Briefing Note

Civil Society in Peace Processes at a Glance

Inclusive Peace & Transition Initiative

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The Research Project

This Briefing Note is based on results from the "Civil Society and Peacebuilding" research project, led by Dr. Thania Paffenholz at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland, between 2006 and 2011, with a team of 19 researchers from 16 institutions. The project investigated whether, how, when and under what circumstances civil society can fulfil a peace supporting role. It analysed in thirteen in-depth qualitative country case studies, the performance of civil society with regards to seven peacebuilding functions in four phases of conflict and peace processes.

Background

Civil society has become widely regarded as an important actor in peace processes and the international community has devoted substantial effort towards building and strengthening its role. Yet there has been little systematic, evidence-based research undertaken to support this assumption empirically. Consequently, policy-makers and practitioners have often lacked concrete knowledge about how, when, and under what circumstances civil society may or may not fulfil a peace-supporting role, i.e. contributing to reducing violence, ending armed conflict, and building sustainable peace thereafter.

Peacebuilding Functions

The "Civil Society and Peacebuilding" project identified seven peacebuilding functions civil society can potentially fulfil. These functions are:

1 | Protection of citizens against violence from all parties.
2 | Monitoring of human rights violations; implementation of agreements.
3 | Advocacy for peace and human rights.
4 | Socialization in the values of peace and democracy as well as in-group identity of marginalized groups, often via peace education.
5 | Inter-group social cohesion by bringing people together from adversarial groups, often in dialogue projects.
6 | Facilitation of dialogue on the local and national levels between all sort of actors.
7 | Service delivery to create entry-points for peacebuilding, i.e. for the functions above.

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Employing this functional approach to the study of civil society actors in peace processes helps to first identify what is needed in specific conflict situations and at different phases of a conflict cycle, before then analysing which actors may have the potential to fulfil these functions in the short, medium, and long term. Additionally, such an approach also allows for a broader look at all existing societal forces that can contribute to peace processes, instead of a narrow focus on well-known, pro-peace non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and similar groups.

This research project analysed both the relevance of civil society activities within its conflict contexts, and how effective or ineffective such activities were in supporting peace processes. This analysis was conducted with regard to four different conflict phases: war, armed conflict, windows of opportunity for peace negotiations, and after large-scale violence has ended. To achieve robust results suitable for comparison, the research framework was applied to thirteen in-depth qualitative case studies.

Definition of Civil Society

The research framework applied a broad conceptualization of civil society, understood as a wide range of actors including professional associations, clubs, unions, faith-based and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as traditional and clan groups. The media, businesses, and political parties – with the exception of their professional associations – were excluded in the definition of civil society used in this project.

Main Results

Role of civil society is limited but supportive

Overall, the research findings stressed that civil society has the potential to play an important and effective role in peacebuilding, and has often contributed positively to peace processes. However, a careful look at the engagement of civil society – compared to the involvement of other actors – reveals that the role played by civil society is not necessarily decisive in building peace, but is supportive in most instances. The central impetus for peacebuilding comes from political actors, and above all, from the conflict parties themselves. These actors are often supported by strong regional actors pursuing their own interests.

Relevance of civil society functions differs across conflict phases

The relevance of the seven main functions performed by civil society substantially differs according to the specific local context and across the four phases of conflict described above. During wars and armed conflicts, when levels of violence are elevated, the civil society functions of protection, monitoring, advocacy, and facilitation are of high relevance. In cases with a lower level of violence over a longer period of time, the relevance of socialization and social cohesion increases slightly. During a window of opportunity for peace negotiations, advocacy becomes considerably more relevant. Mass mobilization to generate public pressure for continued negotiations or a final peace agreement is important, as is lobbying for the inclusion of pertinent issues into a negotiated settlement. After large-scale violence has come to an end, the need for protection generally decreases, as social cohesion and socialization become more relevant because people are able to focus on issues other than mere survival. Monitoring, facilitation, and service delivery remain relevant in this post-conflict phase.

The function of service delivery is special. In cases where the state actively performs service delivery and the level of violence is extremely low, there is no need for civil society to engage in this function with a peacebuilding intention. However, service delivery can become a highly relevant civil society function if it serves as an entry point for protection, monitoring, and social cohesion. Compared to purely dialogue and reconciliation oriented projects, aid projects focusing on basic service provision often provide even better opportunities to bring people together; harnessing shared interests (such as water supply to communities) can facilitate better communication and perhaps trust between former adversarial groups. Unfortunately, the bulk of international aid activities largely ignore this potential.

Imbalance between relevance and actual civil society activities

In general, this research project found a significant imbalance between what was needed and what was done: i.e. between actual levels of civil society activities within a particular function and the relevance of these activities for peacebuilding.

On the one hand, even when a certain function was highly relevant in a particular phase of conflict, it was not necessarily performed by civil society actors. The most striking examples can be seen with the functions of protection, monitoring, socialization, and social cohesion. While protection and monitoring are always highly relevant during armed conflict and war, they were only performed to a far lower degree. On the other hand, functions like socialization and social cohesion - which were not found to be highly relevant during violent phases of conflict, or when windows of opportunity opened - were nonetheless implemented widely. Many social cohesion initiatives, like dialogue projects, conflict resolution workshops, exchange programmes and peace education projects took place during conflict phases when conducting such activities was not highly relevant, hence they stood little chance of becoming effective.

Large differences in effectiveness of functions

Another striking finding of this research indicates that the functions of protection, monitoring, advocacy, and facilitation were more often effectively performed. Conversely, efforts aimed at socialization and social cohesion generally had a very low level of effectiveness in terms of reducing violence, contributing to agreements and sustaining peace. This was due to the way most initiatives within these functions were conducted, and the way they were influenced by certain contextual factors.

For example, socialization of the population with generic democratic and peace values has little effect in polarized times of armed conflict and war. We found that existing socialization institutions in society are the key factors influencing how people learn peaceful behaviour. Such institutions include schools, religious and secular associations, clubs, workplaces, and families. In all cases, those institutions tended to reinforce existing divides, often to an extent that fostered radicalization. Overall, the majority of NGO peace education and training work has not been effective. Deeply permeating radical in-group identities within existing institutions cannot be counterbalanced by a few local or national NGO initiatives that take place outside of these institutions.

Another example is intergroup social cohesion. The effectiveness of most dialogue projects was relatively low for a number of reasons, some of them found within the initiatives themselves. Such reasons include, among others, the scattered, short-term, and fragmented nature of most NGO initiatives; the focus on attitude change as opposed to behavior change; and the apolitical nature of most initiatives. For example, often such dialogue projects exclusively work with participants who are already convinced of the usefulness of reconciliation and dialogue, but not with less receptive groups opposed to these concepts. Moreover, such initiatives focus almost exclusively on well-known conflicts with obvious adversarial groups and work mainly with the same moderate local NGOs. This narrow focus can thus ignore other important conflict lines and actors within these societies.

Context matters

The context in which civil society operates strongly influences the space for civil society to act, thus strengthening or limiting its overall effectiveness. The main contextual factors that enable or constrain civil society are: the behaviour of the state (e.g. restricting laws, violation of rights including violence against civil society); the general level of violence in the country; the role of the media that more often have a conflict escalating reporting; the behaviour and composition of civil society itself (including diaspora organizations); and the influence of external regional and international actors, including main donors. Research results show that donors very rarely apply a holistic approach to distributing funding, i.e. by combining their support to civil society with their parallel political work with government and other relevant actors.

Additionally, donor resources can have either an enabling or a limiting function. In some cases, civil society support almost replaced the efforts of genuine social movements, a phenomenon known as the "NGOization" of peace work. Civil society is also subject to shifting power relations and responsibilities through external funding flows. The more civil society organizations are divided along power, hierarchy, ethnic, and gender lines, and display radical behaviours, the more difficult it becomes to mobilize them for a common peace cause.

The Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative (IPTI) is dedicated to evidence-based research and its transfer to policy and practice. The objective of the initiative is to support sustainable peace by providing expertise and information on the inclusion of diverse actors in peace and transition processes. This expertise is drawn from a collection of research projects that have been conducted for nearly a decade at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva under the lead of Dr. Thania Paffenholz.

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