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Bottom-up ceasefires and everyday peace

Everyday peace at localised level can disrupt dominant conflict narrative

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Introduction

Most academic and policy discussion of ceasefires concentrates on top-down, formal ceasefires. Such a focus is not surprising. It is often international organisations, states and militaries that have the capacity to call, maintain, and monitor ceasefires (Crocker, Hampson and Aall, 1999). These organisations operate at scale and so the 'prize' of a national ceasefire is very great indeed (Eisikovots, 2016).

But can we conceive of bottom-up ceasefires?. Certainly, there are many examples of highly-localised ceasefires that are not mandated by superior bodies. The World War One Christmas truces on the Western front are but one example of local-level ceasefires whereby troops and local commanders took the initiative to lessen tension – albeit temporarily (Adams 2015). More recently there have been many examples of peace zones (particularly in Latin and Central America) whereby communities have sought to 'step out' of the conflict and make clear that they do not wish to be part of the conflict between the state, militants, and paramilitaries (Hancock 2017). Syria has also seen numerous local ceasefires, whereby communities, civil society, militants, and others have brokered short-term truces, often for humanitarian purposes. There is also enormous work by unarmed civilian protection organisations and personnel who often work under the most trying circumstances to protect civilians in conflict-affected contexts. They might, for example, provide protection to women who need to collect firewood for cooking fires.

In our consideration of bottom-up ceasefires, it is worth taking a step back and examining three factors: the level of analysis that we deploy to examine conflicts; the realisation that people have capacity (often much more capacity than outsiders realise); and, that the everyday and the local can be sites of considerable peace, accommodation, co-existence, and ceasefires.

Level of analysis

Many analyses of conflicts and peacemaking take an institutionalist lens. Thus, they interpret contexts through states, international organisations, political parties, militant groups, INGOs and civil society organisations. All of these institutions are important, especially in their ability to provide security that would then facilitate other initiatives or the provision of public goods.

But the everyday and the local are important as well (Björkdahl, Hall and Svensson, 2019). When we consider our lives, it is important to note that we all live highly-localised lives. None of us have country-wide or indeed city-wide lives. Instead, and this is a point that comes through in research from the Everyday Peace Indicators project (everydaypeaceindicators.org), we tend to live lives that focus on the home, the immediate vicinity of the home, our journey to work or school, and networks linked to caring responsibilities, family, and friendship. Our localism, indeed, our hyper-localism, is important because this is the domain that is most important to us. Not only is this domain important, it is also highly political. While we are used to thinking of states and political parties as being obviously political entities, it is useful to think of the family and friendship network as also being political entities. Most people are politicised through family and friends, and so it is worth building a sociological perspective into our analysis, and taking seriously the everyday, and the local.

People have capacity

A second point to make is that we should not underestimate the capacity held by people and communities in conflict-affected areas. This is not to say that people do not suffer enormous privations and dislocation. It is to take note, however, that individuals, families, and communities often must rely on their own resources, capacities, and capabilities to survive and thrive (Mac Ginty 2021a). Humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development interventions often reach comparatively few people, or reach them in episodic ways. As a result, people cannot afford to wait for assistance; they have to get on with life – getting the kids to school, food on the table, and looking after elderly relatives.

It is worth bearing in mind that power and capacity comes in many forms (Boulding 1990). We are very aware of visible and material power in the form of militaries or intervention by aid agencies. But there are other less visible and immaterial forms of power such as the social capital held by communities, their belief systems, and networks of loyalty and legitimacy. These forms of power and capacity are often informal, traditional, and not particularly visible to outsiders. Yet, it is these forms of power that might be vital in lessening tension and violence, and perhaps making the first moves towards local-level co-existence, accommodation and ceasefires.

It is also important to locate civil society organisations (CSOs) in this schemata of material, and immaterial power. Often CSOs may have both forms of power – visible material power through offices, 4x4s, and funded programmes, and invisible immaterial power through their links with communities and understanding of how the local society works. But it is important to note that civil society organisations are not the same ac civil society. There may, of course, be a substantial overlap between the two but many individuals, families and communities will act on their own without CSOs. CSOs may not be particularly representative, may be too close to governments or outside donors, and run programmes that do not meet the needs or aspirations of locals.

The local and the everyday can be sites of peace

The third point to make is to note the capacity of local communities in their everyday activities to contribute to, and sometimes initiate, forms of conflict reduction and peace. Certainly top-down peace is important. Yet, it often is based on the notion of trickle-down: if top-level peace is made then somehow the benefits will trickle-down to communities. This may happen, or it may not. It depends very much on the ability of individuals and communities to populate this top-down peace with their version of everyday peace. Thus, a top-down ceasefire or peace deal may provide security. It is up to communities to turn a ceasefire into opportunities to re-open markets, travel greater distances, take the risk of sending the kids to school, and engage in cultural activities that had been halted by the conflict.

As noted before, we tend to live our lives at the local and hyper-local levels. It is at these levels that ceasefires and peace accords take root and thrive, or wither. The micro-actions of acknowledging and tolerating members of the other community, or of choosing to ignore provocations, have the capacity to develop into something more meaningful. None of this is to romanticise the local-level. The local can also be a site of exclusion, patriarchy, and violence.

A concluding thought: Everyday peace

Everyday peace can be thought of as the first and last peace. It is the ‘first peace’ in the sense of it may be the small acts of individuals and families at the local level that indicate that a ceasefire is holding or that inter-group toleration is taking root after violent conflict. These small acts may be very minor (a friendly glance, a seemingly inconsequential speech-act) but they may have a demonstration effect and may grow into something more substantial. Everyday peace may also be thought of as the ‘last peace’ in the sense that it may be the last vestiges of inter-group relations (for example, between families of different identities) that survive despite the wider society descending into violence.

Crucially, we need to think of ceasefires and peace as verbs as well as nouns. They are given meaning and character by actions on the ground. Often these actions are small, occur on the margins, and may seem inconsequential. But it is at this level that people live their lives and have capacity to disrupt violent conflict (Mac Ginty 2021b). This disruption may be small scale and it may take subtle forms, but it can spread into something more significant.

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