Reflection I: Civil society and inclusive peace: A reality check

By Thania Paffenholz

Inclusion is a hot political topic: we have never had a more conducive set of normative frameworks that all highlight the importance of civil society inclusion. These include the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals – in particular Goal 16 – the sustaining peace and prevention agenda, the work on UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and UNSC Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security, as well as the new state-of-play prevention report by the World Bank and the UN on Pathways for Peace. All of these state that without inclusion there is no prevention of violence, there is no peacebuilding, there is no sustainable political system.

However, what does inclusion mean? Who should be included into what? And what does this all mean for civil society in peacebuilding? Is the current noise about inclusion a policy debate that misunderstands realities? Does it simply pay lip service to an idea and should we simply dismiss it? Or is it a chance to move peacebuilding by civil society forward? If so, is civil society ready to make the most of this opportunity and really take peacebuilding forward?

My impression – from many years of studying civil society in peacebuilding realities around the world and being involved in all levels of practice of peacemaking and peacebuilding – is that the inclusion hype is a good and necessary policy discourse, but that it is not sufficiently embedded in the realities of civil society in conflict countries. Nonetheless, it is a unique opportunity that civil society should grasp – but the question is whether it is ready to. Let me elaborate:

What's new in the inclusion hype?

Although a focus on the interdependence of peace and development is not new, the novel approach of recent normative frameworks lies in a vision of prevention and peacebuilding as a holistic concept that identifies exclusion, inequality, and power imbalances as principal causes of conflict and violence. This marks a clear break with past approaches, bringing inclusion to the fore. The agenda is fundamentally political, not technical, and therefore has much greater potential to bridge the gap between policy frameworks and implementation.

So where is the problem?

My concerns relate to the effect of this paradigm shift on the attitude and activity of the international community and on the behavior of civil society towards it.

This new agenda could prove to be transformative, but there is quite a way for the UN, member states, and civil society to go. So far, at the top international level of mediation and peacebuilding, it has been business-as-usual with only slight adaptations.

Mediators and parties to the conflict in many current high-level mediation processes, from Syria to Yemen or Libya are making an effort to include civil society, in particular women. This is often done by putting a few individuals - or sometimes organizations - from civil society into advisory or consultative bodies that are loosely or sometimes formally attached to the negotiations. Often, these bodies then develop their own life, and become disconnected from the peace talks, and end up having little to no influence. Interestingly, civil society often seems happy to receive this recognition, and does not push sufficiently for real inclusion at the negotiation table.

Mediators' increased focus on inclusion seems to have resulted in less energy to organize on the part of civil society. Civil society has less momentum to take action to influence the talks, focusing more on the peace talks themselves, and on training to be fit for the eventual invitation for inclusion. It also creates business opportunities for peacebuilding NGOs to support inclusion without being political.

Today, many peace talks are stalled. While the formal inclusion debate and the training continue, there is not enough discussion about what civil society can do to push forward negotiations or contribute to sustaining peace in the meantime.

Where to go from here?

I see a risk that inclusion could be used to "tame" social and political movements. Civil society organizations have to start reflecting on how they can use the political momentum for inclusion without becoming coopted into this business-as-usual with slight adaptations. Inclusion is highly political, and must be treated politically. Civil society can be proud of its achievements in peacebuilding and should not shy away from being proactive and political both in international advocacy and in the field as agents of change.
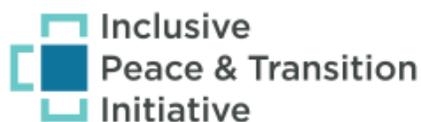
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