

**Public Forum on Armed Groups in Peace Processes:  
Challenges, Constraints and the Role of Citizens  
UP, 23<sup>RD</sup> September 2005**

**Notes from a presentation by Celia McKeon**

**Opening remarks**

- We need to start a discussion on this topic with a recognition that the case for engagement with armed groups has not been conclusively made, particularly in the global context of the 'war on terror', which prioritizes military responses to non-state armed groups.
- In relation to this overall point, there is a further case to be made regarding the importance and value of civil society engagement with armed groups.
- There is slow recognition of the importance of multi-level processes for dealing with internal armed conflicts; at the same time however resistance to opening up the negotiation process remains real, as the warring parties fear a loss of control.
- Before focusing on challenges and constraints, this presentation will identify three areas in which civil society can play an important role in engagement efforts. These areas fall within the early 'phases' of a peace process, namely those moments leading up to and including formal negotiations. There are obviously other roles which can be played at other moments.

**1. Conciliation**

Civil society groups playing 3<sup>rd</sup> party roles can operate with a relatively low profile; this can create opportunities for them to play a role which is difficult for foreign intermediaries who are concerned with conferring legitimacy. Unlike government officials who have a position on the outcomes of any negotiation, groups and individuals from civil society have different interests in relation to any ultimate outcomes of talks, and may be able to focus their role on creating space for dialogue.

Civil society can act as a 'translator of meanings' between the parties. Part of this task involves promoting understanding of armed groups, whose activities, motivations and positions can sometimes be difficult for outsiders to understand. One of the authors of *Accord*, Alastair Crooke uses this expression frequently to describe his work in promoting dialogue between Islamist groups and political decision-makers in Europe and the USA. In their article on 'understanding armed groups', Sue Williams and Robert Ricigliano argue that for armed groups themselves, dealing with 3<sup>rd</sup> parties from civil society may be one of the first times that armed groups articulate their interests to people who are neither supporters nor opponents.

Third parties can also offer advice on an armed group's strategic options, as currently seen in efforts undertaken by a 5-person facilitation team in Colombia, who are working with the ELN on options for a 'multi-lateral peace process'.

Intermediaries can also keep channels of dialogue open during phases of 'hot' conflict. As Julian Hottinger points out in his article, intermediaries be available to armed groups when formal negotiations break down,

“letting them know that when they want to sit down and talk, there are organizations willing to assist”.

Finally, civic groups may be particularly well-placed to facilitate negotiations on humanitarian issues, even though this may be an area where they are advocating certain outcomes or representing particular public interests. In his interview for Accord, Terry Waite describes his ability to find common humanitarian ground with a hostage-taking group in Lebanon who were concerned about colleagues of theirs in jail in Kuwait:

“I said I had no power at all to spring people from jail, but as a humanitarian I believed that all people detained by legal process are entitled to fair treatment”.

In Colombia, the Colombian Campaign to Ban Landmines and Geneva Call managed to engage the ELN in a process of exploring a limited mine-ban, in a context of stand-off between the ELN and the Government on negotiations on other issues. They observe that

“Discussing a concrete and tangible topic such as landmines could open up new possibilities for dialogue... because the acute need for solutions to the humanitarian issue posed by mines seems to be accepted by both sides.”

## **2. Advocacy**

Civil society groups can assist in articulating the substance of agenda issues for negotiations, drawing in a broad range of public opinion so as to indicate to the parties the parameters of acceptable settlement options.

In Guatemala, the Commission for National Reconciliation convened consultations between the URNG guerrilla group and different sectors of civil society. The ‘Oslo consultations’ led to the clarification of key themes to be addressed in future formal negotiations, and highlighted the particular interests of the different sectors. The statements issued from these meetings later fed into the formulation of the negotiating agenda, and into the structure of the Civil Society Assembly, a forum which developed and articulated consensus positions from civil society, feeding them into the formal talks process.

In Northern Ireland, the ‘peace polls’ carried out by a number of academics prior to the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998 helped to record public opinion on key substantive issues in the negotiations and assisted the participants in the multi-party talks in defining the contents of an acceptable settlement.

In the Philippines, the participation of large numbers of the population in the National Unification Commission, with its consultations at provincial and regional levels, fed into the drafting of a peace policy which took on board society’s views on the causes and possible responses to the armed conflict.

In this way, civil society can be a 'barometer' of public opinion regarding the acceptability of an armed group's demands.

Another dimension to advocacy work – which we are short on time for discussing further - is in promoting or demanding accountability from armed groups regarding human rights violations, as Sulong CAHRIHL exemplifies.

### **3. Civil society participation in formal negotiations**

Opportunities to participate in formal political negotiations enable civil society to engage with all the parties to the conflict as well as to participate in their own right. Arguably such participation can create the opportunity for a specific role to be played in relation to armed groups.

Francis Fortune and Rashid Sandi document in *Accord* how civic organizations were able to play a supporting role to the RUF during negotiations with the Sierra Leone government. In particular they were able to draw on informal ties between RUF delegates and members of civil society to build confidence with the group, and urge them to continue to engage in the process. It should be noted that the civic organizations were only accorded observer status at these talks.

In Northern Ireland, the Women's Coalition were more successful in securing places as participants at the negotiating table. Once there, they were able to represent the perspectives of their members and electors in the substantive negotiations. However, perhaps one of their most important functions was their ability to be attentive to the concerns of the armed groups' constituencies, at a time when the representatives of these groups were thinking about political portfolios in the new governance system. The suggestions made by the Women's Coalition on issues such as victims' rights and reconciliation were incorporated into the peace agreement, and their inclusion later proved crucial in efforts to secure popular support for the agreement in the subsequent referendum.

### **4. Challenges along the way**

Having highlighted the various roles that civil society actors can play regarding armed groups' engagement in peace processes, it is also important to highlight the difficulties. I would suggest there are both internal and external challenges to take into account:

Internal challenges include the tensions and divisions that exist within civil society, which is a complicated and enormously diverse phenomenon. This diversity of viewpoints can have an impact on the ability to develop successful advocacy strategies.

A second internal challenge relates to the non-compatibility of the different roles outlined above. Actors who wish to play conciliation roles limit their scope to act as advocates on substantive issues or to demand accountability for violations by armed groups. Humanitarian issues may provide some space for advocates to become facilitators of dialogue, but as parties with a clearly defined interest in the outcomes

of any negotiations, the impact on the scope of possible conciliation activities needs to be clearly thought-through.

However, perhaps the most difficult challenges for civil society actors to deal with relate to the external environment. Firstly there is great vulnerability to the other parties' preferences for the use of military might to force change in the desired direction. When armed groups and governments pursue simultaneous 'peace and war' strategies, there is a danger that civic groups are co-opted within a wider agenda of one of the parties.

This relates to a second concern, namely the struggle for security and space to operate. This is particularly true when the parties don't acknowledge the existence of any middle ground ('you are either with us or against us'). This is a problem common to many internal armed conflicts, and it is also a global problem in the context of the 'war on terror'.

Finally, as peace processes become increasingly internationalized, civil society groups face the risk of being sidelined by external actors who are perceived as having greater prestige, resources or power to play third-party roles.

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