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Navigating inclusion in peace processes

'Dialogue with all stakeholders is needed to end the bloodshed in Kashmir. There is no alternative to peaceful negotiation and mutual understanding other than sitting down at the table to discuss the issues. It remains to be seen whether the process will retain its motion or come to a grinding halt. The hope, however, must survive.'

Shujat Bukhari, the editor of Rising Kashmir wrote this in an Editorial weeks before his assassination when he was shot dead at a market outside his office in June 2018. No group claimed responsibility for the killing.

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Andy Carl



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Civil society inclusion in peacebuilding

Who, how and so what?

Jenny Aulin

In global policy arenas the focus on inclusion in current agendas and strategies for sustaining peace has for many become almost synonymous with civil society participation, often with a focus on women and youth. But exactly whose inclusion are we talking about, and in what kind of peacebuilding?

Beyond the normative acceptance of our basic human rights to participation, freedom of speech and assembly, and the principled support for democratic systems of governance and decision-making, when it comes to tactics and strategies to support inclusion in peace processes, practitioners and policymakers alike often lack clarity and confidence.

To explore this topic with civil society practitioners, in February 2018 the Inclusive Peace & Transition Initiative (IPTI) together with Peace Direct and the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) network launched a global consultation, 'Civil Society & Inclusive Peace'. Through a series of online consultations and workshops, over 170 local and global peacebuilding practitioners and academics from around the world have participated in an ongoing reflection that started with an open query: 'What is inclusion in peacebuilding – do we all mean the same thing?'

By comparing experiences and exploring concepts, this consultation has unpacked assumptions and sought to bring more clarity to what inclusion means in practice for civil society actors' role in peacebuilding. The various perspectives that have emerged can be clustered in three helpful ways:

1. Inclusion as meaningful representation (*who?*)
2. Inclusion as process and influence (*how?*)
3. Inclusive outcomes (*so what?*)

Inclusion as representation: whose voice counts in civil society?

Inclusion in civil society peacebuilding is about the decisions on who should get to have a say in a peace process or a peacebuilding strategy beyond the conflict's most powerful armed actors. The tension around 'whose voice counts' is an ongoing and central dilemma for inclusion in practice. One way to broaden representation in a peace process is through national dialogues, which look to provide more participatory negotiation forums in which different identity groups are directly represented. National dialogues aim for public buy-in and acceptable trade-offs of interests between different groups. However, one persistent risk has been that conflict parties seek to instrumentalise such processes by picking 'their' civil society representatives to participate. A key challenge when looking to enhance participation of particular groups commonly excluded from peace processes, such as conflict-affected and marginalised communities, is that such groups are not homogeneous and rarely have agreed national representation to 'speak with one voice'.

Civil society groups, organised in a variety of forms, often look to function as social conduits for inclusion beyond state-led peace processes. In practice, the ability of local civil society to perform this role is complicated by dynamics within civil society itself, which can include power asymmetries or experiences of trauma, as well as clashing values, interests and conflict narratives. The question of ‘whose voice counts’ in civil society overlaps with perceptions of ‘whose voice is legitimate’, and is debated among civil society and other constituencies through ongoing negotiations on respective visions for peace. The assumptions of international actors on who among civil society is representative or legitimate are also often very influential.

Our consultation brought out a broad view on civil society actors, seen as organised and diverse communities of interests, identity and values, ranging from informal to traditional and local groups, and from broader social movements to formal and professionalised institutions and platforms. Among participants, civil society legitimacy was largely associated with the quality of the relationships that civil society organisations (CSOs) have with the constituencies they claim to represent or know, and their ability to articulate people’s concerns and grievances. Concerns about ‘out-of-touch NGOs’, as perceived by some communities, came out strongly. Participants in the consultation stressed the importance of paying attention to deeply contextual patterns of marginalisation in order to avoid tokenistic and ineffective inclusion (*‘...don’t just “add some women and youth”’*), and of the value of engaging with a diverse political and social spectrum (*‘...not just the liberal-minded groups we agree with’*). The consultation also highlighted as important measures of successful inclusion public perceptions of trust in dialogue and the participants and parties involved, and a sense that people’s priorities have been heard.

Modalities of inclusion: influence in the process?

A key aspect of inclusion is the extent and quality of participation of groups usually excluded from a peace process, and the mechanisms that enable them to influence it. IPTI’s ‘Broadening Participation in Political Negotiations and Implementation’ research identified several ‘modalities of inclusion’ in official peace negotiations. Options for formal and informal civil society engagement include: direct representation at the negotiation table as members of or advisers to the negotiating parties; observer status; consultations; mandated commissions on specific issues; ‘Track 1.5’ problem-solving dialogues and workshops; public decision-making; and mass action.

The research found that more representative forms of civil society participation do not necessarily translate into actual influence over the process. Outcomes of participation are affected by a wide set of factors including elite support or resistance and geopolitical dynamics. Internal process factors cited as being important in supporting or limiting influence included selection procedures and criteria for participation as well as rules for decision-making. External factors included the existence of strong coalitions, public pressure and support structures that enable sustained participation.

Coalitions spanning diverse constituencies, such as women’s coalitions and platforms with representation from different levels of civil society – national, elite, regional, and rural and urban communities – can be instrumental in influencing formal processes. However, civil society coalitions, networks and partnerships are complex. The consultation highlighted that they face a ‘double challenge’ in polarised conflict contexts, of addressing differences and power dynamics within the political process *and* within their own ranks. Participants emphasised the importance of building trust, legitimacy and capacities, enabling mutual learning, and ensuring communication and feedback loops between different civil society arenas.

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Formal peace processes tend to be ‘top-down’, designed by national and international elites who control the time frame, procedures and contents. Participants in the civil society consultation stressed the ‘importance of agency’ – not just being consulted (in ‘invited spaces’), but what civil society can do on its own terms (in ‘claimed spaces’). Processes that emerge from local initiatives in a variety of forms are important complements to formal negotiations. Inclusion strategies can usefully pay attention to ‘channels’ and ‘connectors’ – as identified by ‘CDA Collaborative Learning Projects’ – that can engage, broker and coordinate with bottom-up initiatives.

Analysis of non-violent resistance (NVR), such as that done by the International Centre for Non-Violent Action (ICNC), has much to teach peacebuilders about mass action. NVR theories of change, power analysis tools, protection and movement-building tactics are directly relevant to many civil society ambitions around inclusion, particularly in a global climate of shrinking civic space. Local activists from the Philippines to Colombia have long integrated peace and justice issues into social movements, but the professional sectors that aim to support peace and social justice often work in conceptual and academic silos. This disparity matters, as support by international partners and networks to local actors could be more strategic if they too played a bridging role. Recent efforts to explore integration and complementarities across NVR and peacebuilding, such as ICNC's 'Powering to peace' report, and the 'Synergizing Nonviolent Action and Peacebuilding Action Guide' by the United States Institute of Peace, are starting to address this broader potential.

Inclusion as outcomes: sustainable peace

Beyond formal peace negotiations led by warring parties, peacebuilding CSOs in the consultation highlighted the importance of working to address the structural conditions that enable inclusion in society. They focus on conflict transformation towards building a culture of tolerance, social cohesion and the non-violent prevention of armed conflicts. Some question whether formal peace agreements offer a false promise through the presumption that a meaningful peace can be obtained via elite-driven negotiation. They highlight the importance of work on 'everyday peace' in local communities, such as by local peace committees in Zimbabwe, trauma healing in Bosnia, and peace education in the school curriculum in Côte d'Ivoire. Rather than a 'deal' to be implemented and monitored, these perspectives present a case for investing in formal and informal 'peace infrastructure' that allows for gradual and meaningful change processes.

Inclusion is ultimately about a society's shared vision of positive peace, where people have equal access to resources, services and governance. Peacebuilding

strategies and tactics that seek to address conflict through structural change are long-term undertakings – whether the structures are constitutional or legal frameworks, processes that deal with legacies of the violent past, or new political institutions. As noted by Jonathan Pinckney, the challenge for civil society is to keep social bases mobilised for positive political change throughout periods of transition ('transitional mobilisation') while actively articulating a vision for what lies beyond.

The diversity of civil society constitutes the main challenges *and* opportunities for inclusive peace. Recognising and working with this messy diversity is key to supporting meaningful inclusion and the outcomes that follow. The space and forms in which people self-organise, claim access and hold power-holders and each other to account are in and of themselves an integral part of any peace process. Peace does not trickle down from a formal agreement, but is about meeting the needs and interests that people are able to define and negotiate. This requires both mobilisation and enabling strategies that ultimately can address past, present and potential future grievances, as well as make space for reconciliation over the long term. The questions of *who*, *how*, and *so what* will always have to be asked.

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