



COURSE OF TRAINING FOR
PEACE AGENTS
WE SOW DIALOGUE, WE CULTIVATE PEACE



Forum of Universities for Peace / University of Mendoza

Inaugural Conference

Peace Agents Training Course

**Building Peace in the Contemporary Context:
Assumptions, Opportunities and Requirements for Action**

Virginia Gamba

Mendoza, August 5, 2026



CÁTEDRA
INTERCULTURAL
EDUCACIÓN
PARA LA PAZ



COURSE OF TRAINING FOR
PEACE AGENTS
WE SOW DIALOGUE, WE CULTIVATE PEACE



I would like to thank the University of Mendoza for inviting me to speak with you today. I understand that many of you will soon begin the Peace Agents Training Course offered by this university's Intercultural Chair of Peace Education, as part of the initiative of the International Forum of Universities for Peace.

The topics you will explore over the coming month have to do with understanding **what peace is** and **who a peace agent is**. More importantly, you will have the opportunity to explore **intervention techniques, theories and practices to develop your personal capacities** and become peace agents. I wish you every success in your efforts.

I thought it might be useful today to talk about **peacebuilding from the perspective of contemporary strategy, both in theory and in practice**. Although strategy is nothing more than the "practical adaptation of existing resources to achieve a political objective," its principles go far beyond the way states use their foreign and defense policies to advance their interests, protect their spaces, and prevent or control armed conflict.

It is best to explain this using the definition provided by the Peace Agents Training Course. In describing what the course seeks to achieve, it speaks of "understanding, managing and transforming conflicts from the perspective of positive peace... in professional, community and institutional environments." Based on this description, it would seem that the objective of becoming a peace agent is to enter spaces of conflict and transform them into spaces of peace. But, as we all know, there is often a long way between saying and doing. And in order to **understand peace**, we must **understand conflict**.

Contemporary strategy, when applied to armed violence, gives **equal importance** to prevention, management and action. In international contexts, organizations and states go on alert when an event occurs that may generate a crisis which, in turn, **may or may not** lead to armed conflict.

We all pay attention to the news reported by the media and repeated through social networks and other communications. Depending on the region where a crisis emerges, we may be more or less concerned. In many cases, proximity to the epicenter of a crisis matters more to us because a conflict there could affect our daily lives. When a crisis occurs in a place more remote from us, it may serve more as a topic of conversation or opinion, but its potential impact on our lives is not considered as significant.

From a geopolitical perspective, we all know that this month the most widely discussed international issues have to do with the migration tragedy between Morocco and Spain; the continuation of the war in Ukraine; the ongoing armed violence in Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian territories, including Gaza; sporadic attacks—particularly involving armed drones



CÁTEDRA
INTERCULTURAL
EDUCACIÓN
PARA LA PAZ



and missiles—in Iran, the Persian Gulf countries, and against maritime trade in the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz.

Closer to home, in the Latin American and Caribbean region, there is concern about the expansion of organized crime, human trafficking, the increase in infanticides and femicides, as well as the continuing concern about the socioeconomic well-being of our societies.

To make matters worse, at the global level we are facing natural disasters whose magnitude affects hundreds of thousands of people, such as the double earthquake in Venezuela, wildfires in Europe, and the predicted climate disaster that the El Niño phenomenon is expected to bring to our region in the summer of 2027.

What do all these issues have in common? These issues are alarming **because they distance us from our perception of reality**. The saying that “better the devil you know than the devil you don’t” can be explained from the perspective of the things to which we are accustomed. When we become accustomed to a situation, whether good or bad, we develop a **false sense** of security because we know what is happening. When an event or incident disrupts this false sense of comfort, our perception of insecurity increases because we do not know how our reality will change as a result of this new event. In strategic terms, this is explained through crisis management and the escalation of violence.

We have a state of affairs that we consider normal; let us call it the **status quo**. When an incident arises that has the potential to move us away from the status quo, we enter unfamiliar and insecure territory. We do not know how that incident or event will alter our status quo. In international terms, the status quo is the stability of what is known. In strategic terms, this stability is explained through the doctrine of peace and security. This doctrine holds that it is reasonable to think that peace can exist only if there is security, and that security can never be sustained without peace. Over time, this doctrine expanded the concept to include human security in addition to the security of states.

In strategic analysis, there are four assumptions that help us understand a situation in order to prevent, manage and transform conflicts. These four assumptions are: **peace and security, realism, neutrality of judgment, and rationality**.

I have already explained the assumption of peace and security, so let me now explain the other three. **Realism** means learning to look at reality as it is, rather than as we would like it to be. **Neutrality of judgment** tells us not to judge what we see without having all the necessary information—in other words, to be objective rather than subjective in our analysis of a situation. Finally, **rationality** tells us that it is rational to assume that every entity, person or group will always seek to limit its risks and maximize its benefits.





These strategic assumptions become useful tools for peace agents. Let us see how they work. Professionally, if we seek to prevent a conflict or resolve a tense situation in a workplace, it makes sense to examine the situation by asking the following questions: Is there any insecurity in this workplace that is generating conflict? What is happening in my environment? Am I imagining a problem because I want to see a different reality that I find more appealing? Am I seeing a problem because I am not listening to others or understanding the situation from a perspective different from my own? What incentives can I offer when mediating this conflict that increase benefits for everyone and minimize everyone's risks?

I believe you can all see the logic behind these questions, and you will see that the same questions can be applied in community and institutional environments, not only in workplaces. Incidentally, they can also be applied to domestic situations as well as international affairs. These assumptions help improve the analysis of information and also help prevent and manage conflicts of all kinds.

Let us now talk about the **opportunities** for preventing, managing and resolving conflicts. In strategy, great value is placed on finding the best opportunity to act—the one that involves the lowest risk and the greatest benefit. Everything has to do with timing and with the wisdom required to recognize what we call in strategy the **“window of opportunity.”**

To understand the importance of acting at the most appropriate moment in pursuit of a proposed objective, whether that objective involves preventing, managing or resolving a conflict, we can use any logical example with which you are already familiar, even if you do not realize that you recognize it. Let us think about animals. If a dog is eating a bone, it is a bad time to introduce another dog into that space or to try to take the bone away. We know that the dog will tend to become violent at that moment, and when it feels frightened or insecure, it will become aggressive. If a family member returns from university or work after having had a bad day, everyone knows that it is not the best time to engage in dialogue until the unpleasant experience has passed. At work, if a manager or colleague has received bad news or experienced some trauma—even if it is simply being in a bad mood—it is not the right time to raise complaints or seek approval.

The same applies to countries, institutions and communities. In some way, we are all programmed to recognize when a situation is unfavorable for advancing our objectives. What **we are not equally good at** is **recognizing the moments that are conducive to acting in pursuit of an objective.**

In general, recognizing a “window of opportunity” requires extensive knowledge of the environment, of others, and of the prevailing context. If we do not observe, listen and take an





COURSE OF TRAINING FOR
PEACE AGENTS
WE SOW DIALOGUE, WE CULTIVATE PEACE



interest in the space where we want to act as peace agents, we will not know how to recognize the perfect opportunity to act.

Understanding, gathering information and exercising patience; knowing how to listen to others; having thought through what intervention to make and how to make it in order to take maximum advantage of the window of opportunity—all of these are fundamental to transforming an emerging or existing conflict and creating an opportunity for its peaceful resolution. Perhaps the perfect word to describe this is **being prepared**.

It is never a good idea to attempt to transform a conflict into a space of peace when emotions are running high. Either we intervene beforehand to prevent the escalation of tension, or we create a space for peace as soon as the tension begins to subside. Sometimes that space emerges after several quid pro quo actions between the parties, when the escalation of tension becomes balanced.

We need to analyze, through our assumptions, what is generating tension at work, at home, in the community or within an institution. We need to imagine and consider, **using real information**, what objective we are seeking when preventing a latent conflict. We have to **have a plan ready to use** as soon as the least threatening opportunity for the desired transformation arises.

Sometimes, collective trauma creates a brief window of time in which new ideas can be introduced in a favorable manner. Sometimes, a positive collective moment can also provide an opportunity to advance ideas. **None of this is intended to justify inaction, but rather to identify the best moment to carry out an action that has been thought through beforehand.**

In my own case, working in the international context and attempting to persuade entities and parties to a conflict to give peace a chance, I have always found it useful to learn **to listen without discriminating** and without prejudging any of the parties; to **accept the existence of a problem** that is a problem for everyone and not just for a few; to be **transparent** in the way I communicate; and to **never lie** or promise something that cannot be delivered.

In general, **the truth**, shared with humility, honesty and compassion, **is more useful than lies**, the **presumption of guilt**, and **arrogance**. It is important that all parties to a conflict be treated equally, impartially and without arrogance or abuse of power. **Only in this way can respect be generated**, and respect is essential for obtaining **authority**. **Authority generated through respect enables us to become good negotiators or mediators.**

In summary, to be a peace agent, it is important to have the tools provided by strategic assumptions. With these tools, we will be able not only to analyze the situation, but also to



CÁTEDRA
INTERCULTURAL
EDUCACIÓN
PARA LA PAZ



COURSE OF TRAINING FOR
PEACE AGENTS
WE SOW DIALOGUE, WE CULTIVATE PEACE



imagine a plan to resolve it that is acceptable to all parties to the conflict, and they will also help us identify the best moment to intervene.

We must now focus on the **requirements** necessary for action.

First of all, if we want to be peace agents, **we must be and act in peace**. There is no point in raising our voices, losing our patience, insulting or threatening others when we are seeking to create a space for peace. **It is important to know yourself before attempting to intervene in the lives of others**. Being secure in ourselves brings us peace, and **with that peace and security** we can become good peace agents.

Second, we must know **how to persuade** others so that they **want peace** and **understand the benefits of peace**. If all parties to a conflict can be convinced that there is a benefit for them in seeking dialogue and peace, a common interest can be achieved. No one will seek peace if they believe that peace means losing their security and stability.

The best persuasion is based on the principles of **deterrence**, which is simply another word for **persuasion**. There are **three requirements** for achieving persuasion or, as it is called in strategic terms, the **prerequisites of deterrence**. They are: **capability, communication and credibility**. It is worth exploring each of them further.

In foreign and defense policy strategy, deterrence seeks to ensure that a potential enemy **does not continue with a course of action that is destructive to us**. For the potential enemy to be convinced **that not doing something is better for them** than doing it, the only possible deterrence is to use the potential enemy's own value system.

In other words, **to persuade someone, it is better to appeal to that person's own value system so that they become convinced that not doing something is more beneficial to them than doing it**.

Translating this deterrence doctrine into our work as peace agents in professional, community and institutional environments, we must **persuade the parties** that they stand to lose much more by continuing along their current path than by seeking peace. **Peace must be viewed as a common good for all parties, according to their own value systems and not according to our own**.

To persuade others to accept our intervention as peace agents, we must have **the capability** to be peace agents—that is, we must be properly trained for this role. But there is no point in having that capability if the parties do not know that we possess it. Hence, the **second**



CÁTEDRA
INTERCULTURAL
EDUCACIÓN
PARA LA PAZ



COURSE OF TRAINING FOR
PEACE AGENTS
WE SOW DIALOGUE, WE CULTIVATE PEACE



requirement is communication. We must make it clear to the parties that we have the necessary capabilities, and this is possible by communicating through dialogue.

Finally, there is no point in having the capacity to foster peace and communicating that capacity if the parties do not believe that you are willing to help them achieve it. That is why the third requirement is **credibility**. And **credibility is built; it is not born**.

A person who does not act according to what they say, who is angry, ignorant or violent, is not a credible peace agent. A person who is at peace, who is non-violent, who does not lie, who is impartial and objective, and who acts according to principles despite apparent disadvantages, has greater credibility when offering to mediate in order to create a safe space where dialogue can take place and lasting peace can be built.

After **knowing oneself** in order to be and act in peace, and **knowing how to persuade**, the **last requirement for being a good peace agent is knowing how to seek positive compromise**.

Compromise is inevitable in the search for shared peace, but there are ways to ensure that compromise is not perceived as a defeat of wills but rather as a common gain. This is **not** the same as seeking consensus.

Paradoxically, many people consider consensus to be the best solution to any problem, but it is not. Consensus is built by taking something away rather than by adding something, and this often leads to inaction. It therefore does not constitute the pursuit of positive peace, because consensus is not productive.

Cooperation is much better than consensus. Cooperation leads to action. Hence, the compromise we seek is one in which all parties to the conflict **gain** something, rather than one in which everyone **loses** something. With mutual gains, cooperation can move forward, and ultimately, cooperation is what is necessary to sustain positive peace.

Dear friends, I have no doubt that you will make every effort to inform yourselves and develop your skills through the course you are about to undertake. Nor do I have any doubt that peace is the ideal to pursue in all circumstances and a profound aspiration of humanity.

Peace brings security, and security sustains peace. Do not forget your assumptions or the tools you will have at your disposal to become good peace agents. But remember that, ultimately, **peace begins with ourselves and our closest environment**, and that we already know how to be at peace: all that is needed is faith, hope and charity.

Everything else requires patience and empathy, hard work and courage.



CÁTEDRA
INTERCULTURAL
EDUCACIÓN
PARA LA PAZ



COURSE OF TRAINING FOR
PEACE AGENTS
WE SOW DIALOGUE, WE CULTIVATE PEACE



Is it worth becoming a peace agent? That is a question that can be answered with another question: **is it worth living a violent and insecure life?**

Think about it.

Peace is always the best goal in life, provided that peace does not deprive us of security. **Let us increase our security by seeking peace.**

Thank you.



CÁTEDRA
INTERCULTURAL
EDUCACIÓN
PARA LA PAZ