conciliation resources

Civil society: participating in peace processes

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When people become directly affected by armed conflict, they develop a central interest in contributing to its resolution. Despite being confronted with harsh realities and huge dilemmas, civil society actors can make significant contributions to peace processes. Their capacities may help to create the conditions for talks, build confidence between the parties, shape the conduct and content of negotiations and influence the sustainability of peace agreements.

The nature of internal conflict in the post-Cold War era provides the most compelling argument for the participation of civil society in peace processes. It is not just that the consequences of brutal confrontation between competing military powers spill over to cause death and destruction among the civilian population; more gravely, we see the deliberate and sometimes systematic targeting of the most basic units of society by the conflict protagonists. Individual citizens, the family and the community are violated, coerced and subverted as part of the political, economic and socio-cultural strategies of the armed actors. This is the front-line of modern warfare. As people become directly affected by armed conflict, they develop a central interest in contributing to its resolution. Living alongside the armed actors, they have greater need, and greater potential to take part in peacemaking efforts. And as peace processes increasingly result in changes to political, economic and social institutions and relationships in a society, people also have a right to participate in these decisions.

Contemporary peacemaking practice has to confront these realities and the challenges posed by them. Traditional diplomacy and conflict resolution approaches have largely focused on a narrow definition of a peace process - namely the crucial task of bringing the political and military leaders of opposing groups into a process of dialogue and negotiation with the aim of exploring, reaching agreement on and implementing measures to end violent conflict and create the conditions for peaceful co-existence. This approach is guided by the belief that the leaders have the power to reach decisions and bring along their constituencies in support of any resulting settlement. However, modern civil wars present strong arguments for a more holistic understanding of a peace process. Negotiations between the leaders of opposing groups do not take place in a social or political vacuum. They may sometimes be unable to adequately address the complex and dynamic inter-relationships between

these actors and other groups affected by and involved in the armed conflict, including the parties' constituencies, the wider public and even the broader regional or international forces. People's independent initiatives in their towns and villages, as well as at regional, national and international level therefore have the potential to become key elements in a broader peace process that is capable of addressing these complexities.

The roles of civil society actors in peace processes are determined by a number of factors, including both external factors such as the attitudes of the warring parties and the degree of "political space" afforded to civic groups, and internal factors such as the resources and skills available for groups to draw on. The particular combination of opportunity and constraint in each context will lead civil society to assume a variety of possible roles. For the purpose of this short overview, these roles are clustered into four broadly distinct and complementary approaches.

1. Advocating dialogue as an alternative to armed violence

For non-combatant groups in society, the simple but courageous act of publicly declaring "no" to war and violence can have a powerful impact on the decisions of the warring parties about entering into negotiations. In many situations, an explicit withdrawal of support for the use of military force by sectors of the public will influence the parties' analysis of the options available to them. The public "mood" regarding the conflict and the desirability of a peace process is an important barometer for the leadership of governments and armed groups to take into account.

Civil society groups can shift this "mood" by highlighting the unacceptable costs of the conflict and increasing the political stakes for peace. They can catalyze public mobilization for peace, whether through demonstrations, petitions or media campaigns. Groups who may enjoy a certain degree of moral authority in a particular society, such as religious leaders or elders, can use their influence to add weight to public calls for peace. Advocacy can take diverse forms and benefit from creativity as well as from the richness of cultural traditions. Among some of the many powerful examples of such initiatives, it is worth mentioning the public demonstrations organized by the Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative in northern Uganda, and the 1997 "Citizens" mandate for peace, life and liberty" (*El Mandato por la Paz*) in Colombia, which resulted in the participation of ten million Colombians in a public vote in support of a negotiated settlement to the armed conflict. Across the world, women are frequently a powerful force in resisting war, through initiatives such as "Women in Black", whose silent demonstrations on the streets of Belgrade and Jerusalem offer solidarity with the victims of violence and demand an end to killing and injustice. All of these acts communicate civilians' attempts to resist collusion and articulate alternative approaches to violent conflict. As such they

contribute to shaping the social and political context necessary to underpin sustainable dialogue and agreement between the opposing groups.

Educational initiatives can also make a crucial contribution to the broader socio-political dimension of a peace process, by challenging public perceptions about the conflict. This is particularly true in contexts where opposing groups promote divergent and mutually–exclusive analyses of the social and political context. Against the backdrop of armed violence, the careful presentation of balanced and inclusive accounts of the causes and dynamics of the conflict can facilitate changed understanding of the "other side", encouraging fearful, divided communities to re-assess the prospects of peaceful coexistence in the future. Moreover, in societies where violence has become the dominant mode of conflict resolution, civil society groups can play an important role in educating their membership and wider public constituencies about the possibilities of non-violent approaches to conflictual issues. Legitimizing dialogue as a viable and effective tool can encourage vital public support for political negotiations between the protagonists.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the crucial role of the media in a peace process. Reporting of progress and obstacles at the negotiating table can have a huge impact on public support for the process, as can the format and content of debate about substantive conflict issues. Local or international media initiatives such as Angola's Radio Ecclesia or Search for Common Ground's Talking Drum program in West Africa are just two examples of the many efforts to harness the power of radio and television to promote dialogue and understanding across the conflict divides.

2. Facilitating dialogue between the parties

Traditional diplomacy has largely relied on governmental and inter-governmental actors to facilitate talks or mediate between the conflict protagonists. Certainly, the leverage exercised by an acceptable governmental or UN representative can have a significant impact on the prospects for agreement. However, in situations of protracted internal conflict, violence often penetrates through the social fabric, involving a larger array of armed actors (often with differing levels of autonomy and accountability), as well as a complex tapestry of inter-connected and self-sustaining conflict dynamics at the community level. The state-based international system is comparatively ill-equipped to deal with the people involved in localized armed violence. In such situations, civil society actors – whether indigenous or external – are arguably best placed to complement state-driven diplomatic efforts at the leadership level, given their comparatively low-profile, access within communities and greater flexibility than state or multi-lateral actors.

Civil society-led dialogue processes and mediation efforts can have a number of impacts: they can build trust and understanding between the grassroots

membership of divided communities; they can assist in identifying and resolving local-level conflicts, which can benefit the communities affected as well as build confidence between the conflicting parties; they can create a safe, unofficial space for middle-ranking members of the conflicting parties to engage in problem-solving exercises in advance of negotiations. In some cases, modest activities by civic actors can even lead to their acceptance by the leadership to mediate formal negotiations. The experiences contained in this chapter offer some specific examples of just such roles and impacts. In Mozambique, the opposing parties accepted the mediation of three representatives of the religious Community of Sant'Egidio, as well as the Catholic Archbishop of Beira, Mozambique. Their identity as parties without any political stake in the outcome of the process – nor any of the leverage exercised by foreign governments or multilateral institutions - informed their commitment to finding an outcome that would be genuinely acceptable to both sides and therefore more likely to be sustainable. In Northern Ireland, Peace and Reconciliation Group's quiet mediation work between the British security forces and the Irish Republican Army led to a de-escalation of armed conflict in the city of Derry/Londonderry and was an important opportunity for trust-building between the parties. In the Andean region of Latin America, a dialogue process between members of civil society in Ecuador and Peru created opportunities for shared analysis and problem-solving in relation to the long-standing border dispute between the two countries. Their work created a foundation of awareness and understanding among the affected communities and contributed to the sustainability of the peace agreement reached between the leaders.

In some situations, civil society actors may also become involved in providing assistance to one of the warring parties, to help them consider the potential benefits of engaging in a peace process and to assist them in their preparations. Where negotiations are taking place between a recognized government and a non-state armed group, there may be particularly compelling reasons for this role; armed groups can often be deterred from the negotiating table because they fear domination by a government with superior resources, negotiating skills and diplomatic support. While it is a delicate and often dangerous role to play, it may result in the greater likelihood of a sustainable and effective commitment to the negotiations by one of the parties. Again, and particularly given the sensitivities surrounding internal conflicts, civic actors are often more able to take up this challenge than governmental or inter-governmental representatives.

3. Monitoring compliance and violations

As well as causing devastating suffering to those affected, the perpetration of human rights violations by any of the parties to the conflict is often cited as the trigger for armed conflict or as a justification for escalating military

engagement. Representatives of governments and armed groups frequently argue that their choice of violence is necessitated by the actions of the other side and that it is the only viable option for protecting “their” populations. Whether unwittingly or quite deliberately, parties often blur the boundaries between civilians and combatants, resulting in the death, forced displacement or mistreatment of civilian populations considered to be associated with the “other side”. These violations further fracture communities, entrench fear and mistrust and deepen the spiral of violence between the parties.

The collation of data on human rights violations is a vital task during armed conflict, and can also make a significant contribution to a peace process. Parties often begin talks without agreeing on a cessation of hostilities, and ongoing violations can therefore constitute one of the primary reasons for distrust between them, and ultimately for the breakdown of negotiations. While reliable and impartial data will not prevent these breakdowns, it is a first step in clarifying responsibilities. It is therefore important that it is seen to come from a reliable and impartial source and it is for this reason that civil society organizations can have a particular role to play. International non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch are credited with providing accurate information on atrocities committed during armed conflict and their work assists in putting pressure on the parties to engage in talks. It is frequently complemented by locally-established human rights organizations who may document violations against their community or even across society more broadly.

This documentation becomes particularly important after the signing of agreements resulting in ceasefire arrangements. Such agreements increasingly contain provision for monitoring, whether by international or national organizations. While this is sometimes conceived as a military mission, there is an increasing number of examples of civilian monitoring missions, including the international Peace Monitoring Group in Bougainville or the indigenous civil society participation in the “local monitoring teams” in the province of Mindanao in the southern Philippines.

Finally, civil society human rights advocates may play a particularly important role in ensuring that peace processes and any political agreements reached address the structural injustices that gave rise to the conflict, as well as advocating accountability of and effective sanctions against perpetrators of violations. By promoting respect for internationally agreed standards, civic actors can help to ensure that peace agreements do not perpetuate injustice, discrimination or a climate of impunity.

4. Participating at the negotiating table

The notion that civil society actors play an active part in the political negotiations to reach peace agreements is still a long way from being an

established norm of peacemaking. As mentioned earlier, the dominant paradigm continues to focus on bringing together the leaders of the combatant parties to reach an agreement able to fulfill their minimum requirements and bring an end to violence. However, in a number of countries, civil society groupings have mobilized to earn themselves an active voice in the negotiations – and made significant contributions to the peace process through their efforts.

One study has identified that there are at least three possible “modes” of civil society participation in peace processes: mechanisms for consultation, representative decision-making and direct participation (Barnes, 2002).

Consultative mechanisms create spaces for non-combatant groups in a society to contribute their views on the substantive issues being discussed in the formal negotiations between the protagonists. In this way, Guatemala’s Grand National Dialogue and Civil Society Assembly were able to identify the root causes of the conflict and propose “consensus” documents on the substantive themes being discussed in the negotiations. In the Philippines, the National Unification Commission created forums at provincial, regional and national level for different social sectors to offer their perspectives on the causes of conflict and possible solutions. In both cases, although the outcomes of these consultations were non-binding on the parties, they made important contributions to national level agreements on the conflict. They also created new spaces for discussion between groups with widely differing expectations and facilitated the involvement of previously marginalized sectors of society.

Representative decision-making mechanisms have offered opportunities for groups with an agreed level of public support to take their place at the negotiating table beside the warring parties. Thus in South Africa and Northern Ireland, the negotiations were designed to convene a broad range of political parties in addition to the active combatants. In Northern Ireland, this arrangement enabled ten political parties, and in particular a group of women called the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition, to have a place at the table and represent the interests and concerns of their constituencies. In South Africa, it brought together a range of smaller political parties alongside the African National Congress and the National Party. The subsequent constitution-making process opened the political process even further, inviting all South Africans to contribute their suggestions on its contents. In divided societies, these mechanisms are essential in creating sufficiently inclusive processes that can be “owned” by a broad cross-section of the population, and thus less vulnerable to sabotage or breakdown.

Finally, “direct participation” mechanisms create spaces where all interested civilians can play a role in reaching political agreements to address violent conflict. For reasons of scale, these mechanisms often take place at a local or regional level to address the particular manifestations of the armed conflict in

the immediate context. When the National Pact failed to bring an end to armed conflict in Mali, local civic leaders worked with an international NGO, Norwegian Church Aid, to facilitate numerous “inter-community” meetings. These meetings convened thousands of people, and led to local level ceasefires, trading agreements and reconciliation processes. The format also facilitated greater participation by women and children, and prevented the domination of proceedings by local politicians.

All of these examples indicate that space can be created for civil society actors to make an active contribution to the political negotiations to reach peace agreements. They also suggest that broader public participation can contribute to widening the agenda of issues debated, ensure greater emphasis on structural causes of the conflict, enable broader ownership of agreements reached and facilitate a degree of political reconciliation between participants – all factors that are likely to contribute positively to the sustainability of the process.

5. Challenges and dilemmas

All the roles identified above present huge challenges and dilemmas to civil society actors. Firstly, there is often considerable danger in undertaking any of them, as promoting, facilitating or participating in peace processes is often not a popular position to take. Governments or armed groups may resent the pressure to negotiate, or consider the pressure tantamount to support for the other side. Public information that deviates from the party-line of one or other group may attract censorship or harassment. People or groups making financial profit from the armed conflict will have a vested interest in its continuation. Radicalized sectors of society may also be reluctant to concede anything to one or other of the warring parties through the inevitable compromise of negotiations. These interests represent considerable practical and political risk to unarmed groups of civilians promoting peace.

Ironically, once the parties do take a decision to engage in talks, these same unarmed groups of civilians may find themselves marginalized from negotiations. The warring parties frequently see themselves as the sole legitimate representatives of “their” people and may be reluctant to concede space or control of the negotiation process to a wider group of participants. The international community of interested governments and multi-lateral actors may compound this marginalization by confining civil society’s role to the “post-conflict peacebuilding” phase – where there is important work to be done, but where the political frameworks have often already been determined.

In addition to these external pressures and constraints, civil society also faces its own internal challenges. The first relates to the heterogeneity of what is termed “civil society”: the diverse array of interests, groupings and agendas that are intrinsic to any large mass of people. Given the devastating effects of

armed conflict on communities, building alliances across political divides and identifying points of minimum consensus can be a delicate task requiring time and a great deal of sensitivity. With the capacity for independent initiative and action, developing a helpful degree of coordination and complementarity between different sectors and initiatives can seem an almost insurmountable challenge.

Ultimately, however, these challenges are matched by the wealth of resources and diversity of skills that civil society actors can bring to bear in peace processes. These capacities help to create the conditions for talks, build confidence between the parties, shape the conduct and content of negotiations and influence the sustainability of peace agreements. By contributing to peace processes in this way, civil society actors also play a part in long-term processes of change in how society deals with conflict, influencing social norms as well as the political culture of conflict resolution.

Key resources

Conciliation Resources' Accord series provides documentation and analysis of peace processes, including consideration of the roles played by civil society actors.

In particular it may be worth consulting the issue on public participation in peacemaking: *Owning the process: public participation in peacemaking*. By Catherine Barnes (ed.) Accord 13. London, Conciliation Resources, 2002. Includes three feature studies of public participation in peacemaking, plus additional articles and a detailed bibliography.

In the middle: non-official mediation in violent situations. By Adam Curle. Leamington Spa: Berg, 1986.

Resource pack for conflict transformation. By Ian Doucet (ed.) London: International Alert, 1996.

People, Peace and Power. Conflict Transformation in Action. By Diana Francis. London: Pluto, 2002.

Reflecting on peace practice project: The Collaborative for Development Action, Inc. CDA organizes and spearheads efforts that focus on the role of third party actors in conflict or post-conflict contexts. Online: www.cdainc.com/index.php Participative Approaches to Peacemaking in the Philippines. By Ed. Garcia. Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1993.

Building Peace Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies. By John Paul Lederach. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1997.

Being in the middle by being at the edge. Sue and Steve Williams. London:

Quaker Peace & Service, in association with William Sessions, York, 1994.

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