

## **Bridging the gap between conflict management theory and practice**

New chairman Robert Serry highlights plans and ambitions for UPH

During his long international career, [Robert Serry](#) has seen eye to eye with opposing parties in various conflict zones. These experiences inspired him to join [UPEACE Centre The Hague \(UPH\)](#) as its new chairman in October 2017. His main goal for UPH is to promote learning programmes in conflict management studies that bring together both academicians and practitioners.



*Robert Serry speaking to a man with leg injuries in Gaza, shortly after the 21 November 2012 ceasefire*

“I am very happy to have been offered this position, and I want to pay tribute to my predecessor, Marius Enthoven, who has steered and inspired UPH since its establishment in 2012. This will give me an opportunity to share with academia my personal experience in conflict management and mediation. I consider myself a practitioner in this field, through my work for NATO in the Balkans and Afghanistan, and as the UN Secretary General’s special envoy for the Middle East peace process.”

### **Representing UPEACE – Between The Hague and Costa Rica:**

“UPH is the representative in Europe of the [University for Peace \(UPEACE\)](#), an independent international university in Costa Rica that was set up by the United Nations to offer MA programmes on conflict and peace studies. As the new chairman of UPH, I want to build on UPEACE’s extensive track record, and develop courses on conflict management for academia that will bridge the gap between theory and practice.”

“You could say that our cooperation in peace studies with UPEACE is symbolised by our respective locations: Costa Rica is practically the only country in the world without a standing army, while The Hague has established itself as the international city of peace and justice with a growing UN presence!”

### **Joining Theory and Practice – What UPH can offer:**

“We want to set up projects with universities and higher education institutes that offer international conflict management and mediation modules for their students. First in the Netherlands, but this could be replicated in other European countries. These modules can be individual courses or seminars, or they can be part of a summer school activity, including case studies.”

“The speakers will be practitioners who were actually involved in concrete conflict situations and mediation. They will be asked to share their experiences with students: for example, how to negotiate and implement cease-fires, how to deal with disarmament and amnesty issues, or whether one should deal at all with terrorists in trying to end a conflict. I have had some practical experience myself on such issues, and I hope to draw in other colleagues from the UN, NATO or other relevant organisations, both active and retired.”

“The universities could then offer ECTS credits to students who have completed these modules. Of course, we will have to prove ourselves and show universities that we will actually offer them value for their money.”

### **Themes of conflict management studies:**

“There are a lot of different themes beyond the ones already mentioned that we can cover with our education modules in conflict management studies.”

“I want to highlight one particularly successful example on water diplomacy. I have witnessed myself as envoy in the Middle East peace process how a technical and scientific approach can offer solutions to help solve conflicts over water.”

“UPH facilitated a [water diplomacy programme](#) in 2015 with the world-renowned water institute [IHE Delft](#) here in the Netherlands. This 17-months MA programme starts with a course in conflict diplomacy at UPEACE in Costa Rica, followed by a course in water management and water technology at IHE Delft, and ends with a stay at [Oregon State University](#) where students can write their thesis and work on actual water conflicts.”

“I would love to pursue this sort of collaboration with UPH – in the Netherlands first, but also elsewhere in Europe – whereby organisations of very different backgrounds pool their knowledge and specialisms in educational projects that will highlight particular facets of conflict resolution.”

### **Conflict areas to be studied:**

“Which specific conflicts can be studied in courses proposed by UPH? That will depend on the interest shown by our academia partners. In my view every conflict is unique, but even so it is possible to learn from other cases and to avoid repeating the same mistakes.”

“Let me give you an example. Recently, I gave a course on international conflict management and mediation for the Diplomatic Academy of Ukraine in Kiev. There, I discovered that there is a great interest in Ukraine to learn from conflict cases elsewhere, in order to help Ukraine face its present challenges in occupied Crimea and the eastern Donbas area.”

“I can see room here for UPH projects with Ukrainian universities, institutes and think tanks in organising educational activities on conflict management. This would help these partners as civil society actors to strengthen their capacity to contribute to Ukraine’s policy debates, and to develop knowledge and lessons that can help them find solutions to their problems.”

### **Target groups – students & academia, and others:**

“Our first focus is to reach students, by setting up joint projects with their universities or higher education institutes. Let me stress that UPH itself is not a university and does not offer any courses on its own!”

“However, we do hope to help enable students to enroll in UPEACE in Costa Rica or to follow courses with its partner organisations, such as the water diplomacy course I mentioned. These studies are not cheap, so we hope to find funding for special fellowships.”

“But conflict management is also relevant for professionals. Staff members of NGOs and international organisations could find it useful to follow a session on conflict management situations before they go to the field. Also, I can see UPH offering courses within the framework of training programmes for young diplomats who may one day be posted in countries that are suffering conflicts.”

“But don’t forget that we are just a small NGO. We represent UPEACE in all of Europe, but for now it’s easier for us to start developing academic courses here in the Netherlands.”

### **UPH as a network organization:**

“In order to offer a wide range of high-quality speakers and practitioners, UPH must intensify relations with current and potential partners. That’s why I see UPH as a network organization.”

“Our main strategic partner is of course the UPEACE university in Costa Rica, which I hope to visit soon. We have a strong connection with the [Peace Palace](#) here in The Hague, home of the UN international and arbitration courts. Within the UN family, our partners include [UNESCO](#), which is closely linked to UPEACE, and we hope to work with the UN training and research institute [UNITAR](#). Also, we would welcome staff members of UN organisations such as [UNHCR](#) and [UNICEF](#) to share their experiences of conflict situations with students.”

“Universities and other academia are of course a primary focus for our projects, especially in the Netherlands. However, I see many potential partner

organisations here and elsewhere in Europe who are also working on conflict management, just like us – with perhaps the distinction that UPH has a particular focus on education.”

“For example, I will soon visit the [European Institute for Peace \(EIP\)](#) in Brussels, and recently I was at [NOREF](#), the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution in Oslo. NOREF grew out of Norway’s role as mediator in many of the world’s conflicts: first in the Oslo Middle East peace process, and later in Sri Lanka, Colombia, and Kurdistan.”

### **The Hague as a centre of conflict diplomacy:**

“I believe that an international city like The Hague needs to build up more capacity to play a similar role to that of Norway in international mediation. The Hague is already an important centre for resolving international disputes in court. But it could also develop a capacity in conflict diplomacy, by offering parties informal ways to help end their conflicts.”

“At this moment, we don’t have any specific plans in this direction. But I can certainly see room for UPH and its partners to help this happen.”

### **Funding and sponsoring:**

“UPH hopes to benefit from support of sponsors, but we need proper funding for the educational projects that we are preparing with academia. We can look at a modest fee for participation in the courses, support from university partners, or otherwise fund-raising from sponsors. That will not be easy, but we are not talking about large sums of money.”

“The coming months are going to be exciting for UPH: we will have to prove in how far we’ll be able to realise our plans and ambitions. These developments will be posted on our website, which will be refreshed and updated, and communicated with our contacts, partners, stakeholders and media.”

“I have a great appetite to make it happen. I firmly believe that UPH will find a niche for itself to increase knowledge on conflict management studies, by bringing together theoreticians and practitioners in an educational forum.”

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