

Co-creating our future:

Civil society roles in silencing the guns and setting the agenda for more inclusive political settlements

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As Yemenis struggle to end their six-years of war and achieve sustained peace, UN's Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen Martin Griffiths is seeking to facilitate agreement between the Yemeni parties on a nationwide ceasefire, humanitarian and economic relief and a comprehensive and inclusive political negotiation process. While engaging those who are the primary parties in the fighting is essential, they alone are unable to create a path towards a more transformative peace process. Diverse elements of Yemeni society will also need to be actively involved. This paper was intended to spark discussion at a workshop on this challenge. After setting forth several basic orienting points on the centrality of civil society roles in sustainable war-to-peace transitions, this paper then outlines five key challenges where their involvement can be crucial to cultivating transformative peace processes and more inclusive, responsive and capable states.

The first basic orienting point is that in talking about 'civil society,' we are essentially referring to the elements which comprise 'society' as a whole.¹ Therefore, to consider the involvement of civil society in peace processes is to think about how the different constituent elements of 'the public' can be empowered to play a role in shaping the future of their own country.

The second basic point is to understand armed conflicts as a manifestation of underlying dysfunctions within the state, typically due to profound exclusion, systemic inequities, and / or extractive and abusive governance. If negotiations are conceived only as a means to reach agreement on ending the fighting, too often the results are a recycling of power within the same underlying system structures, leaving the causes of conflict largely untouched. While it is typically necessary to initiate negotiations via a framework agreed by the warring factions with the support of their allies, this framework needs to open the pathway to process of renegotiating the political settlement and state structures responsive to the needs of the whole population.²

The third basic point is that, in the medium to long-term, action by the international community is no substitute for locally grounded peacebuilding in creating the conditions for a self-sustaining peace.³ Within all societies exist nascent movements and forces working towards justice and peace. Care is needed not to displace or undermine their role. To avoid dysfunctional dependencies on externally

¹ Every society has its own distinct forms of social organization, cultural and political traditions, as well as contemporary state and economic structures – all of which are central to the development of civil society and shape its specific features. Most broadly understood, however, *civil society* refers to the web of social relations that exist in the space between the state, the market (activities with the aim of extracting profit), and the private life of families and individuals. Source: Catherine Barnes, 'Weaving the Web: Civil Society Roles in Working with Conflict and Building Peace', in Paul van Tongeren, Malin Brenk, Marte Hellema and Juliette Verhoeven (eds), *People Building Peace II: Successful Stories of Civil Society* (Boulder/London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005) pp.7–24.

² Catherine Barnes (ed.) *Owning the process: public participation in peacemaking*, Accord 13 (London, Conciliation Resources 2002); Andy Carl (ed.) *Navigating Inclusion in Peace Processes*, Accord 28 (London, Conciliation Resources 2019);

³ Desirée Nilsson, 'Anchoring the Peace: Civil Society Actors in Peace Accords and Durable Peace,' *International Interactions: Empirical and Theoretical Research in International Relations* 38, no. 2 (2012)

driven missions, the principle of supporting the capacities that exist should be at the core of international mandates and operations.⁴

The question thus becomes how to do all this.

The first challenge involves **the “who and how?” questions**. A key dilemma is that no peace can hold unless the process is able to work through deadlocks to achieve a sustainable powersharing arrangement; and yet to privilege powersharing is often to lock-in the same systemic dysfunctions that gave rise to conflict in the first place because the logic of state capture remains intact.

For a process to create a sustainable path towards a more inclusive, capable and responsive state, painstaking efforts are needed to both keep the powerbrokers on board while also enabling the meaningful and effective involvement of other public interests. Central to this path is women’s meaningful participation and the integration of gender perspectives in the peace process.⁵ This generally requires some form of multi-party negotiations that enable participation of a wider configuration of groups.

In Northern Ireland, the question of who would have a seat at the table was addressed through holding elections to select the parties to negotiations. This mechanism was initially conceived as a means to enable the political parties associated with paramilitary groups – including some considered ‘terrorist’ organizations – to participate in formal political negotiations. When women from across the sectarian divides decided to form a party, they successfully won a place. Throughout the years of talks, the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition maintained open meetings for grassroots input into their negotiating platform and succeeded in getting key issues like victim’s rights into the agreement. They were also critical in mobilizing public support for the agreement, which was subject to ratification through a public referendum.⁶

A second challenge involves **the “about what?” questions**. To renegotiate the political settlement in ways that make it responsive to the needs of the people; it needs to reflect an authentic national agenda. In Guatemala, decades of attempted revolutionary struggle had been widely seen as a local manifestation of Cold War confrontation. When Catholic Church leaders were able to convene a national dialogue bringing together different sectors and identity groups from across the left / right divide, they debated the internal causes of war, some of which were rooted in the 500-year history of colonization. They identified a substantive agenda that ranged from land distribution, to the status of indigenous people, to the role of the military in a democratic society among others. Several years later, sectors involved in the dialogue insisted on a role in the official UN mediated negotiations between the government and the revolutionaries. While the government and UNRG negotiated what were termed the ‘operational’ issues involved in ending the fighting, a consultative Civil Society Forum was given the mandate to formulate consensus positions on six of the seven main topics on the formal ‘substantive’ negotiating agenda. In the end, their recommendations were largely adopted by the negotiators in the final agreement.⁷

The third challenge involves **how to enable the minimum threshold of security needed for peacebuilding to thrive**. As substantive negotiations typically take place over years, there is always the difficulty of creating a sufficient level of public security to support the space for talks of all kinds. While ceasefire mechanisms are typically aimed at addressing the ‘armed conflict writ large’, wars also involve localized dynamics and motivations that perpetuate fighting. In many cases, local civil society

⁴ This point has long been recognized by the UN: “While every post-conflict situation is unique, the United Nations has accumulated a broad range of experience, and we have learned many lessons from supporting dozens of countries emerging from conflict. First and foremost, we know that peacebuilding is a national challenge and responsibility. Only national actors can address their society’s needs and goals in a sustainable way.” – Report of the Secretary-General on Peacebuilding in the Immediate Aftermath of Conflict (2009, 4)

⁵ For more resources, see UN Women’s Digital Library Series on Inclusive Peace Processes <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/12/series-on-inclusive-peace-processes> (accessed 6/16/2021)

⁶ Kate Fearon, “Institutionalizing a political voice & ensuring representation: The Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition” in *Owning the Process: Public Participation in Peacemaking*. ed. Catherine Barnes Accord 13. London: Conciliation Resources. <http://www.c-r.org/accord/peace/accord13/nor.shtml>

⁷ Alvarez, Enrique with Tania Palencia Prado 2002. Guatemala Feature Study in *Owning the Process: Public Participation in Peacemaking*. ed. Catherine Barnes Accord 13. London: Conciliation Resources <https://www.c-r.org/accord/public-participation>

peacemakers are well placed to mediate these localized disputes in ways that can defuse and de-escalate tensions. In the right conditions, they can also play vital roles in monitoring, preventative verification and confidence building. This can create a stronger foundation for national level processes. In some cases, like South Africa, these mechanisms are developed out of a formal peace negotiation. In others, they are more organically initiated by conflict-affected communities, as in Mindanao. While local civil society efforts and mechanisms do not need to be managed or controlled by official ceasefire mechanisms, they should be recognized, encouraged and tacitly supported, potentially through network structures.

In Mindanao, a network of grassroots and regional civil society organizations formed the Bantay Ceasefire movement in 2001⁸ to promote community security through local conflict resolution and ceasefire monitoring.⁹ The network involved members from opposing factions and from all the main groups of the island – Bangsamoro Muslims, Christians and indigenous Lumad peoples. They initiated a series of community dialogues resulting in localities issuing their own ‘declaration of peace’. Communities made commitments to map and mediate communal disputes, meet rehabilitation needs, foster indigenous healing processes, as well as ongoing monitoring to prevent harmful and destabilizing rumors. As a network, they held the conflict parties accountable to the war-affected communities by creating an independent, grassroots, civil society mechanism to monitor the ceasefire between the Philippines military and the MILF. Drawing upon more than 600 volunteers, they formed teams to investigate skirmishes and reported violations. They maintained contact with the official monitors and, as relevant, with military units in the areas under investigation. Their independence, credibility, and good networking skills allowed them to work simultaneously through village power structures, with the Philippines armed forces and the MILF, as well as with churches, NGOs, and government agencies. In the field, teams sought out the widest range of interviews and documentary evidence available, paying special attention to the experiences of civilians and to human rights violations. Their reports were provided to the media, support groups, senior army officials, and the MILF. In addition to their findings, they made specific recommendations for protecting the truce and on ways to ameliorate the effect of army and MILF actions on civilians and they often arranged meetings with these parties to discuss the issues in greater depth.

In contrast to Mindanao’s community led effort, in South Africa the political parties formally negotiated an agreement for whole of society community security mechanisms. The Peace Accord Structures created an architecture at the national, regional, and local levels for involving local people in promoting security locally through systems for dispute resolution and crisis management in their communities. They also served as peace monitors during the innumerable and highly volatile mass marches through which the parties demonstrated their political strength. During the years of Constitutional Negotiations – which periodically broke down for extended periods of time – peacebuilding through the Peace Accord structures helped to promote sufficient stability for the political process to continue. It also laid the groundwork for reforming the police into a community policing structure and for security structure reform more generally.¹⁰

Opening the path to longer-term structural reform leads to the fourth challenge, which concerns **institutional reform and institution building**. Transitional processes generally gain greater public legitimacy when they offer promise of addressing the daily struggles of ordinary people. As durable peace negotiations typically take many years, it is vital to not wait until they are concluded to begin building the basis for more responsive, accountable and capable state structures. It is never too early to begin

⁸ The Bantay Ceasefire mechanism emerged in support of between the Government of the Philippines and the MILF. When fighting resumed in 2008, many members withdrew. They later regrouped to play active roles in civilian protection and then worked cooperatively with the International Monitoring Team when the GRP-MILF agreed a Framework on Civilian Protection in 2009 and the networked mobilized women’s involvement in the peace and security process in line with UNSC1325.

⁹ Nat Colletta, “Citizen Security -The Role of NGOs and Broader Civil Society in Ceasefire Monitoring: Lessons from Mindanao” *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, March 2006, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 21-34; Diomedes Eviota, Jr. 2005. “Grassroots and South-South Cooperation: Bantay Ceasefire in the Philippines” in van Tongeren, et al., *People Building Peace II*, op.cit.; Julius Cesar Trajano, “Bottom-up Peacebuilding: Role of Grassroots and Local Actors in the Mindanao Peace Process” *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* Vol. 8 No. 2 (2020): 357-372

¹⁰ Susan Collin Marks, *Watching the Wind: Conflict Resolution During South Africa’s Transition to Democracy* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2000); Chris Spies, “South Africa’s National Peace Accord: Its structures and functions” in *Owning the Process: Public Participation in Peacemaking*. ed. Catherine Barnes Accord 13. London: Conciliation Resources <https://www.c-r.org/accord/public-participation>

addressing such structural challenges as economic access and inclusion, promoting rule of law and addressing corruption, and providing public safety. While politically and technically challenging, the groundwork for institutional reform can be laid in parallel to political talks, though some reforms are intrinsic to the negotiating agenda. Civil society should play a vital role in these reform processes – whether through policy dialogue and capacity building, on one hand, or more watchdog-type social accountability initiatives on the other.¹¹ Civil society involvement in security sector reform in many West African countries, for example, was significant in helping to lay the groundwork for more accountability post-peace agreements.¹²

Finally, far more encompassing than what happens at the negotiation table, is the challenge of **addressing trauma and healing the soul of the nation**. Here we must lift the roles of artists, healers, spiritual leaders. They can attend to not only the physical but also the moral and psychological wounds of war that trap us into unending cycles of violence. They are likely to be central to transitional justice and reconciliation processes. But, throughout, they are the visionaries who can spark the moral imagination needed to co-create a more just and peaceful society. These are the true resources for transformative peacebuilding within society and should be seen as central forces for change.

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¹¹ See for example: Carmen Malena, Reiner Forster, Janmejaj Singh, *Social accountability: an introduction to the concept and emerging practice*. Social development papers ; no. 76 (Washington, D.C. : World Bank Group, 2004); GSDRC *Accountability and responsiveness of the state and society*. Applied Knowledge Series Topic Guide. <https://gsdrc.org/topic-guides/voice-empowerment-and-accountability/supplements/accountability-and-responsiveness-of-the-state-and-society/>.

¹² Augustin Loada, and Ornella Moderan, *Civil Society Involvement in Security Sector Reform and Governance*, DCAF Geneva Center for Security Sector Governance, 2015.

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