MICROCON POLICY BRIEFING

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The European Union, Civil Society and Conflict Transformation

Palestinians walk home through bulldozed wreckage in Gaza © R-Projects

- **What roles does civil society play in situations of violent conflict?**

- **What might the effects of EU policies be on civil society organisations' work on conflict?**

Summary: The European Union considers conflict resolution as a cardinal objective of its foreign policy. It makes use of a number of policy instruments to promote conflict transformation through 'constructive engagement', which cover a range of sectors affecting conditions and incentives at the micro level. The EU has recognised the importance of engaging with civil society in situations of violent conflict, but needs to engage more with local civil society to make its policies more effective. This briefing aims to aid the understanding of the role of civil society organisations in situations of violent conflict, and the potential role of EU policies in enhancing CSOs' conflict transformation efforts.

1. Introduction – the EU and peace promotion in the Neighbourhood

The European Union, historically conceived as a peace project, has considered conflict resolution as a cardinal objective of its fledgling foreign policy. The Lisbon Treaty explicitly states that the EU aims to promote peace and that its role in the world would reflect the principles that have inspired its creation, development and enlargement.

The EU views as critical "indicators" of conflict prevention and resolution issues such as human and minority rights, democracy, state legitimacy, dispute resolving mechanisms, rule of law, social solidarity, sustainable development and a flourishing civil society (Kronenberger and Wouters 2005). This suggests that the Union aims at transforming the structural features of violent conflict, eradicating what Galtung (1969, 1994) defines as the seeds of structural violence: social injustice, unequal development and discrimination. As such, many of its policy instruments can influence conditions and incentives at the micro level.

Beyond foreign policy objectives, the EU also makes use of policy instruments to promote conflict transformation through "constructive engagement" with conflict parties. This engagement takes place through the deployment of a variety of measures of cooperation, including Association Agreements, Partnership and Cooperation Agreements, and, in the future, Neighbourhood Agreements under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The ENP is intended to share the benefits of the EU with neighbouring countries to the south and east, and provides financial assistance to these countries conditional on reforms in a number of areas such as economic policy, governance and human rights.

The EU has acknowledged the importance of engaging with civil so-

ciety to enhance its conflict resolution efforts, but has principally focussed on European CSOs. To make its policies more effective, it must engage more with local CSOs. These often have greater understanding, legitimacy and stake in conflict transformation, and can aid inter-communal group formation, mobilisation, communication and empowerment.

This briefing aims to aid the understanding of the role of CSOs in situations of violent conflict, how the EU can maximise its conflict transformation potential and what the possible pitfalls might be. The following sections discuss the role that CSOs play in conflict, the activities through which they impact on conflicts, what determines their effectiveness, the role of the EU in supporting them, and finally three different hypotheses on the potential impacts of EU Neighbourhood policies in transforming conflicts.

2. Civil Society and its function

Civil society can be broadly defined as the area of voluntary collective action, driven by shared values and/ or interests which operate beyond the state, the market and the family, and which provides the web of social relations linking these three spheres (Barnes 2005). Civil society thus undertakes an essentially political function in society.

Civil society can be considered as operating at both the grassroots level (for example community, women, student and faith-based groups) and the mid-level (for example universities, research centres, professional NGOs, organised crime networks). At the top level of society we find more powerful, national actors such as state bodies, political parties, big business and media holdings.

One of civil society's most impor-

tant functions is how it links these three levels. On one hand, mid-level CSOs are closely tied to top-level policymaking through their interactions with parliaments, big business, foundations, etc. On the other, mid-level actors are organically linked to grassroots CSOs, which are principal agents in the cultivation of "peace constituencies" in society writ large.

3. Civil society activities in conflict

CSOs can contribute directly to a conflict and its transformation, for example through activities to foster inter-communal dialogue or encourage truth and reconciliation processes; or even conversely by providing the intellectual or moral justification for violence. They can also act indirectly by working on issues which might be tied to the conflict such as democracy, human rights or gender.

Civil society activities can be divided broadly according to their method and approach. They can be adversarial, aiming to transform conflict by altering power relations and cost-benefit calculations. This could involve engaging in grassroots action aimed at public mobilisation, or mid-level actions aimed at top-level advocacy, monitoring or shaming. Or they can be non-adversarial, relying on non-coercive methods or persuasion and learning to induce social change. This could include promoting inter-communal dialogue.

Such actions deal with either the underlying causes of conflict, through training, capacity building and education activities; or they might act on the material or psychological

symptoms of conflict, through operational service delivery.

4. The impact and effectiveness of local civil society in conflict

4.1 - Impact

Civil society impacts on conflict can be broadly categorised as fuelling, peacemaking and holding. Fuelling activities increase the greed and grievance causes of conflict, worsening the incompatibility of subject positions between the warring parties. Conversely, civil society can have a peacemaking impact by acting materially to rectify the underlying structural causes of conflict, or by discursively contributing to the transformation of subject positions. A holding impact is when CSOs affect the symptoms of conflict, rather than the causes, thus influencing the manner in which the incompatibility of subject positions manifests itself rather than defusing it.
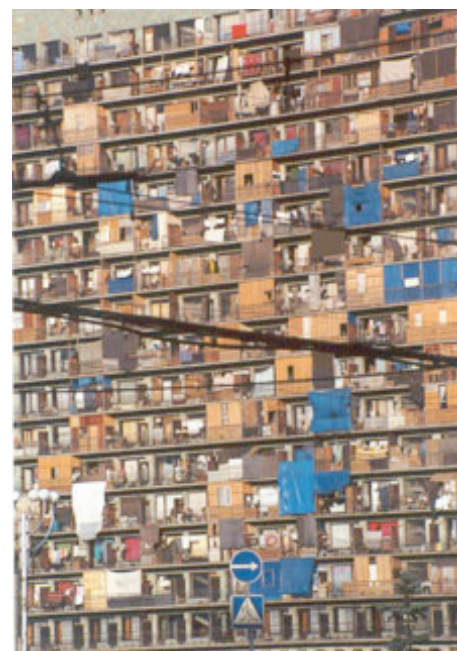
Georgian refugees from Abkhazia in the ex-Iveria hotel, Tbilisi © R-Projects

4.2 – Effectiveness

The effectiveness of CSOs is determined by five principal factors:

(i) Rootedness and legitimacy on one hand; and organisational, financial and professional quality on the other. It is unusual for organisations to excel in both.

(ii) Interconnectedness: The extent that CSOs are aware of each other, work together and are able to strategise about the most effective division of labour between them will enhance their impact.

(iii) Relationship between the CSO and state institutions and the mainstream media. CSOs which are close to or accepted by the state may also tend to benefit from state support and media coverage. However, this apparent effectiveness may merely be the result of their role in reproducing the dominant discourse of the state. 'Anti-establishment' CSOs may receive less support and coverage but nevertheless be as effective as 'establishment' CSOs.

(iv) Relations with the international community: Working with the international level may raise impact by enlisting external supporters. It can also raise the status and visibility of local organisations, and these organisations may influence the role of external actors to their benefit.

(v) Country-specific and time-contingent factors: The scope for effective civil society action will depend on the laws, institutions and political culture of a country, and national events and trends.

5. The EU's role in supporting local civil society conflict transformation efforts

The European Commission considers that it has a direct interest in working with partners to promote conflict resolution, and the ENP views civil society as a key actor in the neighbourhood.

The ENP can affect the civil society dimension of conflict in two ways. It can affect the structural features of conflict, impacting on the political opportunity structure in which local civil society operates. In this way it can shape the effectiveness of civil society action, and in particular two of its critical determinants: intra-civil society relations, and relations between CSOs and the state.

It can also influence CSOs as agents. The EU has recognised the need to strengthen the civil society aspect of the ENP, and proposes to enhance the quality and status of local CSOs through training and exchanges, funding and by encouraging their political role within domestic environments.

6. Two fundamental policy questions and three hypotheses for answering them

In spite of this will to work with civil society in conflict transformation, two critical policy questions remain. Firstly, which CSOs does the EU engage with in the neighbourhood, and does it correctly identify fuelling actors and activities? Secondly, does the ENP succeed in raising the effectiveness of CSO peacebuilding activities, or does it inadvertently weaken the impact of these activities?

To answer these two questions we set out three hypotheses to aid understanding of the EU's role, and to guide ensuing empirical research into conflicts in the neighbourhood. These three hypotheses are by no means mutually exclusive, and we may well find that features of all three co-exist within the same conflict in the EU neighbourhood.

1. The liberal peace paradigm

Under this hypothesis the EU contributes to conflict transformation by strengthening the structure of local civil society by raising the interconnectedness between mid-level and top-level actors, and between mid-level actors and grassroots actors. It also enhances the agency of peacebuilding NGOs whilst weakening or constructively altering the views and actions of fuelling NGOs. The EU thus ensures that its policies do not have negative distortionary effects, and that it builds local capacities for peace.

2. The leftist critique

Under this hypothesis the very fact of engaging with local civil society alters its nature and effectiveness in a way detrimental to peace. This could happen through:

a. The seeming depoliticisation of civil society, whereby EU support renders mid-level CSOs technical instruments at the service of upper echelons at national and international levels. This would lead to a growth of CSOs looking at conflict's symptoms rather than its causes, with EU support going to service based urban NGOs, rather than more explicitly political grassroots CSOs such as trade unions and social movements.

b. EU engagement and support could co-opt civil society and turn it into a mouthpiece for EU policies, priorities and proposed solutions, which may be alien to the needs and desires of the conflict parties themselves (see Ferguson 1990). The EU would fundamentally shape and change the nature of local civil society into a dependent functional substitute within the paradigm of EU foreign policy, detaching and de-legitimising it in the eyes of the public.

3. The realist critique

This hypothesis assumes that conflict is fundamentally driven by the top levels of society. Civil society can thus only be effective to the extent that the top levels allow it space to operate. This space is often limited in conflict situations as governments are often authoritarian in these contexts. According to this hypothesis, unless the EU exerts pressure on top-level actors to undertake democratic reform, then it is unlikely to induce conflict transformation.

Conclusion

In order to analyse these issues, MICROCON's research Work Package, 'Conflict in the European Neighbourhood' will examine 16 CSOs in each of five conflicts in the neighbourhood: Georgia and Abkhazia; Moldova and Transnistria; Nagorno Karabakh; Morocco and Western Sahara; and Israel-Palestine. The analysis will first focus on the activities, type of impact, and effectiveness of these organisations.

It will go on to look at EU involvement in the conflict and its interactions with the selected CSOs. It will examine in particular EU activities under the ENP that help alter the structure within which CSOs operate, as well as their ability as agents, in order to test the hypotheses above.

This will allow for a greater understanding of the ways in which the policies provided for in this new EU initiative interact with the micro features of conflicts and thus contribute incentives for their resolution, as set out in the ENP's ambitious objectives.

Further reading

Barnes, C. (2005) 'Weaving the Web: Civil society roles in working with conflict and building peace', in Van Tongeren, P. (ed.) *People Building Peace II: Successful stories of civil society*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder and London

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