

Global Peace Services USA

...an idea whose time has come

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Greetings from John Eriksson, President, GPS USA

*This issue of the GPS Newsletter features two thoughtful articles about peace building in totally different environments. The first article, “The President’s Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge—What I Learned,” is by Dr. Kenneth Bedell, PhD, who was appointed by President Obama to work in the Department of Education, where he played a lead role in designing and implementing an innovative program to commit U.S. colleges and universities to initiate activities that combined an interfaith orientation with peace building and services in an array of ways. Dr. Bedell’s article provides a fascinating account of how this initiative worked out in practice. He has been involved with peace, interfaith, and civil rights movements his entire life. His most recent book is **Realizing the Civil Rights Dream: Diagnosing and Treating American Racism** (Praeger, 2017). Dr. Bedell is ordained in The United Methodist Church and led congregations for 16 years in New York, Maryland, and Ohio. He has taught at the junior high, high school, college, and theological school levels. In his capacity as executive secretary of the International Association of Methodist Schools, Colleges, and Universities, Dr. Bedell visited schools and colleges in Argentina, Brazil, Korea, Mozambique, Kenya, and Zimbabwe. Dr. Bedell earned his PhD in sociology from Temple University.*

The second article, “Child Soldiers: An International Challenge,” reports an interview by GPS Board Member, Dr. Robert Muscat, of Dr. Michael Wessells, Clinical Professor of Population and Family Health at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health. As Dr. Muscat observes at the beginning of his interview, Professor Wessells “is a prominent expert and advocate for one of the most egregious and perplexing problems of armed conflict: the recruitment and use of child soldiers.” Dr. Muscat elicits Professor Wessells’ vast knowledge of the nature of the problems, the trends and the thus far unsuccessful attempts of the international community to solve it.

*Robert Muscat is based in Sarasota, FL, and continues to write on problems of conflict and peace-building, drawing on his long experience as an economist for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and consultant to the World Bank, the United Nations International Childrens’ Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and other UN agencies and nongovernmental organizations. Toward the end of his 18-year career as Professor of Psychology at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, VA. and as a senior advisor on child protection for the ChildFund (formerly Christian Children’s Fund), Michael Wessells subsequently devoted virtually all of his time to the vexing issue of child soldiers. He published a book-length analysis of the subject—**Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection, 2006, Harvard University Press**—*

and since then has made major contributions to the understanding of the problem, working with a number of organizations with international programs and confronted with the same issue.

In order to continue and expand our current work, such as the GPS Newsletter, so that we can continue putting out our newsletter, with essays and articles readers are unlikely to find elsewhere...and hold our special events, such as our recent panel on the Colombia Peace Process, we do need greater resources. Please consider making as generous a tax-deductible contribution as you can to GPS. This may be done by mailing a check to the postal address shown above or through our website www.globalpeaceservices.org. Phone: 301-681-6968.

We wish our readers a happy, healthy and peaceful new year.

The President's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge — What I Learned

On February 5, 2009 one of Barack Obama's first acts as president was to amend and reissue President G. W. Bush's faith-based executive order by creating the Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships in the White House, and Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships Centers in thirteen federal agencies. The revised executive order also created the President's Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

The Advisory Council delivered its report to the president in March 2010. Included in the 164-page report was a recommendation that "The President should allocate already appropriated funds within the Department of Education or Department of Health & Human Services, to provide the necessary financial incentive to stimulate campus/community partnerships through service projects that bring people together across different religious and secular lines."

As a Senior Advisor in the Department of Education's Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships Center, I was privileged to be part of the initial conversations about how to implement the Advisory Council recommendation. The president wanted to move forward, but there were a number of hurdles as a specific plan was worked out.

The first hurdle was that the recommendation suggested "financial incentives." Although there was general support for the concept at the

Department of Education, no one had a proposal for how to use "already appropriated funds." The project didn't fit into the existing budget and the same was true at Health and Human Services.

Dropping financial incentives from the project turned out to be an excellent decision. As we discovered later, a federal project that includes money is immediately turned over to the development office at most institutions. By taking money out of the equation, the individuals who responded at each institution were highly motivated because of the nature of the project and not because there was federal funding. While financial resources are often important in supporting community level nonviolent action to promote change, having a project that connects with what people want to do is a critical component in designing a program to support community activism.

A second hurdle that almost defeated the planning group was the Paperwork Reduction Act. This law is designed to protect American citizens and institutions from excessive government requests for information. Everyone was in a hurry to kick off the project, so going through the lengthy process required for the Department of Education to collect data from colleges and universities about interfaith/community service work was carefully investigated and then dismissed. The answer to the data collection problem evolved over the next six years.

The first solution that the lawyers came up with was to have the Department of Education keep a list of those who “accepted the challenge.” A loophole in the law allowed the White House to invite those institutions to submit reports on their work to the White House Faith-based Office. Almost of necessity the title of the project became The President’s Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge.

Over the life of the project the two-step process worked well. By making the entry into the program extremely easy, we encouraged participation from institutions at all levels of interfaith/community service program development. The first year, 278 schools accepted the challenge. Of those, 180 completed an extensive reporting process of describing plans, providing a progress report and a final report. The reporting was so detailed that it overwhelmed the small staff in the White House Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships Office. Extensive reporting also overwhelmed the participating institutions. An important learning was that when planning a project to support local action, careful attention needs to be given to what feedback is required for the success of the project.

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) was part of the initial planning and continued to be the federal agency partner with the White House and the Department of Education. Starting in 2013, a category of interfaith was added to the President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll. The application for the Honor Roll was a legal way to collect data. By this time, we had learned that an important reason to collect data was to be able to recognize and reward people for their local efforts. The Honor Roll provided national recognition for exemplary programs at institutions of higher education. CNCS participation also added a dimension of non-partisanship. The Honor Roll, itself, was instituted by President George W. Bush in 2006.

President Obama believed that acts of goodwill and assistance (community service) combined with public education (interfaith engagement) at institutions of higher education would promote understanding across differences. These are two of

the methods Dr. Krishna Kumar describes in “Community Level Nonviolent Actions to Promote Change” (GPS Newsletter of March 2014 [Vol. 15, No. 1]). The response to the president’s sponsorship convinced me that projects that are designed to support local actions benefit from having a celebrity or highly respected organization as a promoter or sponsor.

At the Department of Education, we prepared a mailing list of all the institutions of higher education where students are eligible to participate in student loans and other federal programs. This included public and private colleges and universities, professional schools, junior colleges, and for-profit institutions. In 2011, the president sent a letter through the mail addressed to the presidents of these institutions. In that letter, he challenged them to either establish or expand opportunities for students and staff to participate in community service projects that included a component of interfaith engagement.

For the next five years, email from a variety of federal officials including the Secretary of Education, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, the CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service and the Director of the White House Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships Office encouraged participation. By the end of the Obama Administration, the program had grown to impacting more than 500 institutions. Participation grew to include 12 percent of American students attending colleges or universities with student populations greater than 1,000.

Initial conversations and planning sessions that I was part of never mentioned the potential of the initiative to foster non-violent actions to promote change. As the schools developed programs, examples of peace building cropped up. A good example of this is when a large menorah erected by a group of Jewish students to celebrate Chanukah was vandalized on the Amherst College campus. Relationships that had been forged in the Campus Challenge program resulted in students from various faith tradition coming together to non-violently respond to the incident.

This peace building potential of the program was recognized by White House staff. In early 2015, I was invited to a White House meeting and asked, “With the success of the challenge, could the United States bring leadership to an international movement to build peace through supporting community service/interfaith projects on campuses around the world?” Participating institutions, funders, and federal partners including the State Department helped identify 70 people from 24 countries who attended the Fifth Annual President’s Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge gathering in 2015, held at Howard University in Washington, DC. At the Sixth Annual President’s Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge in 2016, we had 60 international guests representing 31 countries joining nearly 600 faculty, staff, students, and college presidents from across the country at Gallaudet University, also in Washington, DC.

While the President’s Campus Challenge was initiated by President Obama, the important impact was on college and university campuses. In the end, what mattered was the peace building experienced by students. President Trump has discontinued the Challenge. But many of the programs initiated by schools are ongoing. Through organizations such as the Interfaith Youth Core and Campus Compact, institutions continue to initiate and expand programs. And across the globe, relationships developed because of the Campus Challenge are fostering discussions about interfaith community service.

Below I suggest four characteristics of the initiative that I believe can be applied in other situations to promote peace building. These might include engagement with philanthropic organizations, interfaith organizations, local governmental units, as well as high schools, colleges and universities.

Community Planning and Ownership was Essential

Unlike most federal programs where there are very strict requirements for participation, this challenge asked each institution to create its own program. The only requirement was that they conduct community service with a component of interfaith

engagement. Community service was defined as activity that meets a need in the community. Community service becomes interfaith when there is an intentional component of interfaith engagement. It is possible for the service itself to include interfaith engagement. For example, a group of Christian students might work with immigrant families who are Buddhist, as students at the University of the Incarnate Word did in San Antonio, Texas.

Sometimes the interfaith engagement was the result of a college partnering with a community organization on a community service project. For example, Trinity Christian College, outside of Chicago, worked with a mosque to clear an abandoned path. Following the work, they shared a meal and conversation. The result of not prescribing what campus administration and leaders should do, resulted in programs that were relevant to the possibilities of each institution.

Support from Beyond the Community was Useful

While the planning was essential at the local level, there were a number of government agencies and non-profit organizations that supported work at the schools. In 2002, Eboo Patel founded Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) (www.ifyc.org/). He was part of the initial planning for the Challenge and remained involved until the end. With years of experience of working with colleges and universities on interfaith programs, his organization was invaluable in providing free resources to schools to help them with interfaith engagement. Today, with a staff of over 30 people, IFYC continues to contract with institutions of higher education to support interfaith engagement.

Campus Compact (compact.org) also provided resources. It is a national coalition of more than 1,000 colleges and universities that focuses on student engagement in service learning. Their mission statement says that “Campus Compact envisions colleges and universities as vital agents and architects of a diverse democracy” They continue to be an important resource for institutions.

Other national organizations that provided training, program resources, and consulting were Hillel International, Project Interfaith, Secular Student Alliance, and 9/11 Unity Walk. The Department of Education Faith-based Center conducted webinars where resources were shared. A website at the department also served as a source of information about outside resources. This gave campuses a variety of high quality resources. The multiplicity of resources contributed to the quality of program at individual campuses.

Networking Across Communities was Helpful

While resources from “experts” were useful, the ideas and experiences of peers were extremely helpful to participating schools. Of course, some of this was informal exchanges of information. But the Department of Education encouraged sharing in several ways. A Facebook group was established where participants could share experiences and ask for suggestions from other schools. Each year, an annual gathering was held in the early fall where for three days plenary sessions and breakout sessions featured the interfaith/community service work of individual schools. The White House and the Department of Education hosted regional meetings where colleges and universities were invited to come and share their experiences. And a [bi-annual report](#) was prepared that not only summarized all the

work, but it also provided brief descriptions of the programs at every participating school. This helped schools see what others were doing. The result of these efforts was the creation of a community of learning.

Combining the nonviolent methods of community service and education is an effective way to enhance the effectiveness of both methods.

The most important learning for me from my experience with the President’s Challenge is that at a community level, sharing in a service project and including intentional interfaith engagement is an excellent strategy for building a foundation for nonviolent action to promote change. President Obama’s initiative was very focused on encouraging colleges and universities to use community service (assistance) and interfaith engagement (public education) to create an environment of peace. The result was that students developed a foundation for their commitment to cooperation across differences and an appreciation for non-violent cooperation to accomplish shared goals.

I believe that the strategy of using community service as the starting point for an education program that addresses differences could be effective in many situations.

☞ Kenneth Bedell

Child Soldiers: An International Challenge

Michael Wessells, Clinical Professor of Population and Family Health at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, is a prominent expert and advocate for one of the most egregious and perplexing problems of armed conflict: the recruitment and use of child soldiers. Wessells wears many hats, writing major contributions to the understanding of the problem, and working with organizations like UNICEF, Save the Children, ChildFund (formerly the Christian Children's Fund), World Vision, and—his current special focus—the Inter-agency Learning Initiative on Strengthening Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms. At the time his comprehensive book came out—*Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*, 2006, Harvard University Press—there were a large number of child soldiers in the world, and this situation continues today.

Just in November, the problem made the news when a “dissent memo” of numerous senior State Department officials objecting to a decision by Secretary of State Tillerson became public. The secretary had opted to drop Myanmar, Iraq, and Afghanistan from the list of countries cited as violators under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act of 2008. The Act stipulates that countries employing child soldiers should be ineligible to receive U.S. military aid or equipment access. Dropping a country from the list goes beyond exemption by waiver which is allowed if the president decides it would be in the national interest or that a country had made substantial progress toward elimination of child-soldier employment. The dissenting officials argued that dropping these three countries violated the law's criterion for exclusion—complete eradication of the practice—thereby weakening the potential deterrent effects of the Act. Eight other countries remain on the list.

GPS recently had an opportunity to talk with Prof. Wessells. Here is a (non-verbatim) summary of our conversation:

GPS: Your book recounts the sometimes horrific experiences of child soldiers; the conventions formally adopted by the international community to

discourage and outlaw these violations; the organizations and programs that help prevent recruitment and facilitate the post-conflict demobilization and community reintegration of these youthful fighters; and the successes and failures of the whole effort. The book came out around a decade ago. Have there been major changes since then? Significant progress?

Wessells: There has been some progress in terms of increasing acceptance of moral norms condemning child soldiering, expansion of the attention given by NGOs and international organizations, and increased learning of what works and what doesn't, especially concerning the vexing problems of reintegration of children who are released by, or escape from, the control of armed groups. More governments recognize the sanctions they might risk under the UN International Convention on the Rights of the Child. The International Criminal Court has recognized child recruitment as a specific crime. In a few—too few—cases, individuals accused of this crime have been brought to the court, some with successful adjudication.

On the other hand, recruitment has continued, and new methods, such as the use of social media, have been developed to expand the reach and effectiveness of recruitment efforts. ISIS emerged and developed long-distance techniques and powerful ideological appeals to radicalize and militarize the young, anywhere in the world, techniques difficult for the international community to combat. On balance, our understanding of the sources, complexities, and coping requirements has grown, but the scale and design of international child protection programs remains woefully inadequate to the task.

GPS: What are the main limitations on the programs trying to cope with child soldiering?

Wessells: The international efforts lack sufficient priority, resources, decentralization, or nuanced flexibility. On the prevention side, the world's attention is usually seized with trying to contain conflicts before they break out to the point where

child recruitment kicks in. Once child recruitment gets underway, the methods, appeals, and violations employed vary greatly depending on the dynamics and culture of the country where the conflict is occurring. Some children decide to join or may see soldiering as an opportunity to escape difficult family or economic conditions. Others, especially the younger children (say, under 15), are recruited forcibly by kidnapping in village raids. The majority of children associated with armed forces or armed groups do what they need to survive, so they follow orders. In some situations, the children have been trained to become inured to torturing and other sadistic practices in addition to straight-out killing.

The main work of the international organizations concerns the post-conflict problems of demobilization and reintegration into civil society. The ability of children to overcome the propagandizing, physical and emotional maltreatment, and socialization to become killers, varies depending on factors such as their age, their treatment by their commanders, the strength of their earlier absorption of ethical and communal behavior norms, and their inherent personality. The children may have been assigned to supportive activities (e.g. cooking, portering) rather than combat; but all are deemed child soldiers. A major factor, of course, is how the local families and communities receive demobilized children. Reception has been found to vary substantially in willingness and ability. In some cultures, returning child soldiers are viewed with deep suspicion. Demobilized child soldiers getting special reintegration support from aid agencies, particularly material or financial support, may encounter resentment or hostility from home community members whose economic situation is even more dire. The international community has learned that providing aid to only the returning child soldiers can cause unintended harm. Needed reintegration support may vary considerably by context. Different cultures may have different ritual or spiritual traditions for cleansing and forgiving individuals seeking reintegration after traumatic experience or morally unacceptable behavior.

It is very important to recognize another complexity, that is, the different experiences girl soldiers undergo and the different nature of their reintegration problems. While in most conflicts girls

are more often recruited to provide support services, in some conflicts they have been turned into fighters or suicide bombers. In some conflicts, forced marriage and sexual violence are common violations of girl soldiers' rights. Sexual violation is often a barrier to acceptance back by families and communities, after the girls have been demobilized.

Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) is rightfully a major focus for international efforts to help resolve violent conflicts and establish sustainable peace. Unfortunately, the focus in DDR has been on adults and on security force reconstruction rather than on processes of reintegration. Also, DDR attention has been "top down" according little attention to children's voices and preferences and to all the nuanced adaptations needed to cope with the special and individual needs of reintegrating demobilized children. Often the biggest need of former child soldiers is money to meet basic needs. Yet the humanitarian aid system typically does not interconnect economic aid with child protection support. This has proven to be a major shortcoming for child reintegration efforts.

In sum, for outside agencies, even of the central government of the country involved, to deal effectively with this variety of child exposure and communal responses requires a high degree of flexibility and decentralized, tailor-made programming. The international network concerned with child soldier reintegration has become more aware of these needs in recent years, but substantial problems of training, organization, and implementation remain.

One major disappointment has been the failure of the US to ratify the international Convention on the Rights of the Child. This failure is probably due to the general congressional reluctance to appear to undertake binding obligations to international law that might override domestic US legal independence and states rights.

GPS: We read a lot about post-conflict psychological problems (such as post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD) of adult soldiers and the difficulties these problems cause for resuming normal civilian life. Do child soldiers suffer from

the same problems? How do the assistance agencies deal with this?

Wessells: There used to be a common assumption that child soldiers were seriously “damaged goods,” perhaps beyond moral repair. However, as with adults, no one consequence, no one diagnosis, fits all for supporting war-affected children. It is important to make this simple observation because there has also been a general assumption that the psychological effects on children can be properly treated by using the same clinical techniques and therapies commonly employed by the internationally recognized mental health professions in the treatment of adults. Even if this were so, the dearth of mental health professionals in these war zones makes the approach almost useless in practice. The assumption also predisposes aid agencies to discount or ignore the role of traditional healers and local clerics who may be ready at hand with knowledge of efficacious techniques. These techniques commonly serve two purposes: helping to resocialize the individual child to the beliefs and norms that had been inculcated prior to the child’s recruitment and removal from his or her home community, and helping the community accept and reestablish the child’s status as appropriately restored.

Another example of a widely-accepted therapy technique that can be counter-productive is open truth-telling, talking through one’s experience rather than resorting to repression. The so-called “truth and reconciliation” process has become an important tool for communal reconciliation in many countries following resolution of bitter civil wars. On the other hand, in some cultures, individual and communal silence and avoidance of difficult topics are ingrained as means for coping with serious moral transgressions, rather than openly hashing it out and opening old wounds. In some cases, the children (especially if the conflict made them orphans) have resettled in a different community rather than returning home; they have chosen instead to start anew elsewhere to avoid the burden of an exposed reconciliation process with their former family and neighbors.

We need also to recognize that children may, like adults, have a wide range of coping skills or deficits.

Many children are surprisingly resilient despite having undergone terrible experiences. It is a mistake simply to lump them all as permanently “damaged goods.” Furthermore, we have found that resilience is not a fixed capability; it can be enhanced by an adept reintegration process. A guess might put the hard core of child ex-soldiers suffering serious PTSD reintegration impediments at 20%. However, the whole problem of psychological damage to these children is not well understood and is in great need of cross-cultural research.

To complicate the picture even more, by international convention “children” are defined as anyone under 18 years of age. The experiences, the effects on moral understanding, the loss of education, the challenges of reintegration, are all very different for, say, a 10-12 year old compared with a 15-17 year old. To cope properly with the age differences, along with all the other differences, calls for programs that are knowledgeable about the local cultures and child development and are based on the specific norms and capabilities of the communities involved, case by case.

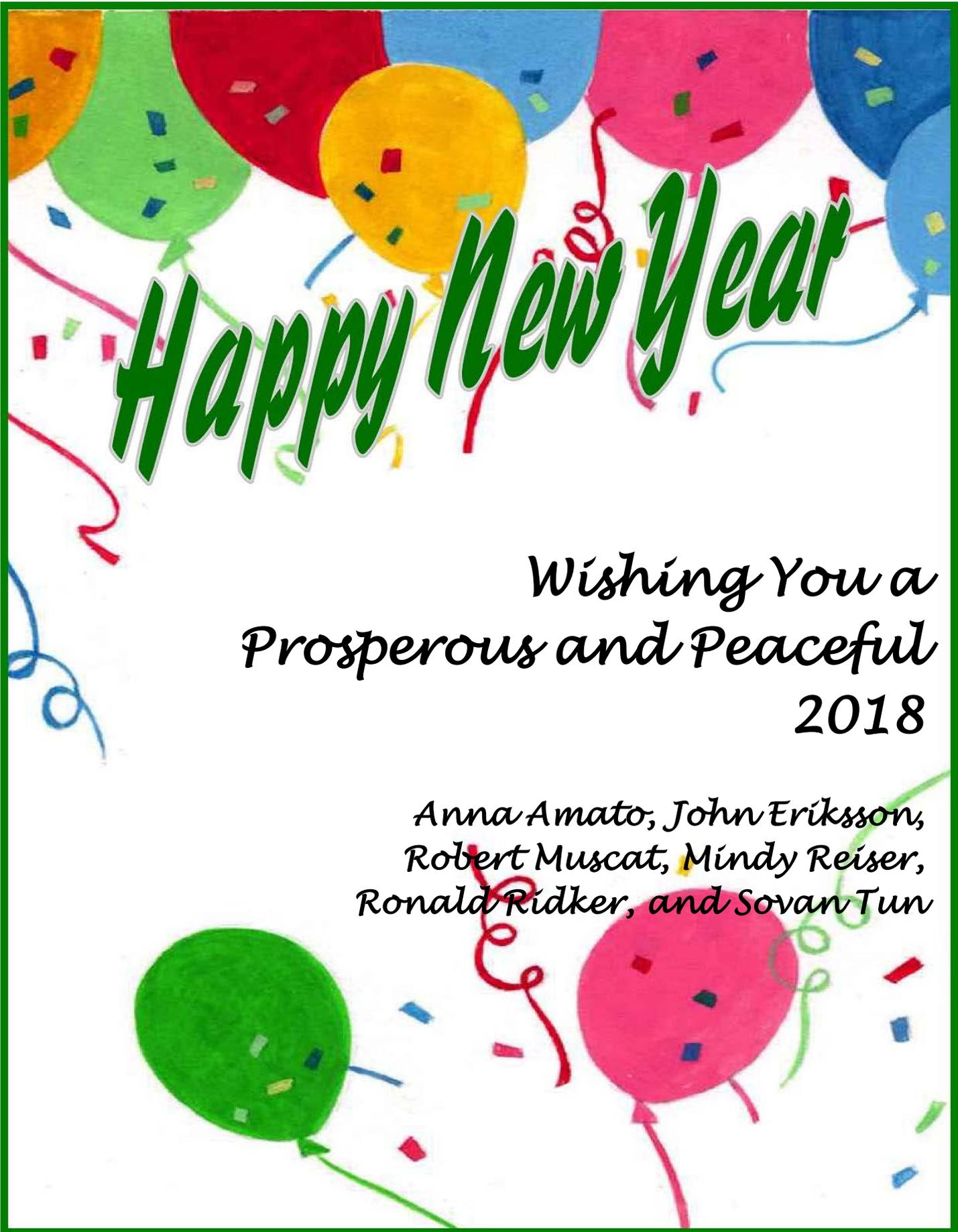
Taking these complexities into account, and the practical lessons drawn from experience in many countries, many child protection advocates have concluded that post-conflict child-soldier reintegration should be implemented through community-based systems.

GPS: If a GPS member wanted to help move child protection forward, what would you suggest doing?

Wessells: One can always donate to agencies like Save the Children, World Vision, ChildFund, and UNICEF, that are important actors in child protection in conflict zones. One can also add one’s voice, perhaps by communicating with one’s Senate representatives, to urge US ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Ratification could greatly raise awareness and concern over the whole range of issues. One can also bring the subject to the attention of local groups generally concerned with public affairs and issues of injustice.

GPS: You have given us much food for thought on a very distressing set of problems. Thank you.

☞ Robert J. Muscat



Happy New Year

*Wishing You a
Prosperous and Peaceful
2018*

*Anna Amato, John Eriksson,
Robert Muscat, Mindy Reiser,
Ronald Ridker, and Sovan Tun*

Global Peace Services USA

The newsletter of Global Peace Services USA is published regularly. GPS USA is incorporated in the State of Maryland and is tax-exempt. Current board members are: Anna Amato, John Eriksson, Robert Muscat, Mindy Reiser, Ronald Ridker, and Sovan Tun. We welcome contributions and comments. To contact us:

Global Peace Services USA
P.O. Box 27922
Washington, DC 20038-7922

Telephone: 301-681-6968
E-mail: globalpeaceservicesusa@gmail.com

Web site: www.GlobalPeaceServices.org

Global Peace Services USA
P.O. Box 27922
Washington, DC 20038-7922
www.GlobalPeaceServices.org