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ISSUES BRIEF

Development Assistance Committee (DAC)
Mainstreaming Conflict Prevention

ENGAGING WITH CIVIL SOCIETY[1]

Civil Society can play a crucial role in preventing violent conflict and in building peace. It also has the potential, however, to play a negative role in efforts to establish long-term stability

This issues brief provides an introduction on how international actors can work with civil society to help prevent violent conflict and build peace. It also identifies related challenges. "Civil society" here refers to local civil society in partner countries.

Underlined words are hyperlinks to other topics available at www.oecd.org/dac/conflict/issuesbriefs.

KEY MESSAGES:

■ A strong civil society serves as (i) a "watchdog" – holding authorities accountable for their actions, (ii) a "corrective" – campaigning against abuses of power and for the protection and promotion of Human Rights, (iii) a source of policy advice (e.g. for peace building), and (iv) a facilitator of dialogue and negotiation.

■ Civil society groups can also provide a channel for service delivery where governments are unable or unwilling to provide basic social services. Careful consideration is needed to balance support for this role with aid effectiveness priorities of donor alignment with country-owned development frameworks.

■ Engagement with civil society can range from supporting their provision of basic health and education services to facilitating advocacy roles and their promotion of dialogue (for peaceful dispute resolution, reconciliation etc.).

■ As external actors can positively or negatively affect tensions and conflict dynamics, at a minimum, they must "Do No Harm". Technical and financial support to civil society organisations must, therefore, be informed by a solid understanding of the local context and the different types of organisations (e.g. beyond those "approved" by the state). It must identify those that genuinely focus on improving the human security of the poor, and may require a more hands-on approach to programming.

■ Coordination with other local and international actors is essential to avoid duplication and to concentrate efforts.

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[1] The drafting of this issues brief was led by the Norwegian Agency for Development Co-operation (Norad).

Civil society groups have the potential to play vital roles as well as to have negative impacts.

INTRODUCTION

In conflict prone or conflict affected contexts, the composition of "civil society" varies greatly in size and the functions it performs. In any given setting, there is potential for it to play vital roles in preventing, mitigating and resolving violent conflict.[2] It can also be a vital force in post-conflict reconstruction. Civil society can, however, also have negative impacts on the dynamics of conflict and peace and on long-term development prospects. These risks must be taken into account in designing and implementing civil society programmes. In addition, external actors must take care not to undermine or disrupt the work of local organisations and groups.

KEY ISSUES

Civil society can be defined as the political space between the individual and the government, expressed by membership of NGOs, social groups, associations and other organisations and networks. These vary in size and in the degree to which they are inter-related. They may, among other activities, advocate political positions on behalf of their members. This includes faith-based organisations. However, it should be noted that the demarcation between religious leadership, social welfare and political advocacy roles of faith-based organisations may be less distinct in some countries.

Civil society can play positive roles in conflict-prone and conflict-affected settings

They have valuable local knowledge, access and, often, influence,

Civil society organisations perform multiple and vital functions in conflict-prone and conflict-affected situations and can play an equally essential role in building and sustaining peace. With their understanding of, and links to, communities, civil society organisations have a valuable knowledge of the local context and sensitivity to the needs of local populations and cultural norms. These are critical to the success of development efforts. In many cases, civil society groups may have access to, or influence over, important actors and groups where external organisations (e.g. donors) do not, and cannot – even in the most unstable and violent settings. Even apparently weak civil societies may hold considerable potential to be an important force for peace, such as:

...and can be forces for peace in a number of ways.

- By monitoring abuses of power, human rights violations, small arms issues etc., and by increasing public awareness of these issues through advocacy, civil society may serve to constrain the use of violence and promote responsive accountable governance, justice and respect for human rights. It can check the power of the state and private sector– playing a type of "watchdog" role.

- Autonomy from government interests can mean it serves as the locus for promoting democratic change (including SSR). It can perform vital roles in helping promote and develop pro-poor policies. By facilitating dialogue and arenas for peaceful negotiation and dispute resolution, civil society can mobilise communities and enable vulnerable and/or marginalised groups (e.g. women, youth, indigenous groups etc.) to access these mechanisms. This serves to build understanding and confidence.

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[2] Conflicts are an unavoidable part of processes of social change in all societies. This issues brief deals with violent conflict but, from here on, uses "conflict" as shorthand for it.

Experience of Teachers' Association in Kissaco, Angola

The teachers' association of Kissaco was created in 2001 as the population started returning after the normalisation of the politico-military instabilities in the zones around the city of Malanje. The idea came from a group of teachers suffering delayed salary payment, seeking alternative revenues through a collective cassava lot. An initial fund was mobilised to rent a tractor to prepare the 25 hectares. The harvest was then sold and the lot increased. Today the association has 22 members paying $6 a month, and the association has a capital of $3,000, principally used for working the land. The income from the produce provides a certain security for the teachers.

In addition, the association is involved in the community, and negotiated with the government to mobilise resources for the construction of teachers' quarters, which were financed by the Eduardo dos Santos Foundation, FESA (Fundação Eduardo dos Santos), as well as for school material from UNICEF. The association further plans to expand the school-building and works to mobilise the parent-teacher association. One of the members of the associations also works as an advisor to the soba (chief).

Source: "Engaging with Civil Society Organisations in Conflict-Affected and Fragile States." The World Bank, 2005.[3]

- When government capacity or will does not exist to provide basic social services, international actors can work with local CSOs in delivering basic services and development assistance (e.g. to refugees and other displaced persons, etc.). This may, however, have negative consequences on state capacity-building priorities[4] (see below).

- Civil society may also play a central role in peace processes, as in the Guatemalan peace talks during the 1990s. Civil society groups can help pressure belligerents, increase popular understanding and support for the peace process, facilitate and increase the voice of women and other vulnerable groups, and ensure that peace accords are respected by the parties.

- In a post-conflict peace-building situation, civil society has a heightened potential to promote peace-building initiatives in communities through actions such as reconciliation, mine action etc. In the post-conflict space, it may also have greater importance as a corrective to political and military elites, and in its advocacy of better governance, the protection of the environment and even constitutional change.

- National and regional civil society groups and networks are also important in monitoring tensions and providing early warning of the risks of an outbreak and recurrence of conflict.

- Northern NGOs can play an important support role in promoting and strengthening civil society in the South, for example, through the provision of technical and financial support that may contribute to competence and capacity building. Importantly, engagement with Northern NGOs may also provide moral support, protection and security.

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[3] See "People Building Peace II", published by the European Centre for Conflict Prevention (2005), which illustrates that peace-building from below – by civil society actors – works, and offers ideas on what civil society can do to help build peace, and how effective partnerships with government and international organisations can be forged.
[4] The DAC Fragile States Group is developing guidance on Service Delivery in Fragile States in the context of overall state-building objectives.

…but there is potential for civil society to play negative roles

Civil society is a product of the society in which it grows and functions, reflecting some or all of the systemic problems and strengths in the society as a whole. There is potential, therefore, for it to be a negative actor and an active "spoiler" in peace processes. For instance, civil society groups participated in promoting hate propaganda that contributed to the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. There is also a risk that some of them might be or become involved in the illicit economic activities such as the exploitation of natural resources and/or in illegal arms trade. Civil society can also play an inadvertent part in driving and fuelling conflict. It is therefore essential that engagement with civil society is based on a contextual analysis, identifying the various types of civil society and their strengths and weaknesses, as well as how they fit into the context of power-relations[5], institutions[6] and cultures.

Knowledge of the context can help ensure that negative roles are avoided.

Negative impacts of conflict on civil society

Instability and conflict can severely impede the ability of civil society to bridge various societal groups and carry out its key functions. They can prevent access to or degrade vital resources, threaten livelihoods, and weaken the social fabric. They can also force people from their homes and land, and can splinter communities. In some cases during conflict, the increased importance of traditional local and/or family-based networks, possibly essential in securing survival, undermines the more inclusive forms of association that are defined less by tribal or ethnic ties. This can contribute to an increased polarisation of society. (The inter-relationship between these groups and engagement with them is highly complex and will pose particular challenges for programming).

Violent conflict can also restrain opportunities for civil society to interact constructively with the state and market actors. The state, which normally defines much of the framework in which civil society functions, may fully or partly break down during conflict, and/or may become more authoritarian. Restrictions on civil and political rights, in particular the right to free association or free political expression, can serve to weaken civil society. Moreover, in regions of latent or manifest violence, actors within civil society may be inhibited from playing a peace-building role by intimidation and attack. Information and communication networks may be especially vulnerable.

In conflict-prone and conflict-affected contexts, violence, intimidation and oppression may inhibit civil society actors from playing their peace-building roles.

However, although the vitality of civil society may be strongly affected by instability, violence and government oppression, it is nevertheless resilient. New or stronger structures can emerge and can be reinforced through alliances with other civil society groups.

KEY QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN GETTING INVOLVED

Drawing on conflict analysis[7], specific questions might include:

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[5] The DAC GOVNET Network on Governance is looking at political economy analysis to identify good practices in using the different approaches such as drivers-of-change analysis (see http://www.oecd.org/dac/governance).

[6] Agency publications on other political and governance issues are provided on the DAC's CPDC webpage "More about CPDC work" (go to http://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict/gov).

[7] Example agency guidance on conflict analysis is provided on the CPDC webpage "More about CPDC work" at www.oecd.org/dac/conflict/analysis. See also the site www.conflictsensitivity.org.

- What impacts do certain civil society groups have on situations of instability and conflict? To what extent can civil society be associated with them?

- What impacts has instability and war had on civil society?

- What characterizes the political and legal framework in which civil society operates?

- In what ways are conflicts experienced and responded to by men and women, including older people, and how does this influence the peace efforts of civil society?

- How are children, both boys and girls, affected by the conflict, and how can they be included in the peace-building process?

- Who are possible agents of change within civil society? What are their key sources of influence?

- How should external actors select civil society partners? On what criteria?

- What can be done to strengthen the role of peace constituencies in society?

- Is there primarily a need for financial or institutional support to civil society, or both?

- What institutional mechanisms for interacting with civil society exist?

- What activities can be used as vehicles for engaging with civil society?

- How can participatory approaches be used to ensure that civil society is engaged?

- Are there any potential risks involved in interacting with certain groups in civil society?

- What is the likely impact of donor involvement/assistance on local conflict dynamics? How can negative impacts be avoided or, at least, minimised?

- Can we intervene without endangering the members of civil society? (In particular in situations of violent conflict and human rights abuses.)

- Are there signals of contextual changes that might affect the ability of partners or stakeholders to undertake their activities?

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

Supporting Civil Society

The positive roles of civil society can be supported in a number of ways.

External support for civil society must be designed and implemented in the light of a contextual analysis and the careful selection of civil society partners.[8] It must keep in perspective what civil society organisations can do, and needs to be measured and appropriate in terms of its form and scope. Careful attention should be given to the risks that may arise as a result of, for example, external assistance, either directly or due to the increased presence of Northern NGOs (see below). In some cases, also, donors have failed to be properly informed of what activities already exist before initiating programmes.

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[8] "Experiences from the Field: UNDP-CSO (2005), Partnerships for Conflict Prevention" UNDP.

Conflict prevention and peace-building goals can be assisted by using and reinforcing the positive roles that can be played by civil society. While remaining sensitive to potential risks, this may involve:

- Providing financial support and capacity-building assistance.

- Including civil society in dialogues on what needs to be prioritised, timing, and channels and division of responsibilities.

- Improving the institutional framework for civil society, including laws and regulations, administrative structures and political modalities.

- Facilitating linkages among "peace constituencies" – individuals and groups that are willing to work against cultures of violence, to help establish mechanisms for peace and to reconcile group interests over the longer term. These "peace constituencies" may include governmental, civil society and private-sector actors (locally, regionally and internationally).

Assistance must integrate a gender equality perspective and ensure the participation of women.

In particular, it should be noted that women and men experience and respond to conflict in different ways. A gender-equality perspective and the participation of women and girls in conflict resolution and peace-building efforts, such as through women's groups, is recognised to be key to their success.[9]

In many societies, village elders play vital roles as mediators and conflict managers that should be supported and/or strengthened.

Given the impact of conflict on children and youth (and the participation of some as child soldiers), it is also essential to recognize these effects as well as their role as agents of change, and their participation in peace-building processes.

Network-building can help sustain and reinforce initiatives and strengthen civil society capacity.

- Network building is a key to reinforcing, sustaining and replicating peace-building initiatives and to strengthening civil society capacity. It can also help protect civil society from hostile groups and individuals. Accommodating civil-society actors that have contributed negatively in conflict situations may prove particularly important in the long term.

Addressing associated challenges

Strategies for civil society support need to take into account that:

- Although civil society groups play a vital function in representing different interest groups, heightened tensions, oppression and increased levels of violence can result when they confront resistance or inadequate accommodation processes.

- External engagement may weaken the local legitimacy and effectiveness of civil society, as civil society adapts to the requirements of, and becomes dependent on, external actors. Support might provoke local distrust or reactions that may exacerbate tensions. Development agencies need to be alert to the risk that their support for particular social institutions and authorities can be misrepresented and misunderstood.

- The arrival of external NGOs may inadvertently lead to the

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[9] See tipsheets on participation and governance produced by the DAC Network on Gender Equality (www.oecd.org/dac/gender).

Support must also guard against certain risks and pitfalls...

diversion of funds and capacity from local groups.

- Some traditional groups may be elitist and oppressive; some NGOs or other local groups may be instruments of contending factions. These alternative or supplementary peace-building agents should be subject to the same scrutiny that the work of other "partner" institutions typically receives.

- Civil society's role as a watchdog and service deliverer may lead to contradictory expectations. Its role in influencing state action and political processes, and in serving as a corrective and complement to market economies, implies that it should not be seen first and foremost as a channel for emergency and development assistance.

- Although civil society might be crucial as a channel for service-delivery in a transition phase, when state capacities are weak, it is important to be aware that civil society playing a major role as a service deliverer might reinforce difficulties in establishing state legitimacy.

Checklist of key points

While no single formula can guarantee success in engaging with civil society, several elements can be identified.

Programme planning and coordination:

✔ Civil society programmes should be rooted in a firm analysis of the context and the role and position of civil-society groups in it. Participatory methodologies are helpful in identifying various sources of demand and community priorities.

✔ Support to civil society requires a long-term perspective in programme planning, particularly when civil society is weak or dormant. In times of conflict, it may be instrumental to build local capacity for future long-term development.

✔ Not all civil society organisations have the ability to positively influence a conflict-prone or conflict-affected situation. Any decision by external actors to engage with a civil organisation should be based on a careful assessment of its strengths and weaknesses and its ability to make a positive change.

✔ Support to civil society should be in coordination with overarching national or donor plans where these exist. Multilateral institutions such as the UN and World Bank are often central in coordinating support.

✔ Any support to civil society must be based on a conflict-sensitive approach[10], with the principle of "Do No Harm" as a minimum. Risks can be reduced through needs assessments and sustainability and feasibility studies.

Implementation:

✔ It is important to engage with a variety of civil society organisations, including women's organisations and other marginalized groups.

✔ Encouraging multiple sources of support for civil society groups is advisable in order to ensure independence and sustainability.

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[10] See the resource pack produced by a consortium of NGOs, "Conflict-sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding" (at http://www.conflictsensitivity.org/resource_pack.html..

Monitoring and evaluation:

✓ Continuous and sustained monitoring is particularly important in conflict-prone and conflict-affected situations. Changes occur rapidly, requiring frequent adjustment to support measures.

✓ The evaluation of support to civil society in conflict-prone and conflict-affected contexts will help in learning lessons.[11]

FURTHER INFORMATION

Websites and reference documents can be found through www.oecd.org/dac/conflict/themes.

- International Peace Research Institute Oslo (2004): "Beyond Blueprints. Civil Society and Peacebuilding".

- Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2004), "Peacebuilding – a Development Perspective".

- Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (2004): "How to Conduct a Conflict Analysis – Conflict-sensitive Development Co-operation" (www.sida.se).

- OECD/DAC (2001) "*Helping Prevent Violent Conflict*", particularly Part II, chapter IV: "Foundations for Peace-building: Good Governance and Civil Society".

- OECD/DAC (1998) "Post-Conflict Initiatives and Equality between Women and Men", Gendernet tipsheet.

- Anderson, M. B. (1999), "*Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace — Or War*", Lynne Rienner Publishers.

- Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict Website, "The Role of Civil Society in the Prevention of Armed Conflict".

- UN (2004), "Civil Society Relations", Report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations.

- UNDP Website on civil society organisations (CSOs).

- UNHCR, UNESCO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and UNIFEM (1998) "Best Practices in Peacebuilding and Non-Violent Conflict Resolution: Some Documented African Women's Peace Initiatives".

- Van Tongeren, P., M. Brenk, M. Hellema and J. Verhoven (2005), "*People Building Peace II: Successful Stories of Civil Society*", European Centre for Conflict Prevention/Lynne Rienner Publishers, Utrecht, Netherlands.

- World Bank (2005) "Engaging Civil Society Organizations in Conflict-Affected and Fragile States – Three African Country Case Studies".

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[11] The CPDC in 2005 and 2006 is working with the DAC Network on Development Evaluation to review the substantive findings from recent evaluations of conflict prevention and peace-building activities, as well as their methodological aspects. It aims to improve practice in this area. (See www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation).