Though tolerance may seem an impossible exercise in certain situations as illustrated by Hobbes in the inset box on the right being tolerant nonetheless remains key to easing hostile tensions between groups and to helping communities move past intractable conflict. That is because tolerance is integral to different groups relating to one another in a respectful and understanding way. In cases where communities have been deeply entrenched in violent conflict, being tolerant helps the affected groups endure the pain of the past and resolve their differences. In Rwanda, the Hutus and the Tutsis have tolerated a reconciliation process, which has helped them to work through their anger and resentment towards one another.

The Origins of Intolerance

In situations where conditions are economically depressed and politically charged, groups and individuals may find it hard to tolerate those that are different from them or have caused them harm. In such cases, discrimination, dehumanization, repression, and violence may occur. This can be seen in the context of Kosovo, where Kosovar Albanians, grappling with poverty and unemployment, needed a scapegoat, and supported an aggressive Serbian attack against neighboring Bosnian Muslim and Croatian neighbors.

The Consequences of Intolerance

Intolerance will drive groups apart, creating a sense of permanent separation between them. For example, though the laws of apartheid in South Africa were abolished nine years ago, there still exists a noticeable level of personal separation between black and white South Africans, as evidenced in studies on the levels of perceived social distance between the two groups. This continued racial division perpetuates the problems of intergroup resentment and hostility.

How is Intolerance Perpetuated?

Between Individuals: In the absence of their own experiences, individuals base their impressions and opinions of one another on assumptions. These assumptions can be influenced by the positive or negative beliefs of those who are either closest or most influential in their lives, including parents or other family members, colleagues, educators, and/or role models.

What Can Be Done to Deal with Intolerance?

To encourage tolerance, parties to a conflict and third parties must remind themselves and others that tolerating tolerance is preferable to tolerating intolerance. Following are some useful strategies that may be used as tools to promote tolerance.

Inter-Group Contact: There is evidence that casual intergroup contact does not necessarily reduce intergroup tensions, and may in fact exacerbate existing animosities. However, through intimate intergroup contact, groups will base their opinions of one another on personal experiences, which can reduce prejudices. Intimate intergroup contact should be sustained over a week or longer in order for it to be effective.