 2003 led to the formation of a series of initiatives, among which the AHDR has arguably been the most successful. The AHDR, established in Nicosia's Buffer Zone in 2003, is a non-profit, non-governmental organization founded by Greek and Turkish Cypriot educators to promote historical understanding among the general public, especially youth and educators, and open dialogue on issues of history, historiography and history teaching and learning. The AHDR started with organizing conferences on these matters and inviting international experts from the Council of Europe and EUROCLIO, to spread awareness and provide capacity building to history educators on how to approach

history teaching in a multiperspectival and critical manner. Furthermore, a long-term aim has been to promote the study and research of the history of Cyprus in a critical manner and contribute to the collection of historical resources, as well as in the translation of research material into educational resources. Some of the educators involved in these efforts were also tasked, around the time of the referendum, with revising Turkish-Cypriot history textbooks used in schools between 2004 and 2009 when the left-wing pro-peace party CTP was in power (Latif 2017). The AHDR's approach on historical multiperspectivity led to a series of publications[5] in a variety of subjects such as the issue of Missing Persons that were approached in a multiperspectival manner providing the experience of different groups involved in the matter such as families, the state, international organizations, among other. Another focus has been on microhistories and social history such as the historical memory of Nicosia across the divide, the history of formerly ethnically mixed villages of Cyprus, while some publications also explored current school history textbooks in a critical manner. One publication for example explored gender perspectives in history teaching, and examined the history textbooks on both sides through a gender lens. The publications always aim to be trilingual, offered in Turkish, Greek and English.

In this sense, the focus of AHDR's work on foregrounding multiple historical narratives has provided grounding and a sound basis for the rest of its activities. The multiperspectivity approach it has pursued shares similarities with peacebuilding initiatives that focus on narratives in Northern Ireland and Rwanda. In the case of Northern Ireland, where story telling has a strong cultural resonance, reconciliation projects funded by the EU have sought to foster safe spaces where people from different sides of the conflict divide could share their stories of past violence orally through the help of trained facilitators from the communities (Maiangwa and Byrne 2015). The significance of such sharing was that people could connect through the realisation of shared pain and through empathy with feelings that they had previously associated only with their collective narratives. This facilitated forms of closure through a sense of "emotional justice" that in many cases transplanted the quest for retributive justice (Maiangwa and Byrne 2015: 98-102).

This offers similarities with the work of AHDR in the sense that even though AHDR's work was more focused on officialising oral history through research and publications, both oral and published stories offered a way of sharing narratives and allowed people to tell and listen to each other's narratives. The publications of AHDR raised issues of violence and traumatic events but also made available shared experiences of bicommunal daily life in the past, which younger generations had

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[5] Examples of publications by AHDR can be found in a special section on this in the bibliography. Also for a more elaborate list please visit: https://www.ahdr.info/our-work/supplementary-educational-materials/.

relatively little access to apart from family narratives that very seldom became public as they diverged from the hegemonic script. Similarly, in AHDR events that included workshops and other encounters between young people, stories were often shared orally that related the stereotypes each community has grown up with and in the process, this sharing allowed the stereotypes to be broken down.

It is in this sense important that beyond the publications, a crucial element of AHDR's work is outdoor education. This experiential aspect of such activities also bears similarities with story telling projects in Rwanda, where participants are encouraged to listen to each other's stories through performative engagements that include arts-based methods such as music, dance, and drawing (Breed and Uwihoreye 2023). In the case of Rwanda where attendance of community-based Gacaca courts in the post-genocide period was mandatory, such experiential sharing provided positive ways in which participants could negotiate pain and deeply connect with each other.

In the case of AHDR's activities, this experiential approach mainly consists of educational walks, done in cooperation with the Home for Cooperation, and study visits across the divide that aim at inquiring and promoting awareness, on issues that touch, but not directly engage with the Cyprus conflict or the individual pain associated with it, as in the case of Rwanda. Instead, the walks engage with spatial narratives such as on architecture of the city, or with collective contemporary concerns such as gender issues, cultural heritage or use of public spaces. One important aim of these city walks is to give the opportunity for and encourage as many people as possible to cross the Green Line, and therefore, start to engage from a safe space with the assumed 'enemy'. In differentiation with the story telling projects analysed for Northern Ireland, this was part of a strategy of the AHDR to not engage directly with the Cyprus issue, but to bring issues of common concern, like the issue of the Missing Persons, or gender equality, anti-racism, children's rights and discuss them from a humanitarian and global perspective. This was achieved by also brining examples from other countries such as Argentina on Missing Persons to make educators more willing to discuss such issues without necessarily having to engage directly with the Cyprus problem either in terms of its formal political parameters, and/or via personal or family trauma related to the conflict.

As a member of the AHDR has stated to us, the work of the AHDR is not only to promote reconciliation between Greek and Turkish Cypriots but to be relevant to people from all communities and all walks of life. This principle is reflected in two changes that marked an expansion of the work of the AHDR. When it was first established, the AHDR worked mainly out of container offices provided by the United Nations Peacekeeping Force (UNFICYP). Then, through a successful bid at the European Economic Area Norway Grants they were able to buy a derelict building in the Buffer Zone from the Armenian Cypriot family that owned it and establish their

headquarters, as well as a community and educational centre known as the Home for Cooperation (H4C) which opened in 2011. After being awarded the funding, buying the building did not require special permission from the ROC since it was located in the Buffer Zone area under the control of the ROC. However, the initial members of the organization had to request permission from the ROC to renovate the building, as well as attend several meetings at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Land Registry office to provide assurances about who they were and what they intended to do in the Buffer Zone. They also secured permission from the UN to be able to establish a presence in the Buffer Zone and the UN also contributed to the equipment of the newly established centre. The H4C, in its brick and mortar presence (Demetriou and Erdal 2018) as will be explained below, was a way to reach a wider public, beyond history educators and students, through a multitude of social, cultural and educational activities held there throughout the years.

At approximately the same time, history education and the H4C, as the two main pillars of the AHDR, were complemented by a third one: peace education. Peace education is an umbrella term which encompasses human rights, antiracist education, environmental sustainability awareness, interfaith and intercultural education, gender equality awareness and non-violence. Through peace education, AHDR was able to expand to other audiences, beyond history educators and students, on themes as wide-ranging as sports, climate, and religion, as well as attract funding from a greater variety of sources.

This was achieved with the IMAGINE project, a landmark project of the AHDR, that was successful in achieving recognition by institutional authorities both in the north and south as a confidence building measure. This was done by identifying a gap in the training of teachers on antiracist education in the south and lobbying to convince policy makers that the AHDR could provide such training through their peace education materials. At first, the project was implemented monocommunally and then bicommunally after gaining approval from the Bicommunal Technical Committee of Education which included policy makers from both sides, and some AHDR members and was established in 2015. The establishment of the Committee itself, one of the few committees attached to the formal peace negotiations that aim to represent civil society (Demetriou and Hadjipavlou 2016; 2021) had been the result of concerted efforts by AHDR alongside other reconciliation groups.

While the initial committees established in the new phase of the negotiation process in 2008 dealt with 'technical' issues such as broadcasting, crime, crisis management, commerce, health, environment, and humanitarian affairs, the newer committees on culture, education and gender were added in 2015 in answer to calls by civil society and the UN to make the peace process more inclusive and better connected to society. The establishment of the Education Committee made it easier for the

IMAGINE project to take root. The strategy followed again for convincing policy makers, as well as teachers to participate, was to emphasize the need to cultivate a culture of peace in schools beyond what might be the result on the Cyprus issue. This made teachers feel that the aim of the AHDR was not to conduct propaganda towards a specific solution, but to help resolve broader conflicts within schools. The conflicts that the AHDR and IMAGINE focused on had to do with issues of common concern to teachers such as racism and bullying, addressing in this sense the general 'peace' within schools without discussing the Cyprus issue directly. Nevertheless, teachers as well as students from both communities had the opportunity for the first time to receive common training by the AHDR at the H4C and for the overwhelming majority, it was the first time that they met someone from the other community. Until 2024, more than 7910 students and more than 2410 teachers were trained, according to the website of the AHDR.

IMAGINE, as well as many other projects, and the very existence of the AHDR and the H4C could not have been possible without international support, funding and collaborations. The funding for IMAGINE, for example, since 2017, comes from the federal office of Germany, which puts political pressure on both communities to recognize its value and implement it. The H4C has diachronically been supported by the European Economic Area Grants and Norway Grants (financed by Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein). The financial supporters of the AHDR according to a member of the association do not shape the agenda of the organization, however, one main criterion that they ask to be fulfilled is that all projects maintain a clear bicommunal character. The international recognition of the work of both the AHDR and H4C, through the networks they created, puts constant pressure on both leaderships in the two communities to respect and approve their actions. As a stakeholder at H4C mentioned to us many times the foreign embassies of countries such as Norway, Slovakia, Sweden stepped in to maintain the sustainability of the organizations but also to put pressure on local authorities to not impede their actions. In this sense, embassies are able to pursue 'soft power' towards peace via available diplomatic channels to ensure that the projects they help fund are not undermined. A key leverage for such soft power is the fine line these project tread that does not engage directly in a conflictual way with official rhetoric.

The boards and staff of both the AHDR and the H4C are constituted by both Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots. Efforts are always made so that there is equal representation from both communities on the board and personnel of the organizations. Board members and staff communicate in English. During the trainings of the AHDR with students and teachers there is always a Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot trainer present, while during conferences and other events translation is provided in Greek, Turkish and English.

Case-study: H4C: associated organization: description of features of the case-study and how it operates in practice

The very existence of a physical space in the buffer zone that communities across the divide can easily access and use for meetings and social time has been an immense step forward in reconciliation efforts. The vision for the H4C was exactly to be a community and social centre, a common space used by all communities in Cyprus, creating the conditions for engagement across the divide. It also aimed to respond to the needs of civil society organizations that lacked infrastructure in the form of space and facilities since there is no consistent governmental funding for the sustainability of NGOs in Cyprus. The H4C has a café where people can meet informally and spend social time together, but at the same time it creates opportunities for people to engage with each other in a less formal way through the many events it initiated throughout the years. As already mentioned, it organizes city walks and bicycle rides across the divide. It offers language courses in both Greek and Turkish, it holds movie nights, salsa classes, as well as events with DJs and live music bands on important occasions such as the International Day of Peace, that allow people to engage with each other in a fun and light atmosphere. This important aspect of the H4C in terms of the social time it creates for engagement reflects and adds to the work of the community and pro-reconciliation *kafeneia* mentioned earlier that created and maintained a pro-peace community of people. It helps to remind people that coexistence can also be fun and joyful in a context where reconciliation has been controversial and thus approached through the lens of struggle, hard work, and great effort. The events and activities at the H4C were organized by people from both communities, not only by the staff of the H4C. As one former staff member mentioned 'we provided the ground, the ideas came from the community'. This was achieved by open calls to whoever was interested in holding activities at the H4C and such activities drew many people who never crossed before or had the opportunity to engage with people from the other community. The lighthearted character of these activities was strategically designed to make engagement easier and fun (also Christou 2021).

Other actions that the H4C organizes in that fashion are festivals such as the Buffer Fringe Performing Arts Festival. The Festival is part of its peacebuilding programs and showcases new and experimental work by local and international artists, challenges physical and artistic barriers, and creates opportunities for artists to meet and exchange ideas. Both local and international artists are involved, while the public has the opportunity to expose itself to artwork that aims at challenging dominant ideologies and borders, while also enjoy themselves with food and drinks in the buffer zone. The H4C further hosts and organizes the Intercommunal Children's Choir along with Greek and Turkish Cypriot teachers' unions and the AHDR.

H4C also offers working and conference spaces for rent by NGOs and professionals who align with its values and who work in the fields of intercommunal cooperation, education, art, culture, research, and sports. It rents the spaces at affordable prices for both communities, and these funds contribute to its sustainability.

Assessment of the institutions from interviews with key stakeholders on successes/failures, circumstances that helped or deterred their actions

Changing conditions in the political sphere, as well as the fluctuating position of different leaderships towards a viable solution to the Cyprus problem inevitably affect the success or failure of the activities undertaken by both AHDR and H4C. In 2016 for example, when IMAGINE was suggested to the Bicommunal Committee on Education, the political climate was ripe for such a bold initiative, as the two leaderships had committed to a new round of peace talks and both seemed willing to find a solution on the basis of a bizonal, bicommunal federation. The failure of this round of talks in 2017 and the subsequent election of a right wing government in the north, that was prone to a two-state solution, led to the eventual suspension of the project in the north and the withdrawal of permissions to engage with Turkish Cypriot public schools.

At the same time, support for nationalist and far right rhetoric in the south rose, as this discourse weaponised anti-immigrant sentiment and blamed Turkey and the Turkish-Cypriot leadership for a lack of control at checkpoints, insisting that this was part of a plan to Islamize the south (Demetriou 2024). This coupling of two emotive issues was further compounded by changes in the political landscape during the pandemic, which constricted activism in general (Christou et al 2023). Amid travel and mobility restrictions in 2020, the government implemented a stricter regime on crossings. The pandemic has been detrimental for exchanges and bicommunal cooperation given that, as an employee at AHDR mentioned to us, it felt like the two leaders used it as an opportunity to close down the checkpoints, a measure that continued to be implemented long after measures within the two communities had been lifted. The staff of both organizations could not use their offices, and activities in schools had to move online which proved very difficult given also the different capacities in schools across the divide. The AHDR, however, continued to train teachers who then reproduced activities in their own schools.

At that time, the H4C, being a space between the checkpoints that became unreachable by either side overnight, came at the brink of closing. Ironically, exactly for this reason, the H4C provided shelter on a few occasions to refugees who were stranded in the Buffer Zone, as they crossed from the north to the south planning to seek asylum. The pandemic measures had long-term effects, however, in the subsequent hardening of checkpoint policing, which affected particularly the social activities at the H4C: '[it is] as if this is a border rather than a checkpoint', an AHDR

employee mentioned to us. People do not meet as often as they did in the past, while it has proven harder to attract new people and the continued failure in peace negotiations is contributing to this through the general disappointment it creates among the public.

Another major challenge of having a brick and mortar presence in the Buffer Zone is the everyday dealing with the various authorities north and south, as well as the UN, in regard to taking permissions to hold events or to bring people, like third country nationals, to the Buffer Zone for the activities. The UN, according to a H4C former stakeholder, often put restrictions in place that impede, rather than facilitate the work of peacebuilding organizations. Examples of common restrictions involved the UN not giving easily permission to hold festivals or other events in the Buffer Zone or even at times copying the activities of the H4C and offering them themselves as to justify their mandate and presence at the Buffer Zone. Moreover, according to the same stakeholder, during the Covid-19 pandemic the UN was not at all helpful in facilitating the continued presence of employees of H4C at the Buffer Zone.

In terms of other challenges, the fact that the north was an unrecognized state, made it necessary to register the organizations in the ROC, something that constituted a consistent point of suspicion from the authorities in the north towards the work of AHDR and H4C and at times was used as an excuse to not approve the implementation of actions. This was mediated to a certain extent by the two organizations that made sure that their Boards of Directors and staff were always constituted by members of both communities on a principle of equality and that these people were not involved in political parties on either side. Also, the consistent mobilization of international support in terms of funding and recognition of the work of the two organizations helped to a great extent in overcoming these challenges and put pressure on authorities not to impede their actions. Still, there is a need to negotiate with many authorities even for the mere use of the language one adopts in different publications to make sure that the fragile balance of meeting everyone's demands is not disturbed.

Conclusion

Below we summarize several key points for consideration:

1. The establishment of a community and social centre in a physical space easily accessed by both communities with relative independent funding is key for peacebuilding efforts. This requires investment and sustenance and can be a liability when restrictions tighten, but on the other hand it also acts as a counter-balance to harsher policies, by providing an anchor for people to continue meeting, discussing, and being active, even when the political climate turns against reconciliation.

2. Open calls to the communities for implementing actions can help strengthen the sense of ownership to the place of allies beyond the core organizations. It invites people and collectivities who may not cohere around formal structures to initiate activities, contribute ideas, and innovate.

3. Organization of social events and festivals and the creation of a light and fun atmosphere for interaction is crucial to remind people of the joy in reconciliation.

4. A key strategy of both organizations is not to address the Cyprus issue directly but make sure that the right conditions are there for people to meet safely, have fun and discuss issues of common concern that might later organically develop into exchanges on the Cyprus issue.

5. The adoption of educational programs that fight prejudices and bring examples from other conflict zones to discuss issues close to home without directly engaging with sensitive histories or personal stories is important in lowering the stakes for engaging in reconciliation activities. It can reassure participants that their viewpoints are welcome and valid, even if they do not necessarily subscribe to historical and political approaches that radically oppose hegemonic perspectives.

6. Having staff and board members from both communities in the organizations increases their legitimacy. It also provides in-depth and nuanced (multiple and sometimes differing) perspectives on socio-political dynamics within communities, making the group more resilient in restrictive environments.

7. Lobbying for international support and recognition to put pressure on local authorities to approve peacebuilding actions is important. Although it may come with challenges, e.g. in delegitimizing actions by making them seem part of foreign agendas, the sense of ownership within the communities of such activities (point 2) provides a counterbalance to such challenges.

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