

GROUNDING THEORIES OF CHANGE IN AN AZERBAIJANI-ARMENIAN YOUTH  
PEACEBUILDING PROJECT

by


Tamar Palandjian  
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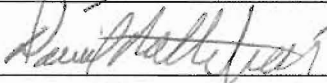
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Grounded Theories of Change in an Azerbaijani-Armenian Youth Peacebuilding Project

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science at George Mason University

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **GROUNDING THEORIES OF CHANGE IN AN AZERBAIJANI-ARMENIAN YOUTH PEACEBUILDING PROJECT**

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The use of Theories of Change as a practice in the conflict and peacebuilding evaluation community has gained attention in recent years as a way to strengthen the field's understanding of what are the efforts that help to bring about social change and how are they able to do it. Within these efforts, there has been a significant focus on deductive methods of coming up with Theories of Change; however, this has excluded the perspectives of the project stakeholders. This research project aims to explore the practice of cultivating the stakeholders' perspectives on the Theories of Change through an inductive or "bottom-up" approach which the researcher calls, Grounded Theories of Change. In particular, it focuses on a case study of Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation working to promote peacebuilding in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict by implementing Track 2 level cross-border joint projects and activities with Armenian and Azerbaijani youth.



## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

Discourse within program evaluation to incorporate Theories of Change as a practice has gained attention in recent years as a way to strengthen intervention efforts in conflict and peacebuilding. Within this discourse, however, there has been limited conversation about incorporating the participants' views on how to bring about social change. As emphasized in the field of conflict resolution, it is of utmost importance to establish an inclusive process that involves all stakeholders in collaborative problem solving in order to ensure a sustainable and peaceful resolution. Especially when there is the potential for conflict escalation and outbreak of violence, there is a need to establish a process that allows all stakeholders to re-examine the situation and understand what steps can be taken to prevent violence. This is precisely what is needed for the Nagorno Karabakh conflict during the current stalemate in the peace talks in order to reinvigorate the discourse on how to establish a sustainable and peaceful resolution to the conflict.

The conflict over Nagorno Karabakh is particularly volatile at this moment in history, as it is slowly transitioning away from "frozen conflict" toward conflict re-escalation and potentially even war. It is, therefore, during an apprehensive moment that this research endeavor poses questions about Theories of Change in conflict resolution efforts in the

Nagorno Karabakh conflict and how the facilitation of an inclusive process – which involves both program staff and program participants - can potentially contribute toward the reinvigoration of efforts for positive social change.

The conflict emerged between Azerbaijanis and Armenians in the late 1980's and erupted into war between the two newly independent former Soviet republics from 1991-1994. Ever since the ceasefire agreement in 1994, the conflict has not been resolved nor has it reverted back to violent conflict, which has led some to consider it a “frozen conflict.” With the recent unfolding of events in 2010, however, there has been reason for scholars, experts and organizations to call for renewed attention to the region's seemingly frozen conflicts. (DeWaal 2009; 2010b; ICG 2011)

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) “Minsk Group” has been mediating the official peace process at the Track 1 level among the leadership of Armenia and Azerbaijan, but there is a need for grassroots efforts to ensure the societies are also involved in the resolution process. With a handful of organizations working to promote peaceful relations between Armenians and Azerbaijanis within the civil society sector, this research endeavor poses questions about the Theories of Change underlying the peacebuilding activities within the Track 2 level in order to reflect on and contribute to learning in these initiatives.

## **A. Problem Statement and Research Questions**

Conflict resolution interventions often focus on (but are not limited to) Track 2 or grassroots level initiatives to help promote positive social change that will lead to peace. There are some serious and challenging questions, though, about which social change initiatives help lead to conflict resolution and moreover, how we know when social change is successful. Emerging within the conflict and peacebuilding evaluation community is the practice of using Theories of Change as a way to understand peoples' assumptions about social change. Strengthening evaluation efforts not only by focusing on outcome-oriented evaluation but also on the underlying theories of how and why social change takes place can help contribute to learning in this realm.

Thus, it is within the context of focusing on Theories of Change evaluation regarding Track 2 level initiatives in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict that this project aims to understand the following research question: What is the relationship between the identified Theories of Change (ToC) in the program design for Armenian-Azerbaijani youth peacebuilding projects and the program participants' perspectives about the ToCs?

The purpose of this research project is to explore the connection(s) of how the stakeholders themselves identify what are the theories of change by understanding the perspectives of past program participants and program staff members. There are currently a few initiatives in the conflict and peacebuilding field that are advocating for the use of Theories of Change as the basis for program evaluation and this research

project has certainly been influenced by such efforts. (USAID CMM 2010; Search for Common Ground 2010)

My initial hypothesis was that the Theories of Change identified in initial project proposals may be somewhat inconsistent with what is happening on the ground. The researcher originally believed the program's Theories of Change were informed and influenced by the policies of donor organizations and agencies which provide the funding. Consequently, the Theories of Change used in the program design and proposal process do not match what the young adults view as their lived reality. For example, participants may feel it is important to meet and learn about conflict resolution skills, but they may not follow up in implementing a project together because they feel they are unable to work with the Other. In other words, this researcher was under the impression that perhaps there are Theories of Change that may not be applicable in promoting peaceful resolution in this conflict in particular – i.e. people-to-people diplomacy. The hypothesis came about as a result of this researcher's skepticism about donor and implementing organizations being unrealistic in the Theories of Change they have identified within the program design vis-à-vis the current situation on the ground. Participants, however, know their lived reality of the conflict and have their own conceptions about the program logic that differ from funders' and implementers' theories. This hypothesis turned out to be incorrect, as it will be described in the forthcoming pages and in the conclusion.

Therefore, this project aims to understand the stakeholders' own experience and involvement within Track 2 level initiatives and how they identify the Theories of Change. Allowing for the people involved in Track 2 work to have the opportunity to speak their thoughts, actions and reactions about how social change takes place can help promote learning within evaluation efforts. As Paulo Freire describes, every individual should be allowed to have that opportunity as it can help to change the world:

Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection. But while to say the true word – which is work, which is praxis – is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few persons but the right of everyone. Consequently, no one can say a true word alone – nor can she say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words. (2006, p. 88)

This research endeavor focuses on a bottom-up (rather than top-down) cultivation of Theories of Change and especially for that reason, provides a unique perspective. It also seeks to provide a space for these individuals' perspectives about social change to be heard, because more often than not, their voices are not included and often deemed to be unimportant.

## **B. Nagorno Karabakh conflict and role of youth**

The conflict over Nagorno Karabakh traces its roots to the beginning of the Soviet period, when the question of the status of this region emerged between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The two independent states fought a war between 1918 and 1920 over the region of Nagorno Karabakh. In 1921, the Soviets made a decision on the status question. One day Nagorno Karabakh – which was predominantly an Armenian populated region - officially was within Armenia SSR, then the next day Stalin placed it under the rule of Azerbaijan.

The Bolsheviks saw it as an opportunity to experiment with the nationalities question in the Caucasus; ultimately, the experiment proved disastrous and was the basis for the current conflict over Nagorno Karabakh.

In the late 1980's when Mikhail Gorbachev instituted reforms of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, Armenians believed it was their opportunity to once again push for Nagorno Karabakh's reunification. After unsuccessfully applying to the Soviet leadership for reunification of Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) as part of Armenia SSR, the Nagorno Karabakh Armenians in Stepanakert called for self-determination and independence. By the time the Soviet Union crumbled, the conflict had escalated into a violent war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which lasted from 1991 to 1994. Since then, the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan has remained closed. Turkey, in the meantime, also imposed a blockade and closed its border with Armenia as well.

The Nagorno Karabakh region is primarily inhabited by Armenians at this time and depending on which side of the conflict one stands, one might consider Nagorno Karabakh to be "occupied" or "liberated." There are about 50,000 Azerbaijani displaced persons from Nagorno Karabakh (Gamaghelyan, 2010: 42) who are awaiting their right to return to their homes and land.

Ever since the ceasefire agreement was signed in 1994, the OSCE Minsk Group – composed of the countries of France, United States and Russia – has been involved in

mediating the official negotiation process at the Track 1 level. In the meantime, there has been little or no communication or interaction between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis. An entire generation of youth from both sides has grown up in the harsh reality of living in conflict and is exposed to the stereotypes and propaganda of the Other as the “enemy.” There is an endemic belief amongst the Armenian and Azerbaijani societies that these two nations cannot coexist together in peace.

Civil society organizations at the Track 2 level have initiated efforts to combat the lack of grassroots level interaction and communication, though these efforts are highly controversial and frowned upon by the majority of both sides of the population. Several organizations are implementing various projects that target youth in particular. At the Track 1 level, the presidents of these nations make the claim that the societies are not ready for peaceful relations; however, there are groups of people – albeit small and limited – within the civil societies of Armenia and Azerbaijan and particularly amongst the youth that are pushing for change and peace.

Certainly there are those who are skeptical that young people can bring about any change or influence, especially in the former Soviet space. Johan Galtung (2006), though, does not ascribe to that belief, as he believes youth are the ones involved in peacebuilding processes because they tend to be more open-minded than adults. Interestingly, Galtung points out that young peoples’ “habit of asking ‘why’ never ends.” Young people tend to have more creativity and are advocates of positive peace. (2006, p. 263) It is precisely

for that reason that Track 2 level organizations have been focusing on working with young people.

Furthermore, considering Galtung's notion that young people tend to constantly ask "why," then perhaps it is time to turn to them and ask them why social change happens and how can we see positive social change for the Nagorno Karabakh conflict?

### **C. Overview of Thesis**

The thesis is composed of this introduction and the following four sections: 1) a literature review which will give an overall introduction to some of the relevant components of scholarly works on the topics presented within the thesis; 2) a research methodology section that will outline the approach for this particular project; 3) data analysis that will analyze the results that emerged as a result of data collection through interviews with stakeholders; and 4) a conclusion which highlights some of the key findings from the research project and the questions raised as a result of conducting this research.

The literature review will primarily investigate some of the literature on evaluation, specifically focusing on Theories of Change. What are the origins of Theories of Change? Where does it come from? It will consider some of the evaluation literature more broadly and provide an overview of how Theories of Change emerged within that literature. It will delve into defining what are theories of change and what can be expected from this type of approach to evaluation. Furthermore, it will also consider



recent efforts of how the field of conflict resolution and peacebuilding has adapted this approach in recent years.

The literature review will also provide some relevant historical background to the conflict and provide an overview of the current Track 2 level initiatives taking place between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. The research project overall looks into how the work of one organization within those efforts, Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation, is working to bring together Azerbaijani and Armenian youth in an effort to bring about positive social change. It seeks to delve into questions about - why is the work of this particular organization worth highlighting? And why is this particular organization worth highlighting as a case study?

Next, the question of how the research questions are operationalized will be addressed in the research methodology section. The research was conducted through the use of qualitative research methods as well as the case study approach, with a focus on the work of Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation. Data was collected through interviews with young people who were past participants in Imagine's programs as well as the program staff members.

The substance of this thesis will be presented in the data results section, which constitutes the implementation of grounded research methodology to analyze the data collected through interviews with stakeholders of Imagine programs – both program staff and past

participants. The concept of Grounded Theories of Change is highlighted within this section. The chapter considers how the use of an inductive method of conducting research helps understand participants' perspectives on how they define the processes of social change based on their experience.

Finally, the conclusion will summarize the key findings from the project and will present questions that have emerged as a result of conducting this study.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Literature Review**

Non-governmental and international organizations have been increasingly engaged in the implementation of conflict and peacebuilding intervention programs to help resolve and prevent violent conflict. There are a plethora of innovative interventions and there are a variety of approaches to analyze the emergence of conflict. There have not been, however, enough efforts to conduct evaluation in a systematic manner that would help make comparisons across various programs, measure program effectiveness and also contribute to learning and bridging the gap between theory and practice (Shapiro, 2005; Church and Shouldice, 2002). In other words, many organizations have been implementing programs but there have only been ad-hoc or minimal efforts to clearly articulate why it is they believe change happens.

One area conflict resolution scholars and practitioners are focusing on to help increase efforts of strengthening evaluation is to push for understanding and eliciting the Theories of Change (ToC) in a program intervention. More often than not, ToCs within conflict and peacebuilding programs are not clearly articulated (Nan, 2010; Shapiro 2005; Church and Shouldice, 2002). Explicitly stating ToCs in a program intervention is an important step to help identify what are the underlying assumptions and activities.

Efforts to measure success of a program and understand its impact in conflict resolution and peacebuilding are significantly related to efforts in US foreign policy to ensure effectiveness in international development overall. Increasingly, there has been significant inertia within US foreign policymaking to fund those organizations and programs that are able to produce results and show effectiveness. This has, in turn, pushed the organizations to conduct evaluations, to provide “indicators of success” and measure program impact. It has also caused some organizations to conduct evaluation that only show positive results, rather than approach evaluation as an opportunity for learning and positive change.

In considering the efforts to strengthen evaluation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, there is a desperate need to revive evaluation of programs and activities aimed at the resolution of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Now, more than ever, official negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan are at a standstill and increasingly, there has been concern about the potential for renewed fighting and outbreak of violence between the neighbors (ICG, 2007; ICG, 2011; deWaal 2010b). There have been a few Track 2 level initiatives and programs aimed at building peace between Azerbaijanis and Armenians and the organizations and activists have endured significant hardship in order to implement such programs. Frankly, as the conflict remains unresolved, the two societies have no chance to interact and at this point, each side has dehumanized the “Other” that they cannot see a future of interaction. Within this context, it is extremely difficult to push for peaceful resolution of the conflict. It is also for that reason that it is

important to understand what efforts are successful in helping to initiate positive social change and more specifically, what is the underlying theory guiding the approach.

This literature review will seek to highlight and introduce some of the literature within the growing field of conflict resolution and peacebuilding evaluation, specifically focusing on recent efforts surrounding the role and use of ToC. Also, considering the current dynamics of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and the need to revive the discourse on how to promote its peaceful resolution efforts, there will be some discussion and a brief overview about youth peacebuilding projects taking place between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Understanding the spectrum of activities and programs concerning conflict resolution efforts for Nagorno Karabakh will help provide some insight about the situational context in which the case study was selected.

#### **A. Theories of Change in Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution Evaluation**

Scholars and practitioners in conflict resolution and peacebuilding evaluation have been posed with a challenge - what are program interventions that work and why? There is increasing interest among the US government, donors, scholar and practitioner community to know and understand program effectiveness and the impact of conflict resolution and peacebuilding programs. (Search for Common Ground et. al 2010; Nan, 2010)

Theories of Change (ToC) are the underlying logic in implementing a program intervention. How and why will a particular action or program lead to change? And what are the underlying assumptions? The idea of using ToC as the basis for evaluation originated in the evaluation literature beginning in the 1970's, which posited it as the basis for all types of evaluation in social sciences in general (Nan, 2010). Carol H. Weiss had proposed the use of program theory for the basis of evaluation in the initial, *Evaluation Research: Methods of Assessing Program Effectiveness* (1972). In a more recent book on evaluation, Weiss (1998) elaborates on ToC and how to incorporate and use them within program evaluation.

The focus of evaluation has been primarily about program outcomes, whether or not a program achieved the results it claimed it would. Weiss points out that evaluators are increasingly being pushed not only to include information about whether or not the program worked, but also to understand the reasons why the program was successful or unsuccessful in achieving its outcomes and goals. Also, to find out if there are ways in which the program can be improved. (Weiss, 1998, p. 55)

According to Weiss, there seems to be a disconnect between the purpose of an evaluation and the way in which the rationale for a program are explained:

Programs are not likely to be laid out in rational terms with clear-cut statements of why certain program activities have been selected and which actions are expected to lead to which desired ends. Yet when the evaluator undertakes to define program theory, those are just the things she wants to know: What ideas and

assumptions link the program's inputs to attainment of the desired ends? (1998, p. 55)

Therefore, it is in the interest of program staff to clearly articulate the set of assumptions or beliefs that underlie their actions, or the Theories of Change. ToCs can also be described as the hypotheses that people use to build their programs, and the programs are the opportunities to "test" the hypotheses, to see whether or not they work. (Weiss, 1998, p. 55) Every program has program resources, activities, outcomes and goals and the ToCs help clarify the assumptions that link all of these components.

Weiss recognizes, too, that one assumption is often made when considering a ToC-based evaluation and that is, if the program is implemented and does what it plans on doing, then good things will come about as a result (1998, pp. 57-58). Such an assumption might be problematic because it might not assume unplanned or unwanted things to occur. To balance this, she also recommends it is wise for practitioners to anticipate and include theories of unintended consequences that might come about as a result of the program as well.

There are advantages for using a ToC-based evaluation approach. Firstly, there is no need to wait for long-term final outcomes to take place in order to show that change has occurred. When this type of evaluation is done in the early stages of a program, it helps to measure parts of the assumed causal chain and thus, anticipate some clues as to what is going well in the program and what is not going so well. Secondly, it helps to explain why and how a program has been able to have the effect that it proposed. Practitioners

can know, more concretely, whether or not their program was the reason why change happened or did not happen, thus, giving more credit or responsibility to the program.

(Weiss, 1998, p. 60)

Nicoletta Stame (2004) explains theory-based evaluations are like bringing transparency to the “black box” in program interventions. As Stame describes, “the black box is the space between the actual input and the expected output of a programme” (p. 58). The goal of uncovering theories of change are helpful in answering the questions of “how” and “why” the theories are central to program design.

...evaluation community has become more and more concerned with the challenge of how to understand ‘what works better for whom in what circumstances and why’ (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) to improve policy decisions and public sector practice. Theory-oriented approaches reproach the previous method-oriented approaches for being ineffective, given their inability (or unwillingness) to ‘open the black box.’ (Stame 2004: p.58)

Stame is critical of approaches in the evaluation field that emphasize the importance of developing more sophisticated methods to evaluate programs. In fact, she argues theory-oriented evaluations can help do what method-oriented evaluations are not able to do – help to have a better understanding of the black box. In other words, the emphasis should not be on the semantics of discussing which evaluation methodology is better or stronger, because all methods can be an appropriate tool when utilized in the appropriate context. The emphasis in a theory-based evaluation, rather, is placed on making explicit the theories that are central to the program design and the evaluation methods should then be built around those theories (Stame 2004: p. 60).



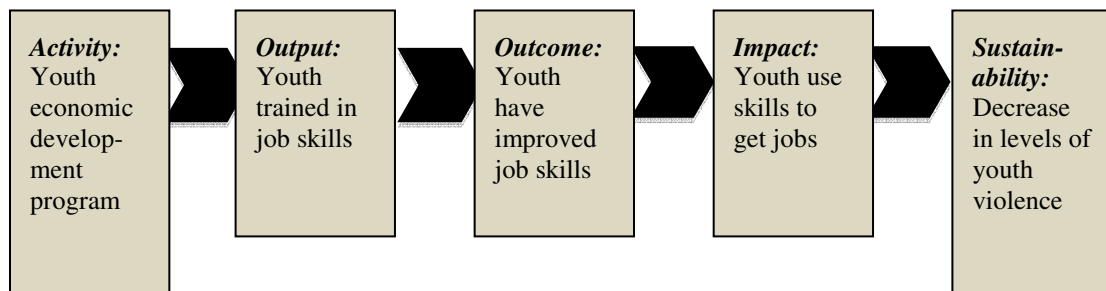
The conflict resolution and peacebuilding community has taken on and adapted some of the concepts presented in the social sciences evaluation. Donald Schön (1983) is credited with his work, *The Reflective Practitioner*, as part of the initial efforts, which influenced the field of conflict resolution in acknowledging the assumptions made when engaging in conflicts (Nan, 2010, p. 2). More recently, scholars and practitioners in the conflict resolution and peacebuilding field have made significant advances and contributions on the role and use of ToC in evaluation (Lederach, Neufeldt and Culbertson, 2007; Church and Rogers, 2006; Shapiro 2005 and 2006).

Ilana Shapiro (2006) explains that conflict resolution programs are already using ToC within existing programs geared towards ending and/or preventing violent conflicts. However, they are stated implicitly. Shapiro explains, “Making the theories of change that guide existing conflict interventions more explicit provides an opportunity to extract and build the theories that are grounded in practice.” (2006, p. 2) It can be used as a tool that evaluates theories or “test” them out, as well as change practices when the underlying assumptions are just not accurate (2006, p. 2)

According to Shapiro, increasing the use of ToC-based evaluation approach can help the conflict field 1) encourage reflective practice which in turn can help expand the range of program options; 2) bridge the gaps between theory and practice by understanding what are the theories that help to influence practice; 3) allows for testing validity of theories; 4) and understand where some theories might be overlapping (2006, p. 2).

As there are different approaches amongst ToCs of conflict and peacebuilding interventions, there are also different changes that can occur. Shapiro distinguishes interventions in post-conflict healing and reconciliation are different from conflict management programs. For example, post-conflict healing and reconciliation entail activities such as dialogue and personal reflection, which can lead to a transformation at the personal/ individual level (Shapiro 2005, p. 1). Whereas, conflict management programs would target community leaders, bring them together and discuss options of how to handle the conflict (Shapiro 2005, p. 2).

With all of the various approaches, there are different ways in which the programs help bring about social change. For example, Figure 1 below is an illustration of a ToC for a youth, employment and conflict program.



**Figure 1** Theory of Change: If youth are employed, then they are less likely to turn to violence

The ToC-based approach can help show how change occurred and how the program might have played a role in producing the change. Hence the importance of looking at

the role and use of ToC in evaluation of conflict resolution and peacebuilding programs related to Nagorno Karabakh.

Another noteworthy point, which the next section of the literature review will further elaborate on, is that Nagorno Karabakh conflict programs tend to target Armenian and Azerbaijani youth. Consideration of the youth's perspective, therefore, also becomes a critical component in evaluation of such programs. A question that should be asked within the evaluation process is - how might their voices be incorporated within the process?

Michael Patton (2008) suggests there are three ways to develop program theories. There is the deductive approach with the emphasis on academic literature and how theories explain social change. There is the inductive approach that draws on theory from fieldwork and is grounded in practice. The user-focused approach works with the "intended users" or key stakeholders to extract their theories (Patton, 2008, p. 344-345). More specifically, as Patton explains, neither the inductive nor deductive approaches integrate the key stakeholders in the process of evaluation. Whereas, the user-focused approach brings together key stakeholders, which include both program beneficiaries and program staff. For example, Patton explains in discussing a program evaluation of whether a graduate school teaches students to think critically, "this would mean bringing together students and professors to make explicit their educational assumptions and generate a program theory model that could then be tested as part of the evaluation" (Patton, 2008, p. 345).

An advantage of the user-focused approach is that the stakeholders understand the theory of action and therefore, they have a sense of ownership of the program. The downsides are that the stakeholders might not know the theory, may not be able to articulate it and therefore, it might make them more defensive. Also their own explicit theories might not reflect the program's realities (Patton, 2008, p. 346). As there may be several ToCs in a program, stakeholders might identify or place more emphasis on certain theories over others.

Carolyne Ashton's doctoral dissertation from 2007 at the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University provides some practical insight on how to go about cultivating the Theories of Change through an inductive approach by involving all stakeholders' viewpoints in the context of three UNICEF peace education programs in Armenia, Albania and Aceh (Indonesia). Ashton conducted a study in which she referred to the evaluation reports from three peace education programs and found there were ToCs inherent in the stakeholders' viewpoints within the evaluations.

Ashton (2007) suggests it is important to use ToC practice in the process of program design and evaluation because it supports the field of conflict resolution's commitment to collaborative problem-solving. Including the stakeholders' viewpoints gives participants a sense of empowerment and ownership of the program and evaluation outcome.

Therefore, Ashton also advocates for the use of collaborative or participatory methods

within evaluation as it mirrors the overall conflict resolution and collaborative problem-solving practices applied within the field.

In her dissertation, Ashton considers the various methods of evaluation and explains, “identifying theories of change is one tool for determining which methods are best evaluating the changes achieved” (p.45). Certainly each evaluation tool has its advantages and disadvantages. One critique of the ToC practice might be that the approach is too linear. However, she argues, the ToC practice becomes less linear due to the inherent nature of the conflict resolution practice ensuring inclusivity and collaborative practices.

Conflict resolution professionals and evaluators of community-based efforts recognize that these processes are not linear. In contrast, these processes are often iterative and quite messy thus requiring the ability of interveners and stakeholders to be able to wander through a variety of possible theories before selecting appropriate ones to test through evaluation (Ashton 2007: p. 79-80).

This type of approach helps to ensure practitioners intentionally make efforts to revisit the theories of change during the program’s implementation (Ashton 2007: p.79-80).

In considering the literature on ToC-based evaluation, overall, there are also other critiques in the approach. Critiques used to challenge the ToC-based evaluation approach include: a) it is more appropriate to consider at social science theories to understand how social change occurs and looking at ToC will not lead to much progress; b) practitioners are not able to identify the appropriate theories, as that is a job for the academics and scholars; c) evaluation of a project suggests information that is specific to that particular

project, in that context and it cannot be compared (Weiss 1998, p. 69). However, scholars who argue for the use of the ToC approach also insist that there is such a low state of development of program theory especially in conflict resolution that it is essential to at least establish the lowest threshold to prevent some inaccuracies.

As the conflict resolution and peacebuilding field is currently advancing initiatives and further developing ways of using ToC within evaluation, this research project is couched within the current debate and efforts that are taking place. Considering the deadlock situation of the peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, there is a need to rethink ways of bringing peace to the Caucasus region.

There have been a couple other notable efforts evaluating interventions that promote peacebuilding activities among youth in the South Caucasus conflicts. Anna Ohanyan and John E. Lewis implemented an evaluation research study that focused on young peoples' attitudes in a Track 2 diplomacy Georgian-Abkhaz youth project (Ohanyan and Lewis, 2005). Their evaluation was a quantitative study and their findings showed the most successful element of the program was the ability to increase the willingness of its youth participants to engage in joint activities with people from the "other side." They conducted a correlational study and surveyed youth participants and used chi-square tests, reflecting the overall trends and patterns of correlation. (Ohanyan and Lewis, 2005, p. 65) The strength of their study is the contribution it makes to overall program evaluation and

the statistics on overall changes in attitudes and perceptions of the Georgian and Abkhaz youth. Moreover, Ohanyan and Lewis' study results are generalizable and reliable. There is a lack of information, though, on the actual responses from the youth on how their attitudes changed when engaging with the other side.

Nargiz Hajiyeva (2009) implemented an evaluation of the Imagine program that examined the impact of the program on the participants. Her analysis primarily consisted of a quantitative evaluation that studied how participation in Imagine had an impact on conflict resolution skills, how conflict resolution dialogues had an impact on participants, and the sustainability of the participants' involvement over time. A total of 12 participants were selected from the Imagine programs implemented between 2007 and 2008 and several were asked to complete a pre-program evaluation questionnaire and post-program questionnaire. The results of the data highlighted changes in the variables mentioned above.

This research project, however, differentiates itself from these particular evaluation projects, as it seeks to conduct an exploratory study of the ToCs identified by the program participants and the program staff. It is distinct in that it incorporates an inductive approach through a qualitative research design, as the methodology section will further explain.

Prior to exploring the ToCs for the project's case study of one organization working on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, though, there is a need to understand the current environment of NGOs and IOs that are working to promote peace and conflict resolution between Armenians and Azerbaijanis.

## **B. Background and Overview of Armenian-Azerbaijani youth peacebuilding projects**

Conflict over the question of the status of Nagorno Karabakh emerged between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as the two independent states fought a war over the region between 1918-1920. In July 1921, Stalin and the Bolsheviks equivocated over the decision of how to draw the borders of Nagorno Karabakh and whether it would be placed under Soviet Armenia or Soviet Azerbaijan. As Thomas de Waal (2010) elaborates, one day the decision about the status of Nagorno Karabakh was decided in favor of Soviet Armenia and then the next day, the decision was reversed and Nagorno Karabakh became a part of Soviet Azerbaijan. "Two years later, the new Nagorny Karabakh Autonomous region was founded, with its borders drawn so as to give it a population that was 94 percent Armenian... Armenians say that Stalin 'gave' Karabakh to Azerbaijanis, while Azerbaijanis maintain that the decision merely recognized a pre-existing reality" (de Waal 2010 Ch 4: Location 1815-1828). All throughout the Soviet era, Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh demonstrated on several occasions proclaiming their dissatisfaction with being under Soviet Azerbaijan and advocated for their autonomy and self-determination (Mooradian and Druckman, 1999).



By placing large populations of one under the rule of another, the Bolsheviks sought to experiment in the Caucasus on the nationalities question (de Waal 2010). The experiment, at the very least, proved to be disastrous and what emerged as a result of the colonial power's meddling is the basis for the emergence of the current conflict over Nagorno Karabakh.

During the 1980's, the conflict exploded into a violent armed conflict with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Nagorno Karabakh declared its independence from Azerbaijan and a war erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which ended with a ceasefire in 1994. Since then, the conflict has often been referred to as a "frozen conflict" or in a situation of "no war, no peace." For over fifteen years, Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders have not been able to negotiate an agreement over Nagorno Karabakh and meanwhile, there has been no major outbreak of violence on the ground. However, the tension between these neighboring countries still exists and the border remains closed.

With the border closed, there has been limited to no contact and communication between the societies. Negotiation for a peaceful settlement of the resolution has been constrained to Track 1 leadership level between the presidents and foreign ministers. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group – led by Russia, France and United States - has been the mediating body of the process, pushing for a peaceful resolution since the ceasefire. The situation, however, remains volatile and

as time goes on, the risk is increasing for a recurrent violent conflict to emerge once again. (International Crisis Group 2007 and 2010; Musayelian 2010; deWaal 2010b)

Furthermore, the war between Georgia and Russia in 2008 has contributed to the notion that frozen conflicts in the South Caucasus can once again erupt into violence and the international community should focus on efforts to achieve peace in the region.

Currently, the international community is not devoting enough efforts and resources to promote peace in the region and especially in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Thomas DeWaal (2010c) raises concern that the international community is not investing enough resources in the official peace negotiations process at the Track 1 level. As official negotiations remain a secretive and exclusive process, the Track 1 leadership is not supportive of efforts at the Track 2 level within the peacebuilding efforts between Armenia and Azerbaijan. DeWaal explains, in fact, that mediators in Track 1 are even hostile toward peacebuilders working at the Track 2 level (deWaal 2010c).

Though the international community has not been investing significant resources into this conflict, there has been some progress among donor governments such as the European Union and United Kingdom to help promote Track 2 level diplomacy in the region.

International Alert (IA) and Conciliation Resources are both UK-based NGOs that have made their presence felt in the region and have invested resources for programs in the South Caucasus, including Nagorno Karabakh.

US foreign policy toward the region has remained consistent over the past two decades, though there has been much less engagement in recent years. According to Ross Wilson – former US Ambassador to Turkey and Azerbaijan - there are four principles at the core of US policy toward the South Caucasus: 1) the policy decision that republics stay independent and maintain their sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of each of these countries since the collapse of the Soviet Union; 2) promote market democracy; 3) push for the integration of the region into the Euro-Atlantic community to bring the South Caucasus closer to international standards and 4) to assist with the conflicts in the region (CSIS 2011). There is concern that Nagorno Karabakh conflict is sliding out of stalemate and the prospects for renewed hostilities now are greater than at any other time. Wilson explained that the situation looks dangerous, the Minsk group has not succeeded and as a result, there is frustration and bitterness over the failure to achieve a peace agreement thus far. Considering the future of US policy, it does not seem that the United States is going to get involved, even though, “there is a critical need for US to re-engage” (CSIS 2011).

Meanwhile, others expressed no need for the US to increase its engagement in the region. As George Friedman said, “you could not get the US involved in the Nagorno Karabakh. There is no political support for that” (CSIS 2011). Fiona Hill (2001) expresses there is no vital national interest in the Caucasus or Central Asia, though that has changed slightly since the US realized the region is rich with energy sources of oil and natural gas in the late 1990’s. Yet even still, the United States does provide some funding and does

support efforts – if only minimal – to promote people-to-people diplomacy in the region (Department of State 2008). In testimony dated March 10, 2011, Philip Gordon, Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs at the State Department, explains that working through the Minsk Group to help find a peaceful settlement to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict is in the country’s foreign policy interests. That the United States must help to avoid future conflict in Europe and promote peace and democratic progress in the neighboring regions (Department of State 2011).

Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF), for example, receives funding from USAID and State Department. In 2008, EPF initiated the “Armenia-Azerbaijan Media Bias” program which aims to increase more “unbiased” journalism regarding the relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the Nagorno Karabakh conflict by establishing a network of journalists and media organizations from both countries.<sup>1</sup> The case study for this thesis project, Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation, has also received funds from the US State Department to implement its programs, workshops and activities. Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation also draws funding from other sources as well.

Thus, there is a lack of funding for peace initiatives at the Track 2 level in the region. The same organizations tend to vie for the same pool of funding whenever calls for grant proposals come out. Furthermore, there is a general lack of support in the societies from Yerevan to Stepanakert to Baku. There are really only a handful of organizations

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<sup>1</sup> Further details are available on their website <http://www.epfound.org/cross-border-programs/armenia-azerbaijan-media-bias.html>

working to promote peace in the region, and even a fewer number actually bringing together Azerbaijanis and Armenians in contact-making opportunities.

DeWaal (2010c) explains in this difficult environment while the efforts to promote civil society engagement and Track 2 diplomacy is helpful, they have not yet gained influence at the broader grassroots level. Why not? He identifies a significant reason is that Armenians are able to meet and engage with Azerbaijanis, but Azerbaijanis are threatened and persecuted for meeting with Armenians. The Azerbaijani government has recently been even more suspicious and persistent in its harassment of Azerbaijanis meeting with Armenians. Meanwhile, the Armenian government is also suspicious of those civil society activists who meet with the other side. However, the Armenian government is not as suspicious as the Azerbaijani government is about cross-border meetings at the Track 2 level.

Considering both societies are suspicious of Armenians and Azerbaijanis meeting with the “Other,” then the question remains of whether or not this is an effective or appropriate policy in this conflict and at this particular time. If the goal is to increase societal support for relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, then what efforts might help to support and contribute to this aim without putting people’s lives at risk? Is the policy of bringing Armenians and Azerbaijanis in touch with the reality of the situation on the ground in the first place?

John Paul Lederach (2007) explains Track I level peacebuilding needs to be paralleled with Track 2 level peacebuilding. Civil society activities and Track 2 level diplomacy between Armenia and Azerbaijan will not be successful unless progress is made at the Track 1 level. Then, the primary question is whether or not there are any efforts that can be implemented to help promote activities at the societal level and promote a future of coexistence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. For that reason, it is important to hear the voices of those individuals who have taken the time and effort to meet with the “Other” and to understand from their perspective, what might have increased traction within their societies. It will be necessary to turn to the opinions and voices of the young people who are the primary targets of many of the peacebuilding program efforts.

Through their own participation in programs bringing Armenian and Azerbaijani young adults together, these individuals are experienced and empowered with a constant reflection of meetings with the “Other.” This research seeks to explore - what suggestions might they have on efforts that would work to promote peace between their societies at the grassroots level? An important element of this project would be for the young adult participants in Armenian-Azerbaijani peacebuilding projects to identify themselves what are the types of activities and theories of change they think can actually lead to positive social change on the ground?

While there may be limited to virtually no contact or communication between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, there are several organizations and people seeking to combat this by

organizing contact-making opportunities for the young adults in particular. The following list includes the most recent Track 2 level projects being implemented and/or recently implemented in an effort to build peace between Armenians and Azerbaijanis with a focus on young people:

### *Peacebuilding projects between Azerbaijanis and Armenians*

- Overcoming Negative Stereotypes in the South Caucasus: A Cross-Border New Media Project, Onnik Krikorian (2009 – present) <http://oneworld.am/diversity/>
- Caucasus Conflict Voices (2010 - present), Onnik Krikorian as a part of the Global Voices Online <http://globalvoicesonline.org/specialcoverage/caucasus-conflict-voices/>
- Youth Peacebuilding Project and Let's Peace Jam (June 2010), by Civil Society Institute NGO (Yerevan Armenia)
- Developing Online Tools for Civic Outreach and Mobilization (DOTCOM) (2008-2010), by PH International <http://dotcom.ph-int.org/>
- Unbiased Media Coverage of Armenia-Azerbaijan Relations Project (2008 - present), by Eurasia Partnership Foundation [http://www.epfound.am/index.php?article\\_id=260&clang=0](http://www.epfound.am/index.php?article_id=260&clang=0)
- Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation implementing a number of projects both in the South Caucasus region and in the United States, <http://www.imaginedialogue.com/home>. Additionally, the organization has also launched an online initiative Caucasus Edition Journal of Conflict Transformation <http://caucasusedition.net/>
- Conciliation Resources and their Dialogue Through Film Project: <http://vimeo.com/dtfc> as well as Karabakh 2014, <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/caucasus/karabakh-2014.php>
- Model Caucasus Parliament, by Caucasus Forum for Solidarity and Cooperation <http://caucasusforum.com/index.php/Model-Caucasus-Parliament-TOT-Study-Programme-in-Vienna.html>
- International Alert and its various civil society and grassroots projects since 1993 <http://www.international-alert.org/>

There are a few things that are noteworthy to mention amongst these projects and organizations. Firstly, most of the organizations that are based in the South Caucasus

region, tend to be working in Armenia and specifically in Yerevan. This is because, as it was described earlier, it is easier for an NGO to work in Armenia on peacebuilding programs concerning the Nagorno Karabakh conflict than in Azerbaijan. In other words, while it is still risky to become involved in peacebuilding between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in both of these countries, it is at least possible for NGOs to operate in Armenia and thus, activities can take place. Meanwhile, in Azerbaijan, often times individuals who do become involved with Armenians are targeted by the government. Secondly, more often than not, programs that bring together Azerbaijanis and Armenians tend to be implemented either in Georgia, Europe or the United States. There seems to be a need to isolate the participants from the region, to allow for a “neutral environment.” Often times, this can help create an environment of feeling safe. On the other hand, this isolation can also take people out of the context of what is feasible and realistic when they go back to their home countries.

Finally, one trend that has recently emerged is organizations’ use of social media in their peacebuilding projects. As contact-making programs tend to pose risks, Azerbaijanis and Armenians were once able to discuss and engage with each other virtually without risk of being targeted by their respective governments. At least that was the case until the recent arrests of Emin and Adnan, two young Azerbaijani bloggers who were imprisoned for their writings on the internet. NGOs and activists working in this realm now proceed with caution as there is a risk of one’s own safety and security even through contacts in social media.



Amongst all of these initiatives and projects, the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation is one organization that stands out for its efforts to bring together Armenian and Azerbaijani youth through people-to-people diplomacy. Imagine's beneficiaries target young adults as participants in their programs. It is the only organization working to bring together its participants in person and physically in one location in order to engage in dialogue about the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. In the past, it has brought together youth who were studying in the United States and convened them in remote locations such as in NY or Maine or West Virginia.

The next chapter presents the research methodology for studying Theories of Change held by Imagine's program staff and participants.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Research Methodology**

This section describes the process and methodology used to operationalize the research question. As a reminder, the project aims to conduct a case study that explores the connection between Imagine program staff and past participants' identified Theories of Change. More specifically, it seeks to understand the relationship between a) peacebuilding program theories that aim to bring about social change among Armenian-Azerbaijani youth and b) the past program participants' perspective of what they believe brings about social change based on their experience in the program. Within the spectrum of organizations working to promote peacebuilding at the Track 2 level in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, Imagine is one of the only organizations focusing on bringing Azerbaijani and Armenian youth together and thus will be the basis for this case study. As mentioned, there are other civil society initiatives promoting cross-border contacts for example in the realm of journalism and film. However, Imagine is particularly a noteworthy case study because of its focus on young people specifically and also the emphasis to actually bring these people together to engage in dialogue about the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. In many of the other projects, that does not seem to be the focus, whereas that is explicitly the purpose of Imagine's programs.

The research is philosophically grounded in the advocacy and participatory worldview, as it aims to engage the participants in an exploratory study and analysis about the program. It seeks to provide a voice for these participants, raise their concerns and advocate on their behalf to help improve the situation (Creswell, 2009, p. 9). By engaging all stakeholders, which includes the participants and program staff themselves, it raises questions for Track 2 level programs implemented in the region and specifically for this conflict.

#### **A. Case study on Imagine program**

This research project employs a qualitative research design, as it aims to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of how humans describe social change (Creswell, 2009, p.4). Case study as a research methodology allows a researcher to dig into complex social phenomena and helps capture the way social change happens from a real-life experience (Yin, 2003, p.2). The purpose of this research project is to engage with Imagine's past participants and program staff to explore what are ToCs they have identified from their own perspective and through their experience in the program. As the project seeks to capture the complexity of the variables within this research project, a case study approach is appropriate.

A case study helps to make the research project feasible, is bounded by time and activity and it limits the scope of the research to one example of an NGO working to bring about social change in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. It is highly important to understand the

context in which the participants and program staff envision and describe their real-life experiences. Questions that this case study seeks to touch on include: why did the Imagine personnel choose these Theories of Change? What is their understanding of the theories? And what is the understanding from the youth's perspective on what are the theories of change?

A primary limitation in choosing case study as a methodology and only one NGO is that the research findings are not a reflection of all organizations working in this realm, nor is this study generalizable about every experience. In other words, this research project focuses on the experience of one organization and this can, in turn, help to pave the way for further research and questions on the subject for other organizations working in this area as well.

### **B. Methodology for the case study, its strengths and constraints**

An advantage of choosing case study as a methodology is that the research study is concerning a contemporary event and the stakeholders involved are accessible for interviews. The researcher aims to carry out this case study through the use of exploratory research to provide some insight on stakeholders' perspectives about ToCs. The purpose of implementing an exploratory research study is to shed light on areas of research that have not been studied and to potentially generate ideas for future research.

The focus of this exploratory research project is for the participants and program staff to identify from their experience the Imagine program's ToCs. Stakeholders' perspectives on ToCs are very much influenced by the context and environment of their lived experiences. Using an exploratory approach, this research design aims to capture that experience according to the thoughts, feelings, values and beliefs ascribed to their involvement in the program. By focusing on the individuals' lived experience, this research project can really delve into the meanings that humans ascribe to as part of their involvement (Marshall and Rossman 2006: p.53).

To explore the stakeholders' perspectives about ToCs they identify in the Imagine program, this research study employs semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary tool for gathering information from Armenian and Azerbaijani young adult participants as well as information about the program through interviews with the Co-Directors and program staff.

When considering Hajiyeva, Ohanyan and Lewis' evaluation studies, in comparison, this particular research study has its limitations due to the exploratory nature of the research design. Firstly, the goal of this research project is to understand the young adult's perceptions about the program, and to give them "a voice" to express what they think would be most beneficial to bring about positive social change in their region. The research project is not an evaluation, as it does not study the impact of the program nor does it seek to claim it is a ToC-based evaluation. It does, however, aim to contribute

and explore the opportunity for future ToC-based evaluation through an inductive approach. Another limitation is that there is no triangulation of data. Therefore, its purpose is to pave the way for further exploration on the subject and the potential to implement a ToC-based evaluation in the context of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict.

For the purposes of this research study, the researcher collected the participants' opinions through in-depth interviews with those individuals who volunteered to be a part of the research project. The researcher established the semi-structured interview instrument utilizing open-ended questions prior to the scheduled interviews. (See Appendix A) As the researcher aimed to conduct interviews similar to engaging in a purposeful conversation with the participants (Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p. 101), the researcher also included follow-up questions to further understand the interviewees' perspectives. Similar to what Patton (2008) suggests in a user-focused evaluation, all stakeholders were involved in the process, including program personnel and beneficiaries.

Within this case study, there are two embedded units of analysis. The first unit of analysis is gathering information from the perspective of the Imagine program staff members. The second unit of analysis is the perspective of past Imagine program youth participants. Two sets of interview questions were created, one set of questions specifically for the participants and one set of questions for the program staff. The interviews were unstructured and conducted through the use of Skype or telephone, depending on whether or not the interviewee had access to internet connection. If the

interviewee was not able to access Skype through the use of internet, the researcher used Skype to call the interviewee at the telephone number provided. The interviews were conducted with all four members of the program staff and ten past program participants were interviewed. Also, all interviews were conducted in English. Imagine has implemented its programs in English and it is usually a requirement for their participation in their program. Moreover, the researcher was most comfortable interviewing them in English.

The interview questions posed to the past participants aimed to explore a few key areas:

- General perceptions about their participation in Imagine program, the year and overall brief evaluation about their experience
- Their perceptions on ToCs for Imagine program and more broadly, about dialogue programs
- How they identified ToCs that would allow Imagine to have greater impact on society

Interview questions posed to the program staff aimed to explore their perspectives about:

- What each staff member identifies are the ToCs for Imagine program
- How they described the reasons/background on why those ToCs were chosen
- Their perspective on the implementation and relevance of the ToCs

Contacting past program participants in Imagine was made possible by speaking to the leadership of the organization and obtaining their permission to email past program participants in order to ask for volunteers of who would be willing to engage in the interview. Imagine has had a total of 70 participants in its program<sup>2</sup> and a total of six program participants initially volunteered to take part. At first, less than 10% of the participant population agreed to be interviewed as part of the research project. During the interviews with the past program participants and program staff, I employed the snowballing method and inquired if these individuals had suggestions of other Imagine alumni I could contact to interview. In the end, I interviewed a total of 10 Imagine program participants – 5 Armenian and 5 Azerbaijani – which comprises 14.3% of Imagine alumni.

Once again, these interviews were conducted through the internet communication tool, Skype or by telephone for those individuals without internet access at home. Some interviewees were located in Armenia and Azerbaijan, while others were located throughout Europe, the United States and Middle East.

The sample was based on a self-selection method and through the use of snowballing. This is actually necessary and crucial for this particular project due to the sensitive nature of Armenians and Azerbaijanis communicating with each other. As a researcher, I was only able to interview those participants who felt comfortable to identify themselves and

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<sup>2</sup> This information was provided through a Skype conversation with Jale Sultanli on March 18, 2011.



to have a conversation with me. Participants' identities were assured they would remain anonymous, however, so as not to compromise their safety. A limitation in using this method of sampling is certainly the potential for bias, as participants volunteer themselves to take part in the interviews.

Another limitation is also that it is not a representative sample of the entire population of program participants. Only those individuals who volunteered to take part in the interviews were able to offer their ideas and thoughts about the ToCs. The research findings, therefore, are not representative of all the past program participants' perspectives on the ToCs. In other words, this research presents ideas of this particular group of interviewees and may differ from others' perspectives of the ToCs.

The timing of when the interviews were conducted may have also influenced the opinions and thoughts of the interviewees as they provided their responses. Some past participants were involved in Imagine about 4 years ago, and therefore, they have had more time to reflect on their experience compared to a past participant who participated in 2010. Consequently, the longer period of time may have also made it more difficult for the past participants to remember details about their participation in the program. Also, participants' perspectives may have changed over time, especially when considering recent political developments that have occurred in this conflict.

Initially, I thought only those individuals who had positive things to say and currently active Imagine alumni would volunteer to take part in the study. My thoughts were proven wrong, however, as there were individuals who did express criticism about their participation in Imagine. Moreover, I was also able to interview past program participants who considered themselves to be both active members and non-active members.

All interviews were recorded through a computer-based audio-recording software called Audacity. This was done primarily for the researcher to ensure accuracy of the collection of the data. Measures have been taken to ensure past participants' interview recordings are not available to anybody but the researcher and the interviewee. Interviewees were also notified that the interview was recorded and remain in the sole possession of the researcher.

Data analysis was conducted through the use of grounded theory methodology. The Results section of the thesis provides further details about the methodology, however, a few things are worth noting beforehand.

As I chose to employ this methodology, I did not determine categories prior to the data collection phase. The research categories or in this case, the Grounded Theories of Change, emerged during the data analysis phase. After conducting the interviews with past program participants and program staff, I transcribed all of the audio-recordings and

used the theories of change they identified as the basis for the Grounded Theories of Change highlighted in the next section.

With regards to my own role as the researcher, I am a past participant of the Imagine program and this affiliation has its advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is that being Imagine alumni has allowed for me to have access to the organization's leadership as well as the past participants. I believe it provided the interviewees with a level of trust while interacting with me because they knew that I had gone through a similar experience. It also allowed for increased understanding between researcher and interviewee because I, as the researcher, was aware of the program's details and methodology. Also, the Grounded Theories of Change identified in this research may have been influenced by my involvement as a past program participant due to my knowledge and familiarity with the program. This can potentially be an advantage because it helps to ensure all of the categories mentioned by the participants are identified and included. It can also be a disadvantage because it may have influenced the categories or themes as part of the Grounded Theories of Change actually emerged from the project.

There are other disadvantages of my own involvement as a past participant as well, as it could play into some researcher bias in selection of Imagine as a case study. However, as it was previously explained, this is also the only known organization bringing together Armenian and Azerbaijani youth for a few years and explicitly implements a program to engage the young people in dialogue about the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Furthermore,

without having this affiliation to Imagine and the leadership, I believe it would not have been possible to conduct this research endeavor.

My own Armenian identity does also potentially play a role and influence the research. One concern is regarding Azerbaijani program participants volunteering in order to speak to me, as an Armenian. To combat this, Jale Sultanli – who is Azerbaijani herself and among the leadership of the organization - graciously endorsed my research project when I solicited volunteers from past programs. Her endorsement and support, I believe, significantly helped to ensure the participation and trust on the part of the Azerbaijani participants.

Finally, without the support and endorsement of Philip Gamaghelyan, Arzu Geybullaeva and Jale Sultanli, the data collection of this research project would not have been possible. It is through their approval of the project and allowing for me to have access that allowed me to conduct this research study.

Regarding the research project's ethical issues, this research proposal has been approved by Human Subject Review Board at George Mason University, the sponsoring institution of this research and meets the conditions and standards outlined in the application process.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Results**

#### **A. About Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation**

Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation, henceforth referred to as Imagine, was founded in 2007 as a non-profit organization seeking to transform relations between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. With the ceasefire agreement over Nagorno Karabakh signed in 1994, the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan was closed and the societies have had little to no interaction or communication ever since. In the meantime, hostile attitudes and relations were further reinforced over the years between these nations as both Armenians and Azerbaijanis portrayed the other as the “enemy.”

Given this absence of communication between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, Phil Gamaghelyan and Jale Sultanli co-founded the organization as an opportunity to allow for interaction and communication. Gamaghelyan served as the Armenian Co-Director and Sultanli as the Azerbaijani Co-Director. Chris Littlefield was also one of the initial co-founders, as he was considered to be a “third side” or the “neutral” side. They designed a program intervention that would aim to bring together Azerbaijanis and Armenians in a dialogue with each other to discuss needs, concerns, fears and hopes of

these nations. Arzu Geybullaeva recently joined as Co-Director and has been helping the organization carry out its mission and goals today.

The goals of Imagine as an organization include<sup>3</sup>:

- Transform negative attitudes of conflict-torn societies towards the conflict and each other and promote cooperative and mutually beneficial view of the conflict
- Generate joint learning, analysis and ideas that take needs, concerns and hopes of all sides into consideration and that can be used in the peace process
- Create and sustain networks of professionals across conflict lines committed to peace building process

The program methodology is an integration of analytical dialogue activities combined with teambuilding activities. Participants engage in sessions on conflict resolution skills training; dialogue sessions which express hopes, fears, concerns; a history timeline comparison session; dialogue through art; problem solving workshop approach; conflict mapping; and joint-project planning. (Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation, 2011)

For the purposes of this project, it is important to note the years in which the Retreat and Dialogue programs were implemented to provide some background for this section:

- 2007 in Maine United States
- 2008 in North Carolina, United States
- 2009 in West Virginia, United States
- 2009 in Gudauri, Georgia
- 2010 in Gudauri, Georgia

Those individuals who participated in the US-based Dialogue and Retreat programs from 2007-2009 were already based in the United States at the time of their application and

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<sup>3</sup> Information obtained through Imagine's website available at: [www.imaginedialogue.com](http://www.imaginedialogue.com)

selection. There were a significant number of selected participants who were studying at US-based Universities through programs such as IREX Muskie Fellow or UGrad programs. Others were Armenians or Azerbaijanis who were already living in the United States, with the majority of them born and raised in Armenia or Azerbaijan.

In 2009 and 2010, Imagine began to implement its programs in the region and specifically in Georgia because it was closer for them to travel to Georgia rather than to the United States. Georgia was still considered a “neutral” setting to hold these gatherings, which is an important consideration as well. Participants travelled from Azerbaijan and Armenia in order to attend the workshop and returned to their homes afterwards.

The participant selection process has changed slightly over the years. During the initial program implemented in 2007, the application process did not explicitly seek individuals who were interested in doing joint projects with Armenians or Azerbaijanis. Through conversations with the program staff, it became apparent that over the years they changed their selection strategy to particularly recruit individuals who were interested in meeting people from the “Other” side and were committed to do cross-border joint projects.

Generally, as long as individuals were interested and active in their communities and had the potential to get involved in cross-border projects, then they were seen as ideal candidates. In 2010, social media experience was added as part of the selection criteria as well.

Each year, the Co-Directors sought to maintain gender parity in the selection of their participants. Therefore, they would have roughly equal representation of both males and females in their programs.

As for the age criteria, during the initial years, participants' age ranged from 18 years old to people in their twenties (with some exceptions of older participants up until the age of 40). In the latter years, in 2009 and 2010, Imagine began to recruit younger generation of Azerbaijanis and Armenians, specifically in the age range of 18-25.

The program implemented in 2007 was considered to be a pilot program in terms of the methodology that the program staff chose to implement. The initial program implemented a Problem Solving Workshop along with the team-building activities and non-formal components, with participants living together with someone from the "Other" side. The program methodology has slightly changed ever since the initial program was implemented in 2007, but generally it has maintained a few key components. Over a 10-day period, participants are given the opportunity to discuss history of the conflict, express their fears, needs, concerns, and are given the opportunity to interact with each other through informal and social components of the program. Through activities such as ropes courses, white-water rafting and hiking trips, the participants have the opportunity to engage in outdoor activities in addition to the more formal educational component that focuses on providing a training in conflict resolution skills.



Another important component of the program is that participants share housing with a person from the “other” side. In other words, Armenians and Azerbaijanis are roommates with each other and it is explicitly arranged this way. They are also paired with each other to organize daily activities such as cooking, cleaning and organizing activities during the free time. When Imagine began implementing its program in Georgia, it no longer required participants to engaging in shared cooking and cleaning chores. Instead, they engaged in other team-building activities in the evenings ranging from time spent on creating social media websites to dance competitions and more.

Since 2007, they have implemented a dialogue and retreat program every year and in recent years, Imagine has diversified its portfolio by implementing a series of other programs including the creation of the website, Caucasus Edition and co-organized an academic conference at Tufts University and presented a panel at Columbia University.

Armenians and Azerbaijanis who participated in one of these programs are considered to be past program participants within this section. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the past participants who were interviewed for this project and what year they participated in the program.

**Table 1**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Interviewees who were 1st time program participants</b>
2007	Maine, US	4
2008	North Carolina, US	2
2009	West Virginia, US	1
2009	Gudauri, Georgia	2
2010	Gudauri Georgia	1
	<i>Total No. of Interviewees</i>	<b>10</b>

On a few occasions, some interviewees were also alumni who were invited back the following year to participate in the capacity of being alumni. There were a few participants who also became involved in Imagine as facilitators of workshops, too. Therefore, in a few circumstances, some of the participants had the chance to participate in an Imagine program on more than one occasion.

An important element of the program is to allow for Armenians and Azerbaijanis themselves to take ownership of the conflict analysis and resolution – have them involved in directly engaging and talking about the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Noted by several past program participants and program staff, this was a particularly unique and important component of their own experience in the Imagine Retreat and Dialogue programs.

**B. Approach to the Analysis of Data: Use of Grounded Theory**

Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser first developed the Grounded Research Theory methodology in the 1970's as a way to conduct qualitative research that extracts theory from data through a process of systematically gathering and analyzing data. This research approach tends to focus on getting out to the field and understanding what occurs on the ground. It also emphasizes human relations and interaction and the belief that people are very much actors who have their own interpretations of social action and reality. (Corbin and Strauss 1998) The approach is an inductive process which derives theory from the data. As this research project seeks to empower and stakeholders involved to participate in the identification of the theories of change themselves and in their own language, grounded research theory is an approach which would be the most appropriate methodology.

In conducting this grounded research methodology, I did not establish a template or categories prior to gathering the data. My approach intentionally did not seek to impose certain existing theoretical concepts or categories on the data collected. However, as a researcher, I cannot dismiss the fact that I played a role in organizing and identifying the key themes and categories that emerged from the data, though I tried to ensure I was using the language and terms identified by the interviewees themselves. This approach, overall, has been most appropriate in allowing the stakeholders to express their own understanding about the conflict and their participation in the program and I as the researcher would seek to organize them according to the categories and themes identified through a coding mechanism. Moreover, identifying categories beforehand and imposing

them on the data creates the potential of misinterpretation of the data and perhaps even allocates meaning that were not the interviewees' intention.

As Marshall and Rossman explain, the researcher engages naively with the data and does very little editing (2006, p. 155). Data collection was based on conducting interviews with Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation past program participants and program staff. All of the interviews were audio-recorded through a computer software program called Audacity. There were 5 Azerbaijani and 5 Armenian past program participants who were interviewed. In addition, 2 of the Program Staff were Azerbaijani, 1 Program Staff was Armenian and 1 Program Staff was American.

After conducting the interviews, all of the interviews were then transcribed. During the process of conducting the interviews, transcribing the audio-recordings and reading and re-reading the text of the interviews, I began to observe there were some patterns and trends. In some cases, many of the interviewees used similar terms and language when describing the overall goals and underlying assumptions about why change occurred during the program. As the questions aimed to draw out the stakeholders' theories of change for Imagine or what helps to bring about social change, the resulting "themes" that emerged are inevitably theories of change themselves. Through a combination of the grounded research theory methodology and theories of change evaluation, what emerged from the data is what I am calling, Grounded Theories of Change (GToC). This describes the inductive approach used to cultivate the stakeholders' – participants and program staff - perspectives on what are the theories of change. In this case, the

assumption is that all of the stakeholders have their own perspectives and viewpoint on what are the theories of change and are able to identify them when asked a few questions. The GToCs are therefore a significant component of the data analysis. This section identifies the GToCs which emerged from the interviews with stakeholders' perspective and also provides some narrative quotes from the interviews as a source of evidence. Even the descriptions used to describe the GToCs were also compiled using the same language and terms expressed by the interviewees themselves.

Prior to delving into the data analysis, there is one additional piece of information to note regarding the GToCs themselves. As these stakeholders spoke about their experience in Imagine – whether they were the program staff or participants in the program itself – the theories are relevant and very specific to the work of Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation and the way in which they carried out program implementation. As one past program participant noted:

I thought this is interesting but I wasn't really imagining how they bring Armenian, Azerbaijani youth together... Because as I imagined at some point there would be a stalemate in the conversation and no dialogue could happen, because one side would be insisting on its own position and the other side on its own position and no dialogue would be possible. And even that situation might get out of control and people might really offend each other very badly, so I was a bit skeptical about what do I have to speak with the other side. But then when I saw what methods are being used to facilitate this dialogue, I was really amazed because it did work, at least the promotion that I was in 2009, we had both moderate people and both radicals from the Armenian group and Azerbaijani group and at the end, we really managed to have this dialogue. (I9)

Another participant also mentioned:

I think bringing people together in general wouldn't be the reason that it's a change. I think it's definitely the Imagine methodology, the way of bringing them

together and setting up the thing that makes it work and at the same time achieve some kind of change in peoples' belief. (I10)

Several participants noted that it was specifically Imagine's methodology and the environment established by the NGO itself that helped to create social change.

Therefore, the GToCs are context-specific and focused on their personal experience or involvement with the program.

### **C. Analysis of the Data: How stakeholders suggest change happens**

Imagine past program participants and program staff members were asked about their overall general assessment of the type of social change that occurs in a Dialogue and Retreat program. The following list describes the findings:

- 8 out of 10 of the past program participants expressed through their participation in the Imagine program they saw positive social change in themselves at a personal level
- 1 out of 10 of the past program participants expressed that no positive social change happened and it might have even had a reverse effect on that individual
- 1 out of 10 of the past program participants expressed that the individual's experience in the Imagine program was neither one that saw positive or negative social change
- 4 out of 4 program staff members expressed they believe positive social change takes place in the Imagine program

While the focus of the questions asked to stakeholders was about their perspectives on theories of change, the set of questions for past program participants were different than the questions posed to the program staff. All interviewees were asked to provide their

own perception about the theories of change for Imagine, but of course, was based on their individual experiences.

All interviewees' identities and names have been coded to maintain confidentiality of the individuals who participated. Each interviewee is assigned a code, which are the following:

I # = Interviewee numbers 1-10, which are Imagine past program participants
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PS # = Program staff numbers 1-4, which are Imagine Program Staff
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When asking all individuals about how they believe social change happens, interviewees initially talked about what they saw as changes and then traced back to how they think it happened. In other words, they initially talked about the “indicators” of change and then reflected on how or why those changes occurred in the first place.

After transcribing all of the data, the researcher used open coding to highlight key terms and phrases that emerged from the interview transcriptions. After reading and re-reading all of the interviews, the researcher observed that in some cases similar themes were being repeated. After the initial cycle of identifying the themes, the researcher went back and identified the interviewees that had mentioned those themes. Thus, based on this process, the Grounded Theories of Change emerged.

While grounded research involves iterative cycles of data collection, this particular research project was unable to do so because of the low response rate from potential

interviewees. As a result, the GToCs that emerged are a result of only one cycle of data collection.

As a result, the GToCs that emerged from the interviews are outlined in Table 2. Some of the GToCs were raised more frequently than others. Moreover, many of the individuals emphasized some components about their perspectives on the theories of change more than others. Each of the GToCs will be elaborated further and contextual evidence from the interviews will be provided in the following section to trace the underlying logic.

Also in Table 2, the column that indicates the GToC's level of analysis was also raised by many of the interviewees. In some cases, interviewees mentioned they were not sure about changes that took place amongst their colleagues, but they knew at the personal level that this was something they experienced. Similarly at the group level, interviewees mentioned they would notice the group dynamics changing and people were spending more time with each other during the social time. For example, one participant noted that at some point the participant noticed all of the participants were no longer sitting together from their own groups anymore, i.e. the Armenians with the other Armenians and Azerbaijanis with the other Azerbaijanis. This helped indicate that the overall inter-group dynamic had shifted. The organizational level was a bit more difficult, as the researcher had to ask interviewees follow-up questions to really understand if this was at the organizational level or simply at the personal level.



**Table 2**

<b>Grounded Theories of Change (GToC)</b>	<b><u>Level</u></b>	<b><u>Total # of people</u></b>	<b><u># of Prog. Participants</u></b>	<b><u># of Prog. Staff</u></b>
<b>(1) “Sense of hope and hopelessness”</b> -- If people across conflict divide feel a sense of hope and the feeling of hopelessness is shattered, then they will feel responsible/ motivated to contribute toward peaceful resolution of the conflict	Inter-personal/ individual, Intergroup, and organizational	6	3	3
<b>(2) “Government support for Track 2 process”</b> -- If the official approach of the government changes and is more welcoming to Track 2 relations, then there will be increased societal interaction between both sides	Intergroup	9	8	1
<b>(3) “Creating a future generation of leaders”</b> -- At an inter-societal level, establish contacts with small groups of young people so that when resolution happens, these young people can lead peaceful transition and set an example	Inter- personal/individual	4	3	1
<b>(4) “Creation of safe space”</b> -- If there is the creation of “safe space” then people will feel comfortable to be open and have relations with the other side	Inter-personal/ individual	3	1	2
<b>(5) “Confronting the elephant in the room”</b> -- At a personal level - conflict needs to happen/erupt in dialogue for people to work through their emotions and feel more “open” with each other in order for genuine interaction to happen	Inter-personal/ individual and Intergroup	6	3	3
<b>(6) “Positive image of other”</b> -- If young people from across conflict lines come together and they have a positive experience, it will contribute to a positive image of the “other” and improved relations with the other	Inter-personal/ individual	12	8	4
<b>(7) “Teambuilding”</b> -- If people from across the conflict-divide are able to interact and socialize with each other outside of structured program activity such as through outdoor activities (i.e. ropes course, white water rafting) or social events (dancing), then authentic relationships can be established that may withstand difficult conversations and/or interpersonal conflicts	Inter-personal / individual	7	4	3
<b>(8) “Inclusive identities”</b> -- If identities are transformed to be more inclusive, then cross-conflict societies will inevitably be more peaceful	Intergroup and Organizational	2	1	1

**GToC 1 “Sense of hope and hopelessness”**

***If people across conflict divide feel a sense of hope and the feeling of hopelessness is shattered, then they will feel responsible/motivated to contribute toward peaceful resolution of the conflict.***

GToC 1 initially emerged from the interviews with the program staff and was supported by the past participants as well. GToC 1 is at the heart of the program’s organizational logic, as the interviewees explained they did not feel that sense of hopelessness, that they knew there were others who believed there was hope for peaceful resolution of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. At that point, they actually felt motivated and compelled to do something to contribute to that peaceful resolution. Prior to their involvement in Imagine, they did not know how to get involved or other people who would support this idea. An underlying reason why Imagine brings together Azerbaijanis and Armenians is to help these people combat the sense of hopelessness that exists when they do not know about other people who think like them, whether they belong to their own ethnic group or the Other.<sup>4</sup> As PS1 explained:

There is a prevalence of this, almost an ideology...and we’ve heard this from participants over and over again. It is this hopelessness that peace is not possible. That there is no way these two peoples will be able to find understanding and resolve this conflict through different ways. I think the reason for this is propaganda....And second is, I think there is absolutely no discussion about ways of peaceful resolution and there is also not a lot of knowledge and scholarship from people to channel that information to the rest of the public and say, ‘no

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<sup>4</sup> Other is commonly used as a term within the conflict resolution field to refer to “the other party” or the “other side” and it means those individuals who are considered to be the “enemy” or across the conflict divide.

For example, see references to Other made in: Dean G. Pruitt and Sung Hee Kim, *Social Conflict: Escalation Stalemate, and Settlement*. 3rd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004.

actually there are possibilities.’ So all of these combinations have created this complete hopelessness in people that only war is possible. And they really sincerely don’t see a choice. And that combined with an enemy image creates a total stalemate and I think one of our goals is /was to break that.

Program staff and past participants identified that the way Imagine is able to change this sense of hopelessness is by creating a world in which the people can actually see those things happening in real life. Hence, they bring together Azerbaijani and Armenian youth and they are able to see the prospect of working with the Other.

Like we create this little world that’s different from the reality and when they see that possibility, that’s what gives people hope. That’s what motivates them to do something. And that’s when they realize, oh my God this is possible. Why have I been sitting and not doing anything about it? I gotta go do something. And it gives them personal responsibility. I think that’s another important theory. In addition to hope, I think there’s a general removal of people of themselves from this huge problem we have on our hands. And I think coming to the program gives them a little bit more accountability and they start sharing this responsibility. They realize together what a bad situation it is and it motivates them to go and do something about it, it empowers them to say, ok I can do something. (PS1)

I8 explained a sense of inspiration after meeting others who thought in a similar way and wanted to get involved after the program was over:

I met a lot of different people that had different opinions, attitudes, characters, and hearing their stories, seeing how they change, how they see the things, how they agree or disagree – it all made me get closer to them and it got me so inspired like how many things we can create together. Like Armenians /Azerbaijanis we’re not enemies, we can actually talk, we can create something together. So I would say that the impression was very good because I got to know a lot of people that were very smart, very impressionate [sic]. After this, that’s what inspired me to do more on this kind of projects. (I8)

I1 expressed motivation to become involved though also expressed concern about how one’s involvement might potentially impact one’s life and career choices:

I was really motivated to work on that because the reasons I wanted to join the program pushed me you know I was really motivated when I started and I wanted

to go on but I had some concerns because of the governmental issues. Because in Azerbaijan if you're really involved in this kind of thing, then the KGB, this National Security council and other government ministries start to pursue you, they follow you, they just start to get into your private life – what are you doing, why are you involved in these kinds of things. And since some of my relatives are in government jobs, I was thinking like if I am really getting into trouble with the government, it can indirectly affect their career. You know, it is why I didn't want to get directly involved in this program. (I1)

I2 expressed desire in learning more about politics and conflicts in general:

Participating in Imagine...helped me, encouraged me to learn more about the current life of Armenia whether it's political – just understand where my people are. And what I can do to influence a change in what there is. Before I was not interested in conflict. It's not like I didn't care. I did not know much and I was not really interested to understand what the conflict is, while I was living in that conflict. I am from Armenia and I live here and my family and friends and everyone else lives here. It really helped to encourage me and people like me who could make something, who could make a change, be more involved in that change, especially when it concerns the entire population – the country. That way, it was a good impact and I'm really thankful for sort of opening my horizon a little more. And understanding that just by living in the country you're not a full citizen but you also need to be involved in everything.

Participants and program staff identified the creation of a sense of hope and combating hopelessness as a theory of change that, according to their perspective, can help these individuals feel the desire to do something to become involved. Based on the interviews, they explained that it was possible for them to feel a sense of hope after the sense of hopelessness was shattered. Along those lines, their hopelessness was shattered when they met others who wanted to cooperate, who wanted to do joint projects and get involved. Many of the program participants mentioned they were involved immediately following the program, but their participation faded over time. Reasons for their lack of involvement were personal / family issues, career-related concerns, lack of time due to pursuing education and more.

**GToC 2 “Government support for Track 2 process”**

***If the official approach of the government changes and is more welcoming to Track 2 relations, then there will be increased societal interaction between both sides.***

Many of the interviewees mentioned that the government had to at least support and not create barriers for Track 2 level initiatives. In fact, with a total of 9 individuals raising this issue concerning how social change happens, GToC 2 is the second highest grounded theory of change.

Support or involvement of their respective governments was vital in order to see Imagine’s work have greater impact and lead to change in the societies. Interestingly, those who expressed this sentiment were primarily program participants, though one program staff mentioned it as well.

If you take the problem, it’s already 15-20 years that our governments are trying to solve this problem, I don’t think that people as civilians who are not really supported by their governments, we can achieve anything in these couple years.... The government should be involved. You cannot really separate yourself from government, especially in the kind of regulation systems in Azerbaijan and Armenia where government dictates every kind of life and lifestyle. You should be getting the support of the government, otherwise it’s really unrealistic to achieve massive support or movement. I’m not talking about movement or revolution, but intellectually spreading these ideas among people it’s also unrealistic unless government is involved or supports it. If government says we’re not going to fund but at least if they say yes you can do that then it’s ok, but most of the time, as far as I know they don’t support. (I1)

I5 expressed more critical views of Imagine overall, but did allude to the fact that the official approach needs to be determined first. Otherwise, such projects cannot bring

about social change at a broader level. Moreover, I5 explained, eventually the people are going to have to live with each other:

For example Imagine would work much better if it happened after the conflict was actually resolved. Then we know ok this is the solution, then people this is the solution just because we are people and we share this planet and we want to live with each other, it's useful if we talk to each other. But before the conflict is resolved, before there is any blueprint from the officials to resolve the conflict, I think meetings like Imagine cannot do much. Because if you look at conflict resolution in other regions when they had self-determination wars or even if they had civil wars especially like territorial conflicts like Nagorno Karabakh – people can't live with each other if they don't have something to fight for...

During the conference, we tried to have a change through people-to-people interaction but I think whatever change you try to have it's not going to be significant or have any important effects if the official approach to the conflict doesn't change. And you may ask like how do you change the official approach and you may think that people hold their governments accountable so if people change they can change the guys that make decisions or they may change the way the government makes decisions. But I think in authoritarian governments especially like in Azerbaijan to some extent in Armenia people have very little impact on state policy. (I5)

I9 explained that the governments actually create barriers to implement cross-border contacts:

In the case of the Armenian and Azerbaijan contacts, there are certain barriers. It is not very much encouraged at the state level to have these contacts. This is very important because if it was just a little bit encouraged or at least no barriers were put on that, I think these contacts would be much more, because there is a certain need for both societies to have these contacts. These contacts could contribute to resolution only if there is certain actions from the authorities of Armenia and Azerbaijan at least not to put barriers. Because we can clearly understand that contacts are not being encouraged. In Armenia one might be very surprised to know that you have Azerbaijani friends on Facebook and vice versa. (I9)

Similarly expressing skepticism, I4 explained it is not in the government's interests nor do they see such cross-border projects as beneficial to them:

I'm thinking that the state might view such kind of initiatives are not to their benefit and so they might intervene. I don't know it's my opinion...The Nagorno

Karabakh conflict is being used – quite in the same way as in Azerbaijan, it’s the same in Armenia – it’s being used. And I think it would not be beneficial for the state because the state / authorities might lose some votes because whenever someone needs some votes they make a call and say like Karabakh is ours and they win the votes and the nationalistic part of society this is what makes me think there might be some state intervention. (I4)

I7 is also not very optimistic that the people living in these countries can actually influence their governments or policy:

...it may also have this long-term goal that can impact the policymakers too because unfortunately we people particularly in our region do not have political voice in the sense that there is no free and fair elections so you can say this government you are not functioning well so I’m socking you. Basically you have to find a way to influence policy so that they are able to change their views as well, and they’re not playing this game for their own personal games. (I7)

While it is good to have cross-border contacts, I2 expressed concern that one’s national interests should not be forgotten nor made subordinate as a result of having friends across the conflict divide.

I had a small conflict with trying to make these people understand that there is a difference between supporting your country and willing to listen to the person in front of you. Other than just avoiding everyone in your country and just being ready to go and do whatever just to show you’re tolerant and democratic and you’re open to any kind of change. People can be the force to influence the government to make changes, changes that we need according to what we want. (I2)

Though I2 is also skeptical that neither the Azerbaijani nor the Armenian governments want to have people-to-people interactions, I2 believes cross-border contacts are more discouraged in Azerbaijan than in Armenia:

But so far neither government wants to have this kind of broad and open interactions between their people. I’ve seen Azeri reactions if their university dean knew about you coming here, they would be like no. Or they would be like, ‘we told our parents we’re just going on a vacation.’ In my case, maybe my case was different. Since Armenia is sort of in a winning position, for us, it’s a little

bit easier to sit and talk. While for Azeris it's a little bit – a lot different, a lot difficult. And their government teaches them on a different way than our government does. You know the entire policy of bringing a new generation up. If Imagine wants to be successful, in both countries it has to have same value and influence. Because just by making Azeris more tolerant it's not going to help to come to success if Armenians are not ready to cooperate.

An overwhelming majority of past program participants believe that social change at a broader societal level is possible only through the support of their respective governments. PS3 explained if the government did not discourage such Track 2 level initiatives, there would be a diversification of funding sources as well. Unless they have some support from the government or at least the government not actively placing barriers on cross-border Track 2 level work, there would certainly be an increase in cross-border societal relations.

**GToC 3 “Creating a future generation of leaders”**

***At an inter-societal level, establish contacts with small groups of young people so that when resolution happens, these young people can lead peaceful transition and set an example***

A few people mentioned that Imagine is investing in a more long-term goal. In order to create change, this group of young people with cross-border experience will eventually become leaders of their countries that will construct coexistent and peaceful inter-societal relations. Most of the past participants and one program staff mentioned they believe young people are the ones who will make social change happen:

The whole idea is to create a domino effect – when you get the genuine [young] people together, and those genuine people go back to their home countries and



perhaps even get the not-so-genuine people understand the logic behind this whole cross-border dialogue...

Imagine has been there since 2007, since then how many graduates have we had so far. 70 people... Everything starts from a small step and this is a small step perhaps that needs to be taken. It's too far ahead to say that it's having an impact on society, in the long-run this will have a bigger impact on society in terms of once you look back, you'll have these small groups of people who to actually set an example. (PS4)

Past program participants also emphasized the long-term effects:

When we look from the longer perspective, we can think that maybe 10 years if the problem is not solved at that time, then maybe these people can get these personal relations and their own experience into practice and they can solve this problem in the future. (I1)

As I2 and I7 expressed, Imagine program targeted young people who would become leaders in the future:

Usually Imagine picked people who were going to be leaders in their society – future leaders - and that would really help in the future when Armenians and Azeris come together to discuss something to have a better and more constructive dialogue. That's what I saw in it. (I2)

I believe it has quite a significant potential in the sense that these are people who have / going to have significant influence in the future in the sense that these are the ones who are those select people who are able to go to the US and get their education there and go back to their communities then and then start working there. So if you look at that potential as a long-term investment, I think that's really influential and has the potential to work well. (I7)

The underlying logic is that for more than 15 years there has been no resolution of the conflict, and the likelihood that it will be resolved soon is also not very high. Therefore, when the time comes for the younger generation to rise up and become leaders, cross-border contacts will inevitably help because they will be experienced in engaging with the Other.

#### **GToC 4 “Creation of safe space”**

***If there is the creation of “safe space” then people will feel comfortable to be open and have relations with the other side***

Only a few people mentioned the creation of a “safe space” to allow for the participants to feel comfortable and interact with the Other without feeling judged. The majority of individuals who mentioned this theme were program staff members. PS1 explained the underlying logic for Imagine program is to create “An environment for a safe place, whether it was in our program whether it’s on a publication or just in a conversation and a project that people can get engaged in.” PS2 also mentioned the creation of a safe space was crucial in order for people to really open up with the Other. PS2 elaborated by explaining that not only is this the case for Imagine program but it is the case with friendships overall. If people do not feel safe, then they will not open up with the Other.

I6 supported these views by affirming that Imagine set-up this type of environment for the program participants:

I think there just isn’t any other venue for the two groups to come together and talk about those things. We can’t really go to each other’s countries. Even if we travel, I feel like youth from both countries shy away from the other side. So if I’m travelling to Georgia, and I saw Armenian young people I probably wouldn’t go up to them and say “hi let’s chat” you know? There’s that separation between the two cultures. But here you’re living under one roof; you’re sharing your meals; you’re sharing everything; and you also have a very structured program where you are put in a situation where you have to talk. So I think that’s why they do it. I can’t think of a better venue and a better atmosphere to get these things done....

It's a safe environment. I would never feel comfortable opening up and talking about those things in any other environment. But in that environment I'm comfortable, because that's what we're there for. (I6)

Therefore, from the context of these particular interviews, people expressed the safe space helped them to feel comfortable to open up with the Other. Without feeling it was safe to open up, the experience would not have been a positive one for the program participants.

**GToC 5 “Confronting the elephant in the room”**

***Conflict needs to happen/erupt in dialogue for people to work through their emotions and feel more “open” with each other in order for genuine interaction to happen***

Six people mentioned that they needed to have a conflict with the Other, express themselves fully as well as listen to the other side, disagree with each other, get emotional and angry with each other and really talk about and “confront the elephant in the room” or express their views about the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Almost all of the program staff members expressed this point as a crucial part of why they believe change happens.

I think it's the elephant in the room. It's the problem that everyone's trying not to look at but it's sitting there. I think by talking about history – we spend 2-3 days on it every time – you get people to talk about, like they have to say it. They have to say these things, you got to get them out, you got to get people pissed off and yell...It just needs to happen at some point, someone needs to have an opportunity to say those things and see the reactions of the other and then realize that the person doesn't want to lose a relationship as a result of those things being said. (PS2)

The way I see this theory of change is that by bringing people together and getting them to talk to each other and at times getting angry with each other and getting emotional with each other, crying and screaming during a dialogue, though that never happened with me...you want these people to see that there are others like them who want to talk, who are ready to break down stereotypes, who are ready to take the steps of doing joint projects together. (PS4)

PS1 explains that going through these emotions is vital because it creates an opportunity for reconciliation and healing amongst the group members:

That's the dialogue and opportunity for people to talk about conflict and the most painful things, to say what they need to say, to heal and reconcile, to understand, to complete the picture they have in their head and to answer the questions, to have internal conversations with themselves, challenge themselves and their own views, and most of the people who come are willing to do that and come there to do that with themselves first and foremost and that's a big part of transformation process. I think an opportunity to be heard and let go of that and to hear the other side and understand that and to put everything in a bigger context. I think that's what creates an exit out of that stuck stalemate and hopelessness. (PS1)

Engaging in dialogue about the history of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict often initiated an environment of tense discussion and heated debate amongst the participants. I3 alludes to this component of the Imagine program and suggests that when the Other is not confronting the conflict, it becomes obvious and unproductive. There needs to be a release of the emotions one has about the conflict, identity and history:

When it was part of the historical discussions, from each party there were people that would get too nervous and they would start to tell whatever they thought but we know there were others that wanted to say something but they were afraid, they weren't telling. I don't know it may be connected with their character, it may be connected with the thing they were afraid but you could see that there is still passion, they are not too open in this situation because they are afraid when they will be heard, they are afraid there will be police somewhere there, and they will have problems in their country. I'm not talking only about Armenia or about Azerbaijan, both of them...And I guess it is negative because when you are opening your heart fully and something is less there, it has results. The same when you are sad and you are not crying, when you are not getting rid of that passion when it has its root in your heart. (I3)

I9 explains the individual needs to release everything and will then feel comfortable to open up, “When you have said everything you think, you feel so much released and you feel so much more comfortable talking to this person because you feel like you’ve been fair towards each other.”

Meanwhile I8 also explained that people chose to avoid the conflict so as not to damage the relationship. Only after confronting the conflict did the participants have better relations with each other:

Because what I saw that when people first met each other they were not talking too much cause they were afraid to say something and they were afraid of a conflict. Like each of the sides of the group, they thought each other they might start a conflict about me and they might fight me just for nothing. But this didn’t happen, instead people got friendlier, people talked to each other, participated in all kinds of activities so that was pretty much the first communication one. (I8)

### **GToC 6 “Positive image of other”**

***If young people from across conflict lines come together and they have a positive experience, it will contribute to a positive image of the “other” and improved relations with the other***

GToC 6 was the primary programmatic logic mentioned by most of the stakeholders that helps to bring about social change. The methods used by Imagine to bring Azerbaijani and Armenian young people together and allow them to have a positive experience or exchange with the other can help to improve cross-border relations. For most of the program participants, it was their first time they were meeting someone from the Other

side. As mentioned earlier, 8 out of 10 of the program participants suggested they had a positive experience in the Imagine program overall. However, 1 program participant mentioned it was a negative experience.

I5 suggested that participation in the program had the opposite effect. It was not the first time I5 had contact with Azerbaijanis, as I5 engaged with Azerbaijanis before the program. However, after this program, the program participant expressed reservations about bringing people together:

I felt – after the conference – more reserved towards Azeris. I never thought it would occur to me because as I mentioned I had many experiences with Azeris and that wasn't the first time I was seeing an Azeri and I would expect anything. But I felt more reserved and that was based on these stories that happened when the person whom I liked the most and was in my opinion the most intelligent person started telling really like folk myths about Armenians that I think a person who is that intelligent shouldn't believe in that. Or the incident that happened with the other participant when I felt that it was a complete waste of time – treating her like a human being when she wasn't treating us like that mutually. I felt more reserved. So if you think of the conference and the purpose of the conference to bring Armenians and Azeris together, it had perhaps the reverse effect on me. (I5)

I10 also expressed reservations about Imagine having a negative or positive impact on this participant overall. However, when asked about the way Imagine implemented its program, if it led to any changes, I10 responded, “Oh absolutely. I think for me actually Imagine was the first program that really kind of changed my view that there is a way of dialogue. And even though a lot of patience needs from both sides and a lot of efforts actually need even to face each other.”

The majority of the past program participants explained Imagine is able to bring about social change by bringing people together and breaking peoples' stereotypes, having the chance to interact with each other one-on-one and to do joint activities together.

The changes were mainly on the personal level. I myself became more tolerant towards other people – not necessarily Azeris or Turkish people – but in general towards people. Like there is this kind of perception when someone tells you “Oh this person is Azeri” you automatically build a wall between you and the person or the same is from Azeri side. The same is with Armenians and Turks, everytime you say ‘oh the person is Turkish’ you automatically isolate yourself from the person. Now since I’ve been having all these workshops and all these interactions with Azeris, I really became more tolerant towards other people and more open. (I2)

I’m going to be honest with you – I didn’t have a good perception of Armenian people before the program. And after the program I changed tremendously. First of all, I developed friendships that I still have today. And secondly, a lot of the stereotypes are gone. I look at people in a different light from Armenia. I can see where they’re coming from because Armenian youth went through the same exercise of brainwashing as we did to an extent, so we’re actually very similar. (I6)

The goal is simple, it just aims at bringing the young people from Armenia and Azerbaijan together, which we miss so much since we don’t have it. This is the most important thing in the whole CR [conflict resolution] process, that it’s going at the state level but it’s not going at the grassroots/ people-people level. We don’t have these contacts. Armenians and Azerbaijanis have fears towards each other. They have concerns towards each other and they basically do not even know – especially the new generations – do not know how to deal with each other. When they meet each other in an international conference, for example, they don’t know how to deal with each other. They don’t know what to expect from each other...What imagine does is simply bring together to meet and discuss the conflict themselves. (I9)

All four program staff expressed bringing people together and giving people the opportunity to interact with each other isolated from all of the media and propaganda, and removing all other distractions from daily life help increase cross-border interaction.

So underlying assumption was that – the relations would be improved between the groups that we would bring together and we chose to target youth as well as

academics and researchers... and doing dialogue or finding other ways to collaborate, we would contribute into overall improvement of relations between the two societies by targeting these segments of the societies. (PS1)

We tried to influence a person's understanding of identity without necessarily using the term identity. But showing others' narrative and analyzing your own narrative, you create this questioning in the person or the group of what they know of who they are and who the other side is. You humanize the other but you also create some self-critical awareness of your own knowledge and your own understanding of conflict and the other side through this questioning. (PS3)

Therefore, bringing people together was simply not enough for people to want to engage with the Other. In fact, a positive experience is necessary in order for people to want to have further interactions with the Other side. In the event that a person has negative experiences interacting with the Other, it can lead to a reverse affect of discouraging a person from wanting to engage with the Other.

### **GToC 7 "Teambuilding"**

*If people from across the conflict-divide are able to interact and socialize with each other outside of structured program activity such as through outdoor activities (i.e. ropes course, white water rafting) or social events (dancing), then authentic relationships can be established that may withstand difficult conversations and/or interpersonal conflicts*

In several interviews, program staff and past participants attributed the GToC 7 played a significant role in helping them see the Other as human, establishing relationships and even on occasion befriending the Other.



PS2 particularly emphasized the importance of the non-formal activities outside of the more “serious” and “structured” sessions to help people release their emotions, get angry with each other and still develop relations with the Other.

If you want to initiate change and I don't want to say it's behavior change but awareness change more so, you need to build a relationship up where it can withstand being able to have extremely difficult conversations about historical issues and about the topics and constantly be balancing those two things together. So it's the juxtaposition of fun events/ social events paired with difficult conversations at the same time.

Rarely do people get to a place where they open up and are authentic with each other. And by using a lot of these activities and the progression of them in the beginning, I'm aiming to really build people up, to build up the relationships, get to know each other, see the human side of each other. The simplest activities of a game, of laughing, a tag game, moving up to things that really push people out of their comfort zone – like a ropes course or white water rafting or you know things like that so you do things that then push them out of their comfort zones and they get a little pissed at each other...What happens is that people start getting authentic with each other.

Cause rarely is it that when you have, after the structured time the group stays together. Cause the group is having so much fun together and having such a good time together that when we stop structuring stuff, they're structuring it on their own. I have an incident this last year when we finished an activity - it was an exhausting 3-hour activity - and afterwards, they just started all playing a game together. There was not one person not there. It was just hucking this giant red inflatable ball around but they stayed out in the parking lot doing that for like thirty minutes afterwards. (PS2)

PS4 also believed the most impactful moments came during the social events and during the periods when there were no “structured” activities per se.

The most powerful thing was seeing all those participants who came a week before who didn't know each other, who were there for a week, they were sharing rooms together, they were in the sessions they were doing everything together, sitting behind a fire and talking about their acknowledgements and sharing their experience with us. To me that was the most powerful thing. (PS4)

PS4 suggested that the teambuilding activities and games allowed participants not only to open up with each other but also to have “practical experiences,” by placing them in real situations of conflict.

And by practical I don't mean necessarily showing them examples from history, but more kind of do it through games or do it through activities. And that's what I really liked about Imagine... So we would give them some free time but then in the evenings we would do team activities, and I think it shows that Imagine brings people not just for intense dialogue during the day and have some games during the day but also for some together time, some “us” time not talking about conflict, but more just talking about “us” and doing fun things together basically. (PS4)

Initially, I9 was quite skeptical about the non-formal teambuilding activities. Ultimately though, I9 became convinced this was quite important.

..again I was skeptical in the beginning about the icebreaking games we had... and I was thinking this is a stupid thing, why do I need this, but at the end I really thought that these icebreaking games are very important. Because when you have fun with these people, when you laugh together on something that is funny, it is so much easier to open up and to express your thoughts more openly than if you do not have it. It's like you feel like friends, just as you would be so frank with your friends...If you do not go through these discussions and quarrels, if you're not mad about what the other is telling about you, you can't really feel the whole of it because once you go through it releases you completely out of your fears and all your concerns. (I9)

Without these activities, I9 believes the program would not have been so successful. I9 provided an example of relations with other Azerbaijanis right now in this person's life but is unable to have genuine relations with them because they have never talked about Karabakh, so their relations have remained at an artificial level.

I8 also attributes the “teambuilding” activities helped people develop friendships with one another. “And the people got very friendly there. Because we were put – we were

camping together we were doing all kinds of crazy stuff together – it got us all close to each other and we totally forgot of all the conflicts we had.”

**GToC8 “Inclusive identities”**

***If identities are transformed to be more inclusive, then cross-conflict societies will inevitably be more peaceful***

One program staff and one past participant elaborated on the importance of understanding how identities are constructed and that if they were more inclusive, Armenians and Azerbaijanis would be more peaceful toward each other. PS3 explicitly described this as an organizational level theory of change:

The big goal of Imagine would be to create more inclusive identities and transform the understanding of conflict or the way people relate with conflict or deal with conflict...But the goal is more to transform the understanding of conflict and the way you look at your identity and more inclusiveness of identity and understanding of self and so on...

The underlying belief is that the way Armenian-Azerbaijani identities came to be today is based on very mutually exclusivist understanding of identity. This us vs. them dichotomy is very strongly manifested. If you try to break down what being Armenian means, it will come down to being not a Turk, being not Azeri, being somehow close to these two identities. It might not be limited to that, but when it comes to discussing Armenian identity us in relation to Turkish/Azerbaijani identities they are kind of related in the way Armenian identity is presenting itself. So these two are presented/are seen as being very quintessential – like meta-ironies – against which kind of the Armenian identity exists. So this is, in very simple brief terms, this is how the Armenian identities are seen and very similar on the Azerbaijani end. Lot of things are constructed in opposition to Armenians, Armenianness and so on...

And this creates a situation in which even the total co-existence of some kind of compromise of living together in the distant future becomes almost intolerable

because the way people see themselves is almost exclusive of some kind of coexistence with the other side. (PS3)

Seemingly, this very much impacted at least one of the past program participants and was successful in helping I3 identify it as a theory of change:

Because we realized that we are not born to be enemies, we were made enemies... If we look at history, we can see that everything starts when you are powerful – but that's not in the case of Armenia – but we were normal country, and everything was ok in Armenia. But somebody didn't like, I can't say which country, but it was evident that they didn't like it and they wanted to break the peace in Armenia. And then when the struggle started, the wrong talking, wrong conversations, wrong echoes of each others' government they said this they said that... it took to that way. Because when we talk, when we listen to each other, we come to that conclusion, that none of our countries wanted war. (I3)

#### **D. GToC Analysis**

Considering the GToCs that emerged during the interviews, an important question that emerges is – how do the GToCs identified by the program staff and program participants compare and contrast between the two groups? In other words, to what extent was there agreement or disagreement among the program participants and staff about what are the salient GToCs? Did the program participants' GToCs differ from the ones identified by the program staff? This section will seek to provide some analysis to explore these questions about the connection between the GToCs identified by the program staff and the program participants. Table 3 provides statistical data that helps to illustrate the analysis when considering how many of the program participants and program staff identified a GToC.

**Table 3**

<b>Grounded Theories of Change (GToC)</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Total # of people</b>	<b># of Prog. Participants</b>	<b># of Prog. Staff</b>	<b>% of Prog Participants*</b>	<b>% of Prog Staff**</b>
(1) <i>“Sense of hope and hopelessness”</i>	Inter-personal/ individual, Intergroup, and organizational	6	3	3	30%	75%
(2) <i>“Government support for Track 2 process”</i>	Intergroup	9	8	1	80%	25%
(3) <i>“Creating a future generation of leaders”</i>	Inter-personal/individual	4	3	1	30%	25%
(4) <i>“Creation of safe space”</i>	Inter-personal/ individual	3	1	2	10%	50%
(5) <i>“Confronting the elephant in the room”</i>	Inter-personal/ individual and Intergroup	6	3	3	30%	75%
(6) <i>“Positive image of other”</i>	Inter-personal/ individual	12	8	4	80%	100%
(7) <i>“Teambuilding”</i>	Inter-personal / individual	7	4	3	40%	75%
(8) <i>“Inclusive identities”</i>	Intergroup and Organizational	2	1	1	10%	25%

\* The percentages are calculated out of the total number of interviewed program participants, which were 10 in total.

\*\* The percentages are calculated out of the total number of interviewed program staff, which were 4 in total.

A prevalent theme that emerged from the analysis in Table 3 is that an overwhelming majority of program participants and program staff agree, GToC 6 “Positive image of other” is salient. When participants are given the opportunity to have a positive experience with the Other then it is likely to contribute to a positive image of the Other, leading to improved relations between the two groups.<sup>5</sup> In total, 12 out of 14 of the program staff and participants mentioned this at some point during the interview. All four of the program staff discussed this GToC within the interviews, while 80% of the participants mentioned it as well.

On the other hand, in one interview with a program participant, as the program participant expressed the experience with the Other was a negative one, it led to the cultivation of slightly more negative feelings toward the other for this program participant as a result of the experience in the program. This affirms that one should have a positive experience with the Other in order to ensure an increased positive image and thus, increased relations.

While GToC 6 was the most salient category that emerged and had the most agreement among the interviewees, beyond that, there seemed to be variation in the perceptions of how the program participants and program staff identified the ToCs.

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<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, this seems to affirm the scholarly literature often referred to as “Contact Theory” that is discussed by scholars such as Gordon Allport (1954), Yehuda Amir (1998) and Herbert Kelman (1999).

GToC 2 “Government support for Track 2 process” had the second highest level of constancy in being identified as a ToC amongst the participants. With 80% of the participants discussing this theory, it was the only other GToC that was most commonly identified by the participants. Meanwhile, there was only 1 program staff member (25% of the respondents) that mentioned this GToC. It was one of the least mentioned GToCs identified by the staff.

Here, it becomes apparent there is divergence between the two groups’ opinions. Perhaps this hints towards the notion that while the participants believe it is possible to establish good relations and plan joint projects during the project, their ability to continue the relations with the “Other” and joint projects is ultimately contingent upon what happens when they go back to their homes. As it became apparent in the interviews, some participants mentioned they would not want to risk their own or their families’ security and safety, nor would they want to jeopardize career opportunities as well.

Among the program staff, there seemed to be strong agreement that the following 3 GToCs were important for Imagine: GToC 1 “Sense of hope and hopelessness”; GToC 5 “Confronting the elephant in the room” and GToC 7 “Teambuilding.” There were 3 out of 4 of the program staff who mentioned these themes within their interviews, which comprises 75% of the staff.

GToC 7 Teambuilding was also a significant theory for the program participants as it was the GToC with the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest level of agreement amongst the program participants. This is noteworthy because it demonstrates that for both the program participants and program staff, the Teambuilding component is an important aspect of the Imagine program that helps to bring about social change. Certainly, their testimony highlighted in the previous section also helps to elaborate and provide further details on why it is that contributes to improved relations.

One of the GToCs that had the least percentage was GToC 4 “Creation of safe space” with only 10% of the participants ascribing to it. Whereas 50% of the program staff mentioned this was one of the components that led to social change. This might be explained by the reality that the program staff are much more aware and conscious about helping to plan and establish the creation of a “safe space.” Meanwhile the participants are perhaps much more focused on their encounters with the Other. In other words, perhaps the participants may be less inclined to think about the overall environmental setting and sensitivities that go into setting up logistics and creating the environment. For program staff, however, that is probably higher within their priorities because they are the ones organizing the event and it is their responsibility to establish the tone of the environment.

Another one of the least mentioned themes by the participants with only 10% was



GToC 8 “Inclusive identities.” Similarly for the program staff, this was only mentioned by 1 program staff member, but this staff member placed significant emphasis on the importance of this particular GToC. During the interview, the staff member described that the underlying programmatic assumption is indeed to create a more inclusive identity, but perhaps not to make this explicitly known to the participants or to call it identity transformation.

There was a significant divergence in views between program staff and participants about GToC 2. Participants placed more of an emphasis on outside forces playing a role to bring about positive social change. GToC 7 was also in the higher percentage range for the program staff, but it was not as significant for the program participants. One potential factor contributing to this is that the staff are the ones who are responsible for the content of the program and thus, they are significantly more familiar with the types of activities planned as a part of the program. Whereas, for the program participants, that part of the program might not have been so apparent for them, as the Teambuilding was a part of their daily activities during the program and perhaps they did not know it.

The GToCs emerged from the interviews and discussion with the stakeholders about their perspectives and views on what helps to bring about social change in Imagine’s programs. Past program participants elaborated on their personal experiences, reflected on individual changes they went through and recalled some very difficult and intense conversations and moments from their dialogue experience. A couple program

participants were skeptical that such people-to-people programs could even bring about social change in the first place. PS5 explained during the interview that one must consider one's motivations in attending such a conference in order to understand their assumptions about change. In this case, PS5's participation in the conference was not to meet people from the other side but to be a representative who was knowledgeable about history, contemporary politics and to represent this perspective during the conference. Further research on this subject might be of particular interest to pursue and explore surrounding the question – what is the underlying motivation for peoples' participation in conflict resolution programs? However, it is outside the scope of this current project. This might help provide insight during evaluation of a program because it will help to elaborate the participant's motivations for attending these types of programs in the first place.

Other participants mentioned their motivation was to meet the other side. Many of them did not have experience meeting the Other and for them it turned out to be a positive experience. Perhaps there is a correlation, perhaps there is not? Nonetheless, this might be a subject of future research exploration.

All in all, every past program participant expressed they experienced some sort of change and even learned about themselves and the Other. By highlighting some of the stakeholders' experiences – whether they were program participants or program staff- this section has focused on presenting the ideas expressed by the persons themselves.

Collecting data through a qualitative research methodology helped to ensure their perspectives and voices were heard within this research project without extensive alteration of their comments. As a researcher, my goal was to highlight and explore some of the Grounded Theories of Change identified by the stakeholders during the extensive conversations I had with them. Upon considering the GToCs that emerged, I aimed to analyze the relationship of the theories of change identified by the staff with the ones identified by the past participants.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Conclusion and implications for policy**

The research endeavor has been written during an unstable and worrisome period of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, as there are rumors and concerns about the reemergence of violent conflict in the region. It is precisely during such a volatile moment that scholars and practitioners focusing on the region's conflicts should take a moment to reflect on what efforts are working to promote peace and how can such efforts be supported to prevent the renewal of violence. This research project seeks to make a contribution in that realm and seeks to exemplify the conflict resolution initiatives at the Track 2 level bringing together Armenian and Azerbaijani youth in an effort to promote peace.

This research project aimed to highlight the role of one particular NGO, Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation, in order to explore the perspectives of program staff and program participants about what they describe to be the Theories of Change. The research aimed to conduct a qualitative research study by interviewing 10 program participants – 5 Armenian and 5 Azerbaijani – and 5 program staff and highlight their perspectives on what they believe helps to bring about positive social change in the Imagine program. The researcher organized and categorized the 8 Grounded Theories of Change that emerged from the interviews with the participants.

Furthermore, what emerged from the research endeavor is that many of the young people are convinced of the potential of people-to-people programs to transform attitudes and behaviors and can also help to cultivate cross-border relationships even though their governments may not encourage it. It was also a worthwhile endeavor to allow participants to have the opportunity to express their views about what they believed are the Theories of Change in Imagine's programs because it helped to give them a voice in the process.

Considering the research findings, there are potentially some implications for Imagine as well as the conflict and peacebuilding evaluation community. This research study aimed to raise further questions regarding Grounded Theories of Change and the potential for future efforts of bottom-up or inductive methods of evaluation.

#### **A. Implications for Imagine's theory and practice**

What might be some implications for Imagine? First and foremost, my initial thoughts are regarding whether or not the GToCs identified by the past program participants correspond to what the program staff believe are the ToCs for Imagine. The findings within the Results chapter aimed to highlight some of the points of comparison between the two groups. To summarize, the following key points emerged in the project (in no particular order or rank):

- A significant majority of the participants and program staff identified that from their perspective, one of the theories of change in Imagine is that having a positive

experience with the Other side can contribute to a positive image of the Other side and thus, increased relations between cross-conflict groups.

- Many of the past program participants also discussed the need to have their governments be supportive of Track 2 level initiatives because without the support, Imagine alumni will not be able to maintain contacts, will continue to be concerned about societal and potentially career-related repercussions as a result of interacting with the “enemy.”
- Program staff identified that the Teambuilding component, from their perspective, was a significant reason why social change takes place in Imagine’s programs. Program participants also agreed with this notion, but not as overwhelmingly as the program staff.

Yet another idea emerged as a result of collecting the GToCs and that is coming up with Indicators of Change. Indicators of Change in evaluation help to identify how we know change has happened. What are some “indicators” or indications that change has occurred? Program staff and past participants talked about what types of changes they saw occurring primarily on a personal level and also at a group level. As they identified changes occurring, I followed up with questions about how they knew change happened and what were some indications of change. One might consider their responses to be “indicators” of change and this might be noteworthy to go back and cultivate the data. This could also create the possibility for inductively coming up with indicators of change within program evaluation efforts.

For example, I8 described that an unintended consequence was that this individual got to meet “friends” who belonged to the Other side. “I wouldn’t expect I would get – I’m not afraid of saying this word – ‘friends.’ Because I thought that I would go to that program I will communicate, I’ll see what it’s about, I’ll go to projects. But at the end I met nice people to talk to, to share, to have friends on Facebook. I met friends - that’s what I was not expecting. But it happened.” One potential indicator of change could be this program participant’s willingness to call the other a “friend.” This notion that one would call someone from the Other side a “friend” also came up in several other interviews as well.

There are also lessons to be learned and extracted from those who evaluated the program in a more negative way. For example, as mentioned earlier, I5 described it is important to consider the motivations of why a person participates in these types of conferences. Seemingly, the program staff learned this lesson a while ago because it actually shifted its strategy after the initial pilot program in 2007 and had a much more focused selection process that brought together Armenian and Azerbaijani young people who actually wanted to implement joint projects. One staff member raised this point in subsequent conversations following the interviews.

Another implication that emerged from the context of the interviews was regarding the highly sensitive nature of one’s involvement in this type of program itself. It reminded me, as a researcher, about the importance of allowing for people to express themselves

yet to also ensure their confidentiality of their identity. Some individuals mentioned that when they participated in the Imagine program, they did not tell their family they were participating in an Azerbaijani-Armenian dialogue project but they were “going on vacation” so as not to get into trouble upon their return. Other individuals were concerned about career security and did not want to lose their jobs or prospects for a job, especially in the government by being too friendly with the “Other.” This has implications for Imagine’s efforts to conduct follow-on projects and really complicates the ability to be able to implement them. Thus, while many people expressed that they wished they were more involved, some people simply did not want to risk losing their jobs or causing any personal harm by staying involved in the project afterwards.

### **B. Implications for theories of change in peacebuilding practice**

A significant implication that emerged from this study for the peacebuilding and conflict resolution evaluation community is that the stakeholders themselves are capable of identifying what are theories of change and what is it that makes social change happen. As this field seeks to strengthen its evaluation efforts, it raises a poignant question for practitioners, which is - whose peacebuilding project is it anyway?<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, it helps to increase our understanding of how stakeholders articulate the theories of change. In other words, it poses them the question – how do you believe

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<sup>6</sup> A blog post on this question recently came out in April 2011, entitled “Sorry but it’s not YOUR project.” Peacebuilding and conflict resolution practitioners working in the development field should be aware of the language used when presenting or talking about a project. The post is available at: <http://www.how-matters.org/2011/04/27/not-your-project/>



positive social change can happen within this conflict? As Carolyn Ashton (2007) also pointed out, it empowers the stakeholders and helps to increase the ownership of a project's outcome and the evaluation results. Since it is an important goal within conflict resolution interventions to achieve stakeholder empowerment, the evaluation community should consider efforts to ensure that the stakeholders have the ability to contribute within the realm of identifying theories of social change.

When given the opportunity, human individuals can help identify some of the personal changes they see themselves going through and how, for example, the program participants saw their opinions shifting about the Other. Inductive research processes and particularly grounded theory methodology can help contribute to knowledge and learning about social change. As the current discourse on conflict and peacebuilding evaluation evolves on Theories of Change – how might we consider alternative methods of identifying Theories of Change? Who determines which theories of change get to be highlighted? And how might inductive methods help contribute to the formation of theories of change?

Efforts to systematically document and gather Theories of Change from a top-down approach might be further enhanced by employing bottom-up methodologies as well. It can help provide contextual evidence that these are the types of change that correspond to the ones already documented through top-down efforts. For example, GToCs identified by the stakeholders in the Imagine program correspond to some of the Theories of

Change identified in the USAID CMM initiative (Nan 2010). Figure 2 is from the Healthy Relationships category and highlighted within this category is the Community-based peacebuilding ToC. Figure 3 includes GToC 6 that emerged from interviews with Imagine stakeholders. When considering these two side-by-side, there seem to be similarities in the language employed – even though Figure 3 ToC emerged from a top-down approach while Figure Y emerged from a bottom-up approach.

**Figure 2** (Nan, 2010, Appendix A, p. 3)

3 Healthy Relationships				
The theories in this family target attitudes, as do those in the previous family. They differ in expecting that attitudinal change comes from the interactions of belligerent groups and the increased mutual understanding and appreciation that results. The two Healthy Relationships theories differ with respect to whether the setting for interactions is a shared community, or a separate, safe location.				
Theory	Statement	Description	Target	Illustrative Activities
Community-based peacebuilding	If belligerent groups within a community are given the opportunity to interact, then they will better understand and appreciate one another and will prefer to resolve conflicts peacefully.	This theory addresses divisions within a community that may be rooted in such things as ethnicity, religion, or status as a returning ex-combatant, displaced persons, or refugee. The aim is to create opportunities for a series of interactions between belligerent groups in the community to promote mutual understanding and positive attitudes. As the health of the relationship between these groups improves, the likelihood of violence between them declines.	Identity	Negotiation and problem solving to enable returns; intergroup dialogue; ex-combatant-community engagement; processes for handling land claims; joint projects.

**Figure 3**

	<i>Grounded Theories of Change (GToC)</i>	Level
6	<b>“Positive image of other”</b> If young people from across conflict lines come together and they have a positive experience, it will contribute to a positive image of the “other” and improved relations with the other	Interpersonal / individual level

Upon considering this point, one might respond with the question – if the top-down and bottom-up approaches both come out with similar results, then why should the time, money and energy be spent on creating an inclusive process for the stakeholders? My

response is that the facilitation of inductive processes – such as Grounded Theories of Change – is not intended to focus on the content of the outcome achieved, but rather, to ensure that an inclusive process is established that empowers the stakeholders. In other words, the concern is not regarding the outcome but rather the process used to strengthen program evaluation, and it is through an inclusive process that stakeholders can feel a sense of ownership and be empowered to seek positive social change. This is, ultimately, an inherent value within the conflict resolution field as well.

Furthermore, by integrating bottom-up approaches to data collection within evaluation, it emphasizes that people themselves are actors in interpreting the way in which social change happens and they themselves have a role in defining it as well. The emphasis is therefore placed on dialogic processes in evaluation that help cultivate knowledge formation and the cultivation of ideas. By focusing on such dialogic processes, evaluation can also move away from being a “numbers-oriented” program evaluation. While it is important to identify “no. of conflict resolution training workshops” that have been implemented, it is also important to understand how and why conflict resolution training workshops help bring about social change. In other words, engaging the stakeholders in a bottom-up approach and gathering qualitative data about the Theories of Change can help gather richer information about how social change happens.

### **C. Potential for future research exploration**

The research study aimed to explore the relationship of program staff and program participants’ perspectives on theories of change. Emerging from the research study are

findings that can contribute within the realm of advancing the evaluation through bottom-up approaches. Moreover, it aimed to give a voice to the stakeholders themselves about what makes social change happen and specifically identified the case study of Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation working to promote peaceful resolution of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict at the Track 2 level. One might consider this research study to be an intervention itself, as it has aimed to empower the participants and to give them a voice and space to reflect on their participation in the Imagine program. One area of further exploration might be to consider similar future interventions where an organization can engage in this participatory action evaluation method and engage the stakeholders themselves in designing evaluation tools.

The research endeavor was conducted at a time when the conflict resolution and peacebuilding evaluation community aims to strengthen its evaluation efforts in order to ensure understanding of what helps to bring about social change and why. In considering these initiatives, this research study aimed to make a modest contribution within that realm and to explore the possibility of establishing an inclusive process to ensure stakeholders' views are also taken into consideration.

## APPENDIX A

### Interview Questions

#### **I. Interviews with Armenian and Azerbaijani young adults (ages 18-30 years old)**

Semi-structured interviews conducted through Skype snowballing method to inquire about other participants that would be able to participate in the interviews

The following questions are the main questions and themes on information I sought to obtain from interviews with the past program participants:

- (1) When and for how long did you participate in an Imagine program?
- (2) What was your overall impression of the program?
- (3) How would you describe the purpose of the Imagine program?
- (4) What is your perception about changes (if any) that take place after bringing together Armenian and Azeri youth in dialogue? Do you believe there are changes? If yes, why or why not? If no, why or why not?
- (5) Do you believe programs that bring together Armenian and Azeri youth in dialogue are successful in doing so? Why or why not?
- (6) If you were to identify a mission or goal for Imagine and Azeri/Armenian youth dialogue sessions in general, what would it be?

#### **II. Interviews with Program Staff**

Conducted through Skype, used snowballing method to inquire about other participants that would be able to participate in the interviews

- (1) What are the theories of change in the Imagine Program?
- (2) How did you choose to work with these theories of change?
- (3) How does Imagine implement these theories of change within the program implementation?

## **LIST OF REFERENCES**

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## **CURRICULUM VITAE**

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