

Civil society and peace processes in Kivu

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Misunderstanding of the nature of civil society in the Kivus and exclusion of grassroots representatives are implicated in the failure of the peace processes in DRC.

Recent research into the role of civil society in DRC suggests that international organisations involved in the Congolese peace process have tended to assume that civil society in the Kivus mirrors its Western counterpart, in which ‘civil society’ represents the needs of the people to the state and keeps the state accountable to the people. Civil society in the Kivus, however, developed quite differently, with today’s distinctive social and bureaucratic structures having been shaped by the colonial administration of earlier years.

One tier of these structures, carrying the official title ‘Civil Society’, comprises a network of national, regional and provincial entities which are little more than one of many branches of patron-client networks throughout the country. With the influx of international aid and humanitarian intervention throughout the conflict, a second tier developed: local NGOs and associations which are in practice run by international actors and which at times do not necessarily take into account the needs of the local population. However, there are also grassroots local NGOs which do address local needs and are primarily funded by their own members from income generated by second or third jobs.

Building peace

The primary goal of including civil society in any peace process is to ensure that the peace process addresses the roots of the conflict and the needs of those most affected by the conflict. However, building such a peace process requires a nuanced approach to the inclusion of civil society. It involves distinguishing whether or not civil society representatives are truly connected to the population or are

simply the puppets of political élites or international organisations.

This is evident in the Congolese case where more recent forms of the peace process tried to create mechanisms for inclusion of civil society. Before 2008 the peace process focused primarily on brokering agreements with militia leaders and senior political leaders. The Goma Agreement in 2008 was the first to include civil society leaders, and to directly request their input. Hundreds of civil society leaders attended a conference to present their concerns for consideration at the table. There was a failure, however, to include grassroots civil society groups; the peace process catered primarily to the élites in the country and had little effect on realities on the ground. Peace processes need to occur both from the top down and from the bottom up.

Grassroots leaders tend to use bottom-up approaches to resolve conflict at the local level – and in implementing pragmatic responses to the enormous physical and psychological trauma that war has produced. However, they had no access to the peace process. Primarily, members of officially sanctioned tiers connected to patrimonial-style networks had access to élite circles. Internationally connected NGOs have some links into power because of their international linkages but they are also linked to the general populace. In sum, civil society in Kivu comprises a mixture of leaders.

This distinctive nature of civil society has influenced the peace process in significant ways. International organisations have brokered agreements that sought to include what they believed to be a civil society connected to the felt needs of the population because they expected Kivutien civil society to mirror its

Western counterpart. However, in reality they only included members of some parts of civil society – parts which were largely disconnected from local populations and which instead represented the interests of political élites at the head of patronage networks or international actors. Grassroots civil society members were marginalised and had little access to the peace process even though they were the most important stakeholders in the process.

I interviewed representatives of groups who were present at the peace talks as well as some who had been excluded from the talks. The interviewees represented a range of groups. Some belonged to the official ‘Civil Society’ bureaucratic network while others were not part of this ‘official’ network but were leaders of NGOs either run by international organisations based in Europe or local to the area.

The interview questions focused firstly on the structure of civil society and secondly on understanding the degree of participation that each specific representative discerned his or her group had in the process. Descriptions of ‘un-civil’ groups within civil society in the wider literature shared similarities with what I found in DRC but the strongest evidence was that uncovered in the course of the interviews. And the consensus of the interviews was that, in the Congolese context, the peace process has met with little success not only because it faces immense challenges due to the regional dynamics of the conflict but also because it has primarily existed in top-down form and failed to integrate bottom-up processes. It has failed not only to include the right members of civil society but also to ensure that the shape of the peace process matches the society to which it hopes to bring peace. It is necessary to understand the multiplicity of ways that civil society can be defined in any given context, and to have a more nuanced

approach to civil society inclusion for more sustainable peace processes.

Civil society in the context of the Kivus has developed separately from its European and North American counterparts as a hybrid

of deeply entrenched patrimonial associations, transnationally controlled NGOs and small local associations. It is important to take these realities into account when designing mechanisms for civil society inclusion in a peace process.

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