About Initiatives of Change

Initiatives of Change International (IofC International) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) working for peace, reconciliation and human security worldwide. It has Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, and Participants Status in the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. It stresses the importance of personal responsibility, ethical leadership and building trust across the world’s divides.

Based in Caux, Switzerland, IofC International was founded in 2002 as an association bringing together the autonomous national bodies of the Initiatives of Change movement which are active in 39 countries, many of them over several decades.

IofC International represents the universality and multi-faith character of the movement, and facilitates its relationships with the United Nations and other international organisations through its Geneva office. Its Office of Training Services in Geneva connects the training processes of the worldwide movement with needs identified by the UN and other international agencies.

IofC International has operational responsibility for Initiatives of Change’s global communications and facilitates collaboration between IofC national bodies. Certain transnational programmes of the Initiatives of Change movement also operate under its auspices.

Aims

As a diverse global network, IofC initiates programmes aimed at:

- Healing the wounds of history
- Strengthening the moral and spiritual dimensions of democracy
- Building trust and integrity in the global economy to sustainably meet the needs of humanity and protect the environment
- Rebuilding a sense of community and tackling causes of racial and communal discrimination
- Forging networks of people of different cultures and faiths to work for reconciliation, justice and peace
- Encouraging a culture of care and responsibility in personal and family life

President’s message

In the face of enormous environmental, economic and social challenges, how can we address the divisions that get in the way of effective responses?

For myself and myself, one response has been a five-month ‘Voyage of dialogue and discovery’ to 14 nations, accompanied by a multinational team of mostly young Initiatives of Change activists. We did not go to preach solutions, but with a hope for honest dialogue and collaboration.

Our journey began in war-scarred Sri Lanka. Then to Indonesia, where the genuine faith of our young hosts showed us Islam with heart, with compassion. In Kenya and South Africa, we encountered a hunger for reconciliation between tribes, races, and within families. In Norway we met young families building bridges with the Muslim minority.

In Palestine I was not prepared for the devastating impact of innumerable Israeli settlements, walls, and settler-only roads. Yet nor did I anticipate the quality and dedication to non-violence, peace and justice we witnessed in many Palestinians and Israelis.

In Romania the depth of faith, especially among young people, was striking. In Ukraine, where cultures and political influences clash, our Voyage sparked a national ‘Week of Trust’ which the media picked up, placing trust on the national agenda.

In Japan we found a nation at a crossroads, caught between greater involvement in Asia and consciousness of its past mistakes. The Voyage continues through USA, and countries of Latin America.

In every country simple messages made the strongest impact:

- when I point an accusing finger at my neighbour, there are three more pointing back at me
- the most important connection is between each individual and the ‘inner voice of conscience’. Everywhere, we invited people to consider a ‘coalition of conscience’ to confront the real enemies, which are hate, fear and greed. Obedience to that inner voice of truth is not only available but the irreplaceable response to the crises we face.

Rajmohan Gandhi
President, Initiatives of Change International

Professor Rajmohan Gandhi has been President of IofC International since January 2009. A journalist, academic and social reformer, Gandhi has received international acclaim for his biography of his grandfather Mohandas K. Gandhi.
Rajeev Dubey: planting a million trees per year

Chris Breitenberg

a movement which is the outcome of changed lives, endures. Organizations spring up like mushrooms wherever there is aid and responsibility born of faith and moral change in the fruit of something less tangible – a deep sense of commitment.

In each case, the organization or programme is the visible timed during the visit of IofC President Rajmohan Gandhi media, this young team organized a national ‘week of trust’, Through public forums, competitions, street activities and the values on which freedom thrives, in particular honesty, posed by conflict, corruption, climate change and injustice.

The launch was followed by a six-week ‘Harambee leadership programme’ for 18 young people from seven African countries, undertaking outreach to schools and universities. Similarly, when IofC’s Foundations for Freedom (F4F) programme was officially registered as an independent international Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) based in Ukraine in September 2009, it was the culmination of several years work by IofC in the region. F4F was started in 1993 by IofC-UK, with the aim of training a new generation of leaders in Central and Eastern Europe.

The new organization, aims to ‘promote development of true, free, democratic and fair societies where citizens understand and practise the values on which freedom thrives, in particular honesty, integrity, personal responsibility and servant leadership.’

Through public forums, competitions, street activities and the media, its young team has networked a national ‘week of trust’, timed during the visit of IofC President Rajmohan Gandhi to Ukraine. Getting ‘trust’ onto the national agenda is no easy task in this nation where corruption and the wounds of history run deep. Some of the team are now building a sustainable community house as a base for dialogue, training and building the leadership.

In each case, the organization or programme is the visible fruit of something less tangible – a deep sense of commitment and responsibility born of faith and moral change in individuals. In countries such as Ethiopia and Ukraine, organizations spring up like mushrooms wherever there is aid and disappear just as quickly when aid dries up. A movement which is the outcome of changed lives, endures.

Peace and truthbuilding

At the core of IofC’s approach to peace building is the practice of listening to the inner voice of conscience and a readiness to take responsibility rather than blame others. The following are some of the activities conducted by IofC during the year.

At a time of heightened tensions between Sudan’s Muslim north and Christian south, Nigerian Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye shared their interfaith mediation experience with religious and political leaders in Khartoum and White Nile State. The story of how these former militia leaders and sworn enemies reconciled is now work for peace is told in the film ‘The Imam and the Pastor’, made by IofC’s FLT Films. Their visit to Sudan in January, assisted by IofC, was the Arabic version of the film, and followed a similar visit to Egypt in May/June 2009. In November the pair were presented with the First Foundation Civic Prize for Conflict Prevention.

Creators of Peace is a woman’s initiative which challenges and empowers women to become active peacemakers.

The Fifth Creators of Peace international conference took place in Australia in October 2009, bringing together 235 women from over 50 countries. Forgive was ‘a golden thread weaving through every session’, as Aboriginal Australians, Australians, Hindus, Russians, Indonesians and Sinhalese, Europeans and Africans shared stories of breaking down walls of conflict.

Hope-Sierra Leone, a Freetown-based NGO affiliated to IofC, works to implement recommendations from the country’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It has coordinated a series of reconciliation and symbolic reburial ceremonies over eight months in 17 chieftains around the country. A decade of brutal civil war, ending in 2002, left 50,020 dead and thousands more traumatised – destroying the economic and social fabric of the country. One part of the government’s reparations programme includes payments or services provided to victims. The other, coordinated by Hope-Sierra Leone, addresses the emotional wounds through apologetic practices rooted in the local culture.

An initiative described by the BBC as ‘ground-breaking’, brought 65 young Muslims from across Europe for a five-day programme of ‘Learning to be peacemakers’ in the IofC conference centre in Caux, Switzerland in August 2009. It was the brainchild of British Imam Amaur Massor after an earlier visit to Cairo led to a ‘profound change’ in his thinking. Massor wants to train 1,000 young European Muslims, supporting them to better understand their own faith tradition and to become involved constructively in the wider community.

Transforming society and culture

IofC’s programme encompasses understandings and tools to help shape the societies and cultures they are part of. By bringing people together in ‘honest conversations’ ways are found to address social ills such as racism, corruption, family breakdown and self-harm materialization.

Former Virginia Governor Tim Kaine, chair of the Democratic National Committee in the USA, launched a book on ‘Truthbuilding: an honest conversation on race, reconciliation, and responsibility’ on 15 March. The book, published by the University of Virginia Press, was written by Bob Corcoran, founder of IofC’s Hope in the Cities programme. It tells how Richmond, a city starkly divided by a history of slavery and racism, has modelled approaches to facilitating honest and inclusive dialogue and building diverse partnerships. ‘Listening is a lost art in this world,’ said Kaine. ‘Hope in the Cities is a space where people can talk.’

IofC participated in the Fifth Parliament of the World’s Religions in Melbourne, Australia, 3–9 December 2009, with over 2,000 from 200 countries representing the world’s major faiths. IofC’s contributions included a Creators of Peace workshop, sessions on forgiveness and screenings of The Imam and the Pastor by IofC’s FLT Films. Outside the official programme, the IofC centre in Melbourne hosted two occasions with speakers from the Parliament.

In Paris, the Dialogue Initiative has held several conferences involving public figures such as Professor Tariq Ali around the crucial themes of intercultural cooperation and dialogue. Participants include 235 women from over 30 countries. Forgiveness was ‘a golden thread weaving through every session’, as Aboriginal Australians, Australians, Hindus, Russians, Indonesians and Sinhalese, Europeans and Africans shared stories of breaking down walls of conflict.

In December, 120 students representing 50 schools and universities launched SAVE Indonesia (Students Against Violence and Extremism). A 10-point declaration, drafted by students, calls on them to respect differences, refuse discriminatory behaviour, speak out against violence and promote a spirit of brotherhood. The declaration was the product of a two-day dialogue between IofC and Indonesian government officials and Indonesians and the Center for Feminism and Democracy Studies.

Global economy and sustainability

From the earliest days of IofC, people from all sides of economic life – workers, management, farmers and financiers – have found common cause in working together to meet the needs of humanity. New energies and creative teamwork emerge when people look beyond their own self-interest, or the narrow interests of their group.

In July 2009, the second Caus Forum for Human Security was opened by Prince Hassan of Jordan suggesting that 2009 was the year ‘to change our minds’ in response to challenges of water and food security, and dwindling natural resources. ‘Thinking supra-nationally and intra-dependently is essential,’ he said. The Forum, in Caux, Switzerland, brought together peacemakers, politicians, environmentalists and campaigners from both governmental and non-governmental organizations to explore the interconnectedness of human security, climate change, good governance, corruption and local business sectors. In this context there were dialogues between Israelis and Palestinians and between Indians and Pakistanis. Young environmentalists at the Forum formed an ‘Environment and Economy’ group, and they went on to attend the COP15 conference in Copenhagen, working to try to build trust between the parties.

Also in Caux, a conference on Trust and Integrity in the Global Economy took up the challenge of building a people-focused sustainable approach to globalization. Among the industries attending, Rajeev Dehey, President of Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd, India’s largest tractor manufacturer, told of his company’s investment in bio-diesel and hybrid electric vehicles, and community programmes including planting more than a million trees across the country. A Food and Sustainability Network was launched at the conference, connecting farmers and consumers to promote just and sustainable strategies for food production, water use, health, the soil and the environment.

Training and capacity building

Change requires people with a passion for a cause, resilience to keep going when things seem impossible, and moral qualities to inspire others to give their best. IofC training programmes aim to nurture a visionary, inclusive and humble leadership.

Thirty-nine training programmes of IofC are being offered around the world, some of which have continued for more than 35 years. Vital elements of the training programmes are tools such as inner listening, sharing stories of change that lead to change in the wider community or society, and living a valued-guided life where motives and actions are shaped by absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love.

The 17th Caus Scholars Program, for instance, gave 20 post-graduate students an intensive summer school in the theories and practice of conflict prevention, embedded with the basics of IofC’s ‘Weekend ‘Youth, changing lives’ programmes take place through the year in Brazil. And a second ‘Tools for Change’ conference in Malaysia combined basic tools of personal change with professional skills training for 80 NGO and community activists.

This year the Office of International Training, based in Geneva, launched the IofC Trainers Certification process and the formation of country-based Trainers Hubs, making programmes and designs available to local, regional and international organizations. The Office conducted its 10th annual Trainers Conference on team-building to national and international organizations in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Sierra Leone, Lesotho and South Africa. As a result the Minister of Gender in Lesotho asked IofC International to conduct training to female members of parliament as well as those in the 12 district councils before the end of 2010.

www.iofc.org/highlights

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