Civil Society & Inclusive Peace

Executive Summary

Key insights and lessons from a global consultation convened on Peace Insight
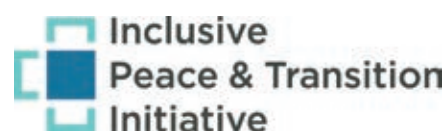
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peace direct

Inclusive peace, or the idea that all stakeholders in a society should have a role in defining and shaping peace, is now a widely accepted theoretical priority for policymakers and practitioners. But in reality it has proven extremely difficult to achieve.

A long roster of actors play key roles in facilitating—or hindering—these efforts, from the UN and other multilateral organisations to national governments, armed actors, international donors and more. Civil society groups play a critical role in contributing to inclusion. Drawing on two online consultations with local and international civil society peacebuilders from across the world, this report shares key insights to enrich the pursuit of inclusive peace.

The goal of the "Civil Society & Inclusive Peace" consultations was to unpack different perspectives on civil society's role in building inclusive peace and to identify key barriers and challenges they face in the process. The result was a robust discussion that demonstrated the broad, dynamic nature of civil society peacebuilders. The insights generated from these conversations can inform practical decision-making across a range of actors and sectors.

Unfortunately, structural, process and internal challenges too often limit the capacity of civil society to achieve their intended impact. These challenges have been magnified in recent years by the shrinking space for civil society in many countries across the globe. The scale of this threat is perhaps best

captured by the fact that, for some participants in these consultations, the limit of their current ambition is to ensure the mere survival of civil society as an independent force.

Given these challenges, the online consultations identified a range of strategies for advancing inclusive peace. These range from non-violent resistance and mobilisation to direct representation in formal negotiations. They also include strategies focused on root causes of conflict, such as facilitated dialogue, bridging divides between groups and addressing structural inequalities that contribute to conflict in the first place.

Choosing which peacebuilding strategies to pursue requires both self-assessment and a deep understanding of context. The latter, of course, is the core value added by civil society: groups that operate close to, or within, affected communities bring to the table a deep understanding of those communities' insecurities, needs, and wants. Policymakers, donors and other national and international actors would do well to recognise that inclusion of these groups is not simply a tick box exercise, but a prerequisite of sustainable peace.

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About Peace Direct
Peace Direct works with local people to stop violence and build sustainable peace. We believe that local people should lead all peacebuilding efforts, and this report is the latest in a series canvassing local views on violent conflicts around the world in an effort to highlight local capacities for peace and local expertise.

Key insights

Peace Direct, the Inclusive Peace & Transition Initiative (IPTI) and the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) convened two related online consultations in 2018. Participants were invited to contribute to a series of online, text-based discussions over the course of two to three days. Across the two consultations, 174 participants took part from 54 countries. This report summarises the key themes of the consultations. Analysis was conducted by first grouping participant responses according to the extent to which they agreed, disagreed or offered new insights. Themes and issues that had not been posed in the framing text or questions, but had emerged during the discussions between participants, are also included here.

The main insights are summarised below:

- **Creating a shared definition of terms like "civil society," "peacebuilding" and "inclusion" is not always possible—but being explicit about different actors' understanding of these terms can help lead to more tangible progress towards inclusive peace.** Donor and multilateral organisations, in particular, need to be cautious about how to identify civil society groups, as doing so can unintentionally reinforce power dynamics and marginalisation.

- **For many civil society actors, "inclusion" in peacebuilding is often experienced as a box-ticking exercise.** Meaningful inclusion requires robust stakeholder analysis and the conditions to engage and influence a process on fair terms.

- **Civil society continues to face barriers to inclusion in formal processes.** While civil society often finds opportunities to lead informal mechanisms, space needs to be found for both—and for bridging the two.

- **The diversity and breadth of civil society is both a challenge and an opportunity for peace processes.** While the role of civil society in peacebuilding depends on a number of variables, including context and stage of conflict, civil society organisations give decision makers access to diverse constituencies whose expectations can be difficult to manage. But civil society dialogues at different levels also make for more tools in the peacebuilding toolbox, as well as options that may be "outside the box."

- **There can be a "lack of capacity" on the part of international actors.** The issue of "lack of capacity" is often discussed in relation to civil society, but it is important to recognise that the challenges involved in working with diverse civil society also require capacity on the part of state-led process conveners, international partners and donors.

- **The shrinking political space in many countries is a huge barrier to civil society's work on inclusive peace.** What's more, civil society actors struggle to adapt strategies to this challenge.

- **Donor priorities are a common factor driving programmatic change.** Funding dependency, restrictive donor requirements, including prescriptive timeframes and approaches, were identified as a key barrier for civil society innovation.

- **Civil society faces its own critical internal challenges:** fragmentation, elitism, political agendas and more. This points to an urgent need to build spaces for self-reflection and learning.

Recommendations

Drawing on the key insights from these two consultations, Peace Direct developed the following recommendations aimed at international donors and other actors responsible for crucial decisions related to the makeup, funding and implementation of peacebuilding efforts.

- **To secure meaningful inclusion, decision makers should undertake broad stakeholder analyses that respect the interests of all affected groups or communities**. Those in charge of convening or funding peace processes should take responsibility for ensuring that the people invited are actually connected to the groups they claim to represent.

- **Civil society should be allowed agency to influence all stages of peace processes**. In addition to formal representation, decision makers should open channels of communication with those who are not at the table to give them the chance to input into the negotiations.

- **Given the shrinking space for civil society in countries worldwide, international donors and multilateral organisations should, where possible, apply pressure on states** that continue to limit free expression by civil society.

- **Donors should incorporate unrestricted funds that can support grassroots and more informal civil society actors**. Instead of relying solely on a limited roster of professionalised NGOs, peacebuilding donors could make efforts to include informal actors without forcing them to conform to a particular concept of civil society grantees.

- **Decision makers and international donors should support accountability mechanisms and promote community mobilisation around peace implementation**. Given that peace and conflict are not linear, support for civil society initiatives must not stop at the moment when peace accords are signed.

- **The civil society peacebuilding community needs to address internal barriers by building space for reflection and learning**. For example, civil society can build partnerships with academic institutions to help capture evidence of impact; prioritise internal strategy sessions during programme implementation; work with expert facilitators; and experiment with technology and writing tools to support reflection. Well-facilitated reflection spaces that pay attention to power, diversity and solidarity amongst civil society peers are equally crucial to collective impact.

These consultations made clear that meaningful inclusion remains more an aspiration than a reality, not only in relation to peace processes but even within civil society itself. Only by acknowledging these barriers, and pinpointing potential strategies to overcome them, can we begin to address the complexity of meaningful inclusion. This reflection and adaptation is critical, since ultimately meaningful inclusion can improve chances for more comprehensive, sustainable peace.