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Inclusiveness and Peacebuilding: Operational Perspectives

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There is a broad normative agreement in the international community that inclusiveness is important and desirable. However, in great contrast to such normative agreement, the reality of peacemaking and peacebuilding has distinctively different characteristics. Peace agreements involve only a limited number of actors and therefore do not always represent the views and aspirations of a significant portion of society. What is more, the contributions of marginalised groups – such as women, youth and ethnic minorities – are largely ignored. The gap between normative ambition and current practice demands a better understanding of the operational aspects about *how* to achieve higher levels of inclusiveness in peacemaking and peacebuilding. Such a focus on the 'how' highlights a series of tough questions: who needs to be included, what issues need to be addressed, to what extent and when? What are the process requirements to work towards a higher level of inclusiveness over time? How do we operationalise inclusiveness in political environments that are not truly conducive to this concept? And how do we engage those groups that self-exclude from a peace process?

Operationalising inclusiveness means multiplying peacebuilding spaces: it is about driving several peace processes at the same time, which in their totality shape the levels of inclusion

Questions such as these were at the heart of a seminar on peacebuilding and inclusiveness held on the occasion of the International Day of Peace 2012. "Our intuitive understanding of the importance of inclusiveness is not yet matched by experience and adequate tools to implement it effectively. We need to narrow that gap," underlined Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, in a statement opening the event.

This Brief focuses on three themes related to the operationalisation of inclusiveness. The first theme looks at the various practical obstacles to inclusiveness. These can, for instance, include the resistance of governments, international donors and armed groups to include a wider range of actors. The second theme highlights the importance of so-called 'untouchables' – groups or individuals targeted by sanctions or anti-terror legislation, or ostracised through public stigmatisation. The third theme touches on marginalised groups, such as

women and youth, as a distinct challenge for inclusive processes. In all three themes, the Brief draws on examples from Central America and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Overall, the Brief underlines that processes with higher levels of inclusiveness are characterised by multiple, overlapping efforts, and are not confined narrowly to one process that leads to a peace agreement. Operationalising inclusiveness, therefore, means opening up the space for peacebuilding to drive several peace processes at the same time, which in their totality shape the levels of inclusion.

Hesitance to inclusiveness occurs because of political expediency and perceived threats to the authority of governments and the international community

Resistance to wider inclusion

One of the major obstacles in the operationalisation of inclusiveness is "the resistance of some governments, donors and armed groups to include more actors in peace processes," observes Catherine Woollard, Executive Director, European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), drawing on EPLO analysis of obstacles to inclusiveness. This resistance occurs because governments and the international community may perceive expanding inclusiveness as a threat to their authority, which is especially the case when civil society organisations have had time to gain experience and expertise. What is more, the tendency towards exclusion may also be related to political expediency.

In the context of Iraq, Riccardo Bocco, Professor of Anthropology and Sociology of Development at the Graduate Institute Geneva, highlights that the 'de-Ba'athification' of the Iraqi administration in 2003 by the U.S. forces meant excluding an important actor in the interest of eliminating the party's influence in the new political system. As the Ba'ath Party made up 90 percent of the administration at that time, this move led to state collapse.

Civil society is often excluded due to the real or perceived lack of their capacity and the division of external assistance into 'hard' and 'soft' support

In the context of the transitions in the MENA region, international donors sometimes tend to exhibit hostility towards the inclusion of civil society and other actors for the sake of political stability. A process that only includes a select range of actors may be called 'exclusive inclusiveness', states Bocco. In this context, another reason for leaving civil society actors out is that many donors perceive such actors to represent political or religious extremes, according to Bocco. Beyond the MENA region, a frequent argument for exclusion is the real or perceived lack of capacity of civil society organisations.

After a peace agreement has been reached, there is further division of external assistance into 'soft' support for civil society and 'hard' support for governments, highlights Woollard. Instead, civil society needs to be included in state or institution-building processes, through the use of accountability mechanisms, monitoring, anti-corruption, oversight and participatory budgeting.

Armed groups (those that are considered acceptable by the international community and thus invited to negotiations) often do not wish to widen inclusion as it could reduce their own power within peace processes. Inclusion, therefore, remains limited to those holding arms – the parties of the conflict – and not to wider civil society.

The importance of 'untouchables'

Even within a climate of normative acceptance of inclusiveness, certain groups remain excluded from peace processes as they are deemed 'untouchable'. Legal instruments, such as blacklists related to terrorist or sanctions legislation, have been designed for the purpose of excluding actors, for instance certain armed, rebel or terrorist groups. In addition, organised criminal associations and gangs are increasingly causing violence and conflict, however their participation in peace processes, dialogue and negotiation, remains inconceivable. While it is not agreed that they should have a seat at the negotiation table, organized criminal groups and gangs have real power on the ground and – in some cases – significant social roles. The achievement of a peace that is sustainable and legitimate in the eyes of a large portion of the population, therefore, requires a more inclusive approach.

It is generally accepted that actors using armed violence for political purposes can be easily included in peace processes. In contrast, there is significant apprehension by formal international and national actors to engage to a similar extent actors that use armed violence for economic or criminal means. The labelling of actors can therefore be a significant obstacle to operationalising inclusiveness. For instance, Woollard notes that those who are labelled as an 'armed group' are 'lucky' because everyone finds it easier to talk to them. However, excluding actors, such as 'terrorists' or 'criminals', can complicate the achievement of peacebuilding goals because such actors hold real power over politics and economics. By the same token, self-excluding actors can also become problematic as their exclusion could undermine a peace process over time.

The labelling of specific individuals or groups as 'terrorists', 'criminals', or 'warlords' renders their participation in peace processes inconceivable

In contrast to negotiations with armed or rebel groups, there is much greater hesitation among formal actors to consider informal dialogue or facilitation processes with 'terrorists', criminals, or gangs as a means to reduce or prevent violence and build peace. The last decade has made 'talking to rebel groups' an increasingly recognised practice. However, the new frontier for the next decades should involve expanding such practices to a more diverse range of groups that hold the levers of power and violence, especially when confronting new kinds of armed violence in non-conventional or urban contexts.

In the past, armed groups have made the transformation into legitimate political entities in order to be included. Ireland, South Africa, Kosovo, the Philippines and Indonesia are examples of their inclusion leading to successful peace processes. However, these peace processes were all put in place before the latest anti-terrorism policies came into effect. In cases when governments are unable to hold talks with rebel groups themselves, specialised private mediation actors have developed over the last decade to facilitate relations between the parties.

Inclusiveness in context

The experience of Central America is in many ways ground-breaking with respect to engaging with the new faces of violence in a more inclusive way. To date, there remains a tremendous need to demystify the workings of gangs and organised criminal groups, who have traditionally been excluded from peace processes in the

region. The northern triangle of Central America (composed of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) currently faces some of the highest homicide rates in the world. Most of the violence and criminal activities are blamed on youth gangs. Important distinctions must be made between organised crime and gangs: simply put, gangs do not automatically equal organised crime. The relationship, however, is more complex as some gang members are collaborating with organised criminal groups, while others are not. There remains a need to better understand gangs and organised criminal groups as they are not static and limited definitions can result in further exclusion.

There is a need to demystify gangs and organised criminal groups in order to pave the way for greater inclusiveness

El Salvador has so far been one of the most visible cases of this new form of inclusion. In March 2012, a truce was established between the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the Mara Dieciocho (M-18), the two largest gangs in the country. In the six months that followed, homicides decreased from 14 murders per day to 5 or 6. These results demonstrate the possibility and the need to talk to ‘untouchables’ and that the conditions for dialogue have to be created, but that in the case of gangs, it requires a different strategy to truly achieve an inclusive process.

“In a context where excluded actors are further stigmatized by citizens, politicians could end up being the losers in inclusive processes,” observes Isabel Aguilar Umaña, Director of the Regional Youth Programme of Interpeace in Guatemala. She highlights the example of the Salvadoran truce, where politicians are able to take credit for reducing homicide rates. However, they will likely still lose popular appeal for supporting inclusive approaches to gangs, given their widespread stigmatisation as well as political opposition from conservative camps. Thus what is really needed to further inclusive peacebuilding in the context of gang cultures and youth-related violence is to increase the political incentives for politicians to advocate for and participate in such processes.

In the Middle East and North Africa, the issue of inclusiveness has much to do with a fundamental need for donor governments to rethink their approach to Muslim societies

Shifting from Central America to the Middle East and North Africa, the issue of inclusiveness has much to do with a fundamental need for donor governments to rethink their approach to Muslim societies, states Bocco. Many Western donors have supported secular regimes for reasons of political expediency at the expense of their credibility in the Arab world, notably in the eyes of civil society. Bocco argues that it is actually the Islamic movement, rather than secular movements, that is the more likely vehicle to create democratic systems as it is in touch with a larger portion of society. As such, actors from the Islamic movement should not be excluded from peace and transition processes.

In the context of the MENA, it remains necessary for international donors to distinguish between the various Muslim groups and to address the growing domestic European hostility towards migration and Islam. The burden of the colonial past and orientalist stereotypes continues to linger. Consequently, there is still a long way to go before a more systematic inclusion of all relevant (and powerful) actors in the transition processes in the MENA can be fully realised.

Marginalised groups: women and youth

Although it is difficult to compare the Middle East and North Africa to Central America, the two regions have two factors in common: mistrust and stigmatisation of marginalised groups. According to Aguilar Umaña, inclusiveness and identity of women, youth and ethnic minorities must be linked in order to achieve more inclusive processes.

Often, the only way to get women to the negotiation table is to broaden civil society participation

Women constitute a significant marginalised group. In Central America, the role of women in gangs is generally restricted to specific tasks, such as care services and information sharing for imprisoned gang members and their families. Despite their potential to influence the rest of the gangs, women are not included in decision-making or peace processes and are indeed the most marginalised group in the region. For example, women are not present in the meetings of the *palabreros* (chiefs of the gang) – so-called *ranflas*. They do not belong to any space in which *maras* make important decisions, exemplified by the truce in El Salvador. Involving wider civil society is often the only way to get women to the negotiation table and therefore more strategies are needed to include women on a broader scale.

Alongside women, youth form a second significant marginalised group. Youth were the key drivers of the Arab Spring, such as in Tunisia and Egypt. However, following their active protests and calls for reform, youth have been side-lined in the transition processes and are now excluded from mainstream governance. This exclusion is by no means a coincidence; in Egypt, for instance, youth are intentionally kept aside by the country's two most conservative parties – the army and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Broadening inclusiveness can also lead to new exclusion

Similarly, Central American youth face a high degree of stigmatisation. The isthmus is characterised by 'gangophobia' or 'pandillophobia' (*pandilla* meaning gang in Spanish). This fear of gangs is then often directed towards youth in general. Many sectors of society fear youth as a consequence of them often appearing different. Central American gangs generally have a strong criminal reputation, which is fostered by the governments and media. Society largely forms its opinion about *maras* and *pandillas* based on the media, which distorts the image of gangs, exacerbating the stigmatisation. The complex, structural and underlying problems of gang activity are hidden by this type of stigmatisation. In this regard, it is important to work with journalists and the public at large in order to change the social misconception of the gang issue in the region. Including non-gang youth in processes to reduce violence and in public policy-making is another key ingredient to reduce stigmatisation as they show more tolerance and can facilitate a better understanding of gang members.

Using another example from El Salvador, Aguilar Umaña highlights how inclusiveness can also lead to new exclusion. In March 2012, the Salvadoran government announced a pilot project to develop an industrial park as an employment opportunity and as a means of reinsertion for former gang members. While this project announced the inclusion of current and former gang members, young 'civilians' (as gangs refer to non-gang members) have started opposing this project because – being themselves also affected by unemployment - they feel left out

and thus deem it unfair. This situation again highlights the need for spaces of dialogue between all stakeholders, which are an "extremely valuable resource for peacebuilding," states Aguilar Umaña.

Conclusion

While there has been a clear trend in normative discussions to argue for the desirability of more inclusive peacebuilding, there remains much work to be done to better understand how to operationalise inclusiveness. Trends in peace processes suggest that formal actors are more at ease with inclusiveness when actors are labeled as "rebel groups", rather than "gangs", "terrorists" or "organized criminal groups". In civil war situations, there is now a professionalised body of peacebuilding actors that drive inclusive processes, despite the possible creation of new exclusions. From an operational perspective, the emphasis is, therefore, on working towards higher levels of inclusiveness while being aware that such inclusiveness can never be complete. Reasons for this are the inherently political nature of peace processes and the necessity for mechanisms to address the needs of those newly excluded from an 'inclusive-enough' process.

While there is a clear normative agreement that inclusiveness is desirable, there is much work ahead to better understand how to operationalise inclusiveness

Furthermore, inclusiveness is not only about actors but also about issues. For instance, Woollard underlines the importance of designing processes that are sensitive to all issues and recognise that these should be addressed at the right time, by the right people. In a similar fashion to the exclusion of actors, the exclusion of issues can be driven by political expediency. In this context, it is particularly important to note the sometimes significant difference between the discourse about international engagements and domestic politics of some Western governments in regards to inclusive change-making in conflict-affected and fragile states.

In conclusion, it is important to rethink the design of peace processes. While recent practice in peace negotiations has tended to focus the attention of the international community on a peace agreement that becomes a convergence for all peace efforts, there is much need to open additional space for parallel and overlapping processes. In this context, not every process must be inclusive, but the multiple processes in their totality represent inclusive peacebuilding. Not all actors, notably 'untouchables' and marginalised groups, necessarily have to be present at the negotiation table but can be included in alternative ways. Recognising the importance of parallel tracks that are connected and coordinated is necessary to ensure that peacebuilding ultimately occurs at a higher level of inclusiveness.

About this Brief and the authors

This Brief is based on a roundtable discussion titled, "Placing Inclusiveness at the Heart of Peacebuilding? Limits and Opportunities." The discussion occurred on the occasion of the International Day of Peace, 21 September 2012, and was convened by the United Nations Office at Geneva, Interpeace, and the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform.

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