Preface

The editors of this book want to thank all those contributors who took the time to write up their experiences of adopting community development approaches in conflict-affected environments. We particularly wish to pay tribute to local practitioners who all too often find it virtually impossible to find the time or space to record their learning. Surviving in circumstances of violent conflict can draw the oxygen out of opportunities to reflect on practice. Priorities can be overtaken by the need to manage difficult and sensitive situations in order to ensure that practice is sustainable.

We have deliberately invited contributions drawn from a range of very diverse conflict-affected environments, but sharing the impact of both state and non-state armed actors. A unique element of the community action recorded is to be able to balance between these countervailing forces and even, at times, mediate between them. This is where community development interfaces with peacebuilding – a subject that is considered in this book but that warrants more detailed examination than we have space to present. However, if there is an overriding message it is that community activism is not only possible, but very necessary, in situations of violent conflict. Similarly, peacebuilding is not merely a post-conflict strategy, it gains its credibility by being applicable both during the violence and in periods of peace negotiations. We are also conscious of the critical role that effective peacebuilding plays in working to prevent a roll-back into either authoritarianism and/or future violent conflict.

Alongside presenting contributions from a range of very different societies and circumstances, the editors welcome the very different perspectives presented by the authors. We do not necessarily agree with each of the analyses put forward, but we feel that it is important that readers are made aware of the various approaches adopted by different agencies and practitioners. For ourselves, we prefer approaches that are locally owned and grounded rather than programmes externally designed and/or adopting a one-sided political perspective. However, we are also acutely aware that in conflict-riven societies, whatever community development strategy is adopted will be seen as ‘political’, whether a big ‘P’ or a small ‘p’, as so often noted by the community-based Women’s Sector in Northern Ireland. It is rare for community development to avoid a degree of politicisation in whatever context that it is practised, but it can never escape politics in situations of conflict.
Finally, we welcome those contributions that offer some advice to community activists and workers themselves as to how to survive and avoid burnout in often difficult circumstances. Self-care is not a luxury; it is healthy defiance in the face of what may be seen at times as overwhelming odds. If this collection of stories can be of use to anyone, it is practitioners like you that we have in mind.