

Beyond Diplomacy

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VIEWPOINT

INSIGHTS FROM THE FRONT LINES

Beyond Diplomacy

Civil society organizations are dramatically changing how countries bring an end to violent political conflict.

BY DEREK BROWN

The Save Darfur Coalition was one of the most impressive examples of global activism in the 20th century. Yet it fell tragically short of meeting its goal to end the genocide in Darfur and to bring peace to the citizens of Sudan. Despite a wealth of good intentions and some notable achievements, leaders of that movement lacked familiarity with the broader context of the Darfuris' plight. They also lost sight of the need to pursue an indigenous Sudanese peace process. Those deficiencies undermined an otherwise extraordinary effort.

That failure to secure peace and to prevent mass atrocities in Sudan is not unique. The many conflicts that have unfolded over the past two decades—the continuing turmoil in Eastern Congo, the traumatic end to the civil war in Sri Lanka, and the genocide in Rwanda, to name only a few—show just how difficult it is to achieve and maintain peace. Efforts by nation-states and multilateral groups (including the United Nations, the African Union, the Arab League, and others) to end violent conflict have faltered at least as often as they have succeeded. The ongoing tragedy in Syria is just the latest testament to this reality.

Yet alongside this record of failure, there are notable signs of promise. In a report published in 2012, for example, the Human Security Research Group (an independent research center affiliated with Simon Fraser University) offered this finding: “An increasing proportion of conflicts is terminated by negotiated settlements, the majority of which prevent the recurrence of violence.” Furthermore, the report notes, “[E]ven when peace deals collapse, the death toll due to

subsequent fighting is dramatically reduced.”

What has driven this trend? Since the end of the Cold War, new peacemaking institutions and new approaches to peacemaking have arisen around the globe. These institutions and these approaches exist mainly outside the scope of traditional diplomatic activity, and much of their success has hinged on a crucial development: Increasingly, civil society organizations are contributing in significant ways to the peace processes that help to end violent political conflict. In many environments, these organizations complement or support the efforts of national governments and multilateral institutions. In other environments, they fill roles that those institutions either cannot or will not fill. Although civil society organizations have no formal power to influence conflict actors, they often possess sorely needed expertise

and skills. More important, they possess a kind of moral authority that nation-states and global institutions can no longer claim.

STRUCTURES FOR PEACE

At its core, peacemaking is the process by which parties in a violent conflict bring hostilities to an end and then begin the work of nonviolent political and social transformation. Securing peace is not simply a matter of conducting international diplomacy, or of achieving an agreement among warring parties. Indeed, the increasing diversity of approaches employed by peacemakers has contributed significantly to the increased rate at which stakeholders have been able to settle conflicts through negotiation. (The terms “peacemaking” and “peace-building” are a subject of much discussion. Here, in the interest of simplicity, I am using “peacemaking” in a way that encompasses both the act of bringing hostile parties to a negotiated agreement and the post-agreement efforts that are commonly known as “peace-building.”)

Consider the most famous peaceful political transformation of the 20th century: South Africa's journey from apartheid to the creation of a democratic state. That process involved a multitude of peacemaking efforts. There were the official negotiations that

took place between Nelson Mandela and Frederik Willem de Klerk. There was the multi-party initiative known as CODESA (Convention for a Democratic South Africa). And there was the less well-known work of various regional bodies that emerged under the country's National Peace Secretariat. These bodies helped form local peace committees that included South Africans of every racial and ethnic background, and from every sector of society; they met regularly to prevent or address outbreaks of violence in their communities.



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The CODESA process and the system of local peace committees are examples of transitional “peace structures”—mechanisms established to support peacemaking in cases where governmental structures are unequal to the task of uniting deeply divided communities. The most famous peace structure in South Africa is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), an institution established in 1995. The goal of the TRC was to uncover the historical truth about human rights violations and to promote national reconciliation by sharing that information.

A more recent example comes from Nepal, where a national peace process helped end a bloody civil war. Both before and after the signing of the country’s Comprehensive Peace Accord in 2006, Nepalese leaders established multiple peace structures. These structures enabled contact among conflicting political parties, assisted the National Peace Secretariat of Nepal in drafting agreements, and oversaw the management of cantonments in which Maoist rebel forces had agreed to confine their militias.

Many of these peace structures drew on the assistance of another entity, Nepal Transitions to Peace (NTTP), which served as a “backbone” organization that offered services such as research, technology infrastructure, and communication support. NTTP was a collaborative endeavor that brought together civil society groups, political parties, governmental institutions, and multilateral organizations. Equally important, it provided an institutional home to several prominent Nepalese figures who acted as facilitators throughout the peace process.

Today, the use of peace structures and indigenous civil society organizations is being tested in parts of the Arab world. In the wake of the Arab Spring, many countries in that region have launched peace structures that are called “national dialogues.” These extra-constitutional bodies aim to foster a spirit of national consensus within deeply factionalized societies. The oldest of these structures is the one in Lebanon. Launched in response to a domestic political crisis that long predates the Arab Spring, the National

Dialogue in Lebanon has arguably helped keep the country from descending into a civil war—even as a civil war rages in neighboring Syria. That body, when it convenes, involves about two dozen leaders from all parts of the Lebanese political landscape.

Although the National Dialogue in Lebanon focuses largely on the security agenda of the country, it has spawned a series of parallel dialogue processes that draw in leaders from government departments, political parties, civil society groups, and even international institutions. These secondary national dialogues are subject-specific; they tackle deep-rooted social and political challenges that have persisted since a peace accord ended the Lebanese civil war in 1989.

In Lebanon, as in Nepal, there is a backbone institution that supports efforts of this kind—an entity known as the Common Space Initiative for Shared Knowledge and Consensus Building. As an independent body, it enjoys a flexibility that allows it to serve the needs of the various governmental and non-governmental organizations that seek its assistance.

Given the tumultuous political climate in Lebanon, it is too early to assess the long-term impact of these efforts. Despite sporadic outbreaks of violence across Lebanon, peace—however fragile—has held in that country. The Syrian civil war has put a huge strain on relations among parties inside Lebanon, yet those parties have sustained their commitment to dialogue. That is a modest achievement, perhaps, but it’s also a deeply important one.

LESSONS FOR PEACEMAKERS

When national dialogue initiatives and other peace structures function well, they generally follow a set of core principles. They are inclusive, drawing representation from all political, ethnic, and sectarian groups. They are based on a foundation of collective “buy-in”—a commitment by all stakeholders both to the peacemaking process and to a shared authorship of outcomes. They have a robust supporting infrastructure that includes the services of skilled facilitators. Ideally, these

facilitators will be respected nationals who demonstrate a primary loyalty to the peace process, and not to any ideology, any party, or any other stakeholder group.

The rules that govern a national dialogue process, or any other peace structure, should not simply replicate other legislative or multi-stakeholder bodies. On the contrary, the design of such structures should lead parties to shift old patterns of interaction. It should challenge them to enter a process of exploration and knowledge sharing that will allow them to identify common interests, to work through disagreements, and to weigh policy options.

The growing use of national peace structures, along with the increasing reliance on national peace facilitators, exemplifies how civil society organizations, working in collaboration with national and international partners, are introducing new approaches to peacemaking. In many cases, these approaches complement both the official mediation efforts of international diplomats and the advocacy efforts of activist groups such as the Save Darfur Coalition. Yet the true power of civil society organizations lies in their ability to support the *indigenization* of the peacemaking process by building long-term social capacity within conflict-prone nations.

Despite the expanding role that civil society organizations play in peacemaking efforts, members of the general public know very little about their work. What peacemakers do remains largely invisible. Consider Nelson Mandela. He’s the most famous peacemaker of our time—a reference point for the peacemaking field and a beacon of inspiration for all. Yet few of us could describe his specific contributions to the South African peace process.

The relative obscurity in which peacemaking occurs may have served a purpose at one time. High-level peace negotiations, for example, often work best when they take place out of the public eye. But as civil society organizations continue to develop novel approaches to peacemaking, their work—its strengths as well as its shortcomings—will merit greater public awareness. ■