
Reflection II: What civil society restrictions can teach us about inclusion

By Hannah Tsadik, Life & Peace Institute



Working for the past ten years supporting civil society peacebuilding in the Horn of Africa has afforded me and the organization that I work for, the Life & Peace Institute (LPI), opportunities to think about the nature and space of civil society engagement for peace. Some of our most helpful, hard-earned and often surprisingly fundamental lessons about inclusion have not been learnt where civil society was thriving but rather in contexts often described as “closed, narrow or restricted” – a challenging reality across the world, and **reportedly on the rise**. Let me briefly share one of those lessons and what I think it could mean for the “reality check” on civil society and inclusive peace.

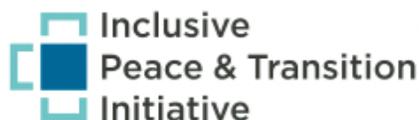
An unintended positive consequence of working in ‘small civil society space’ is that it forces you as a practitioner to reflect more deeply and deliberately on the context and actors, as navigating it poorly often has very direct, dire consequences for peacebuilding. ‘Small space’ challenges us to put our ready-made interventions and assumptions aside on what and who works for peace, as often only highly nuanced, tailored and strategic modes of engagement will survive and in due time, possibly thrive.

What has proven helpful in LPI’s ‘small space’ practice has been to ask afresh in a genuinely open-ended way, the question ‘who is civil society in this context’ and widen our lens to identify who is best placed and able to do peacebuilding despite restrictions - and let the answers surprise us and push the conventional boundaries. In contexts where the formal ability to mobilize as civil society for peace is curtailed, other actors emerge - some who would comfortably fit into a more formal notion of civil society and others less conventional - who would have otherwise been largely overlooked - such as informal associations (elders groups, self-help groups), religious actors, universities, trade unions, student groups and even individuals. Although it might be a pragmatic choice to support such actors in places where few formal peacebuilding NGOs can operate, this widening of the concept of civil society also expands what is possible and as a result, can expand space in surprising ways and embolden these actors to imagine themselves as peacebuilders.

Beyond the conceptual obstacles to support an expanded understanding of civil society, at a very practical level, many of the funding mechanisms and partnership frameworks lag behind the realities of what is needed to get inclusion right - e.g. partner assessments, reporting requirements and financial accountability mechanisms - which often have to be significantly adapted for the diversity of actors we need to engage. This is one of the very practical - but

impactful - considerations that need a part of the “reality check”. The re-think might be engendered by the shifting legal and normative ground for civic engagement, but it is not all bleak. Ingenuity, novelty and breakthroughs are often born out of hardship and navigating changing circumstances.

The next chapter of civil society peacebuilding will have to reckon with the shifting contours of civic engagement for peace and set new, relevant terms for civil society support. At the table for setting these new terms, we need diverse voices calling for innovation and also those who remind us to go back to our peacebuilding roots: question the assumptions, ask the hard questions, take the long view, build trust and relationships across divides - and even with those you do not agree with - and inspire unconventional partnerships, be unyielding in the objectives and principles yet flexible in the modes of engagement. And always find the cracks for the sunlight to come through, even in the darkest of circumstances for as we should remember and as the Somali proverb teaches us: “if people come together, they can mend a crack in the sky” - *haddii dadku ay isu yimaadaan, waxay xitaa xoojin karaan dillaac circa.*



This reflection piece was a contribution to the online consultation [“Civil Society & Inclusive Peace – A Reality Check”](#) co-hosted by IPTI, Peace Direct and GPPAC on 27 February – 1 March 2018