

INCORE

Local International Learning Project (LILP)

*Civil Society in Transition and the Role of Civic
Forums*

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INCORE

Conflicts of an ethnic, religious, political and cultural nature continue to dominate the world's attention. Since 1990, over 150 wars have taken place, most of which are re-current, protracted and intra-state and there is little evidence that such conflicts will decrease significantly over the coming decades. Ninety percent of states are now multi-identity states and most governments are having difficulty dealing positively with such diversity.

Addressing the causes, effects, solutions and post-settlement impacts of such wars has been the role of the UNU Institute for Conflict Resolution at the University of Ulster (INCORE) since it was established in 1993. INCORE is a joint research institute of the United Nations University and the University of Ulster. It seeks to address the management and resolution of contemporary conflicts through research, training, practice, policy and theory. INCORE's vision is of a world where the knowledge and skills exist to make non-military management of ethno-political conflict the norm.

The *Research Unit* undertakes, commissions and supervises research of a multidisciplinary nature, particularly on post-settlement issues, governance and diversity, and research methodology in violent societies. The *Policy and Evaluation Unit* is committed to bridging the gaps between theory, practice and policy. It seeks to ensure that conflict-related research and practice is incorporated in grassroots programming and governmental policy.

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Foreword

In today's global reality it is becoming increasingly important, and possible, for societies to share strategies in order to combat the problems of the twenty-first century. There is much to be learnt from approaches in other contexts. INCORE is aware of the potential of international comparative work, and believes that it is crucial to develop models that facilitate the reciprocal transfer of lessons and methods, whilst also recognising the challenges posed by different contexts and the 'transferability' issues involved in lessons learned. Indeed it is recognised that the direct transfer of approaches without thoughtful appraisal, can be unrealistic and potentially harmful.

With funding from the Community Relations Council (CRC), INCORE initiated the Local International Learning Project (LILP). LILP aims to promote the exchange of models and ideas between Northern Irish and international practitioners and policy makers within the field of conflict resolution and community relations. The project has centred on workshops and exchange visits, although the exact format of events has varied from stream to stream.

The nine-month pilot phase of the project was divided into four thematic streams:

- Single Identity Work
- Civil Society in Transition and the Role of Civic Forums
- Multiculturalism and Diversity
- Realism of the Past

This publication represents a summary of the main ideas and challenges that arose during the second stream of the project: 'Civil Society in Transition and the Role of Civic Forums'.

Introduction

Civil society organisations that have been involved in a conflict dynamic face new and challenging roles in a post-settlement context. In cases like that of the South African transition, civil society groups have had to deal with this shift in a variety of ways; an experience from which many useful lessons and potential challenges can be identified.

The post-settlement context of the Good Friday Agreement, has posed a series of challenges for civil society groups in Northern Ireland. It is potentially useful to look for ideas and models for adapting to this new political and societal reality. LILP recognised the potential of drawing on lessons identified through the South African experience of transition.

The civil society stream of LILP held a workshop on 31st May 2001, at Renshaw's Hotel, Belfast, Northern Ireland. The event consisted of two sessions:

A. Civil Society in Transition: The South African Experience

Panellists included:

- Eldred de Klerk, Community Development Council, Northern Ireland, formerly of Centre for Conflict Resolution, South Africa
- Professor Roelf Meyer, Tip O'Neill Chair in Peace Studies, INCORE and Civil Society Initiative, South Africa, formerly Minister of Constitutional Affairs in the South African Government
- Brandon Hamber, Democratic Dialogue and Research Associate at Queens University, Northern Ireland, formerly of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, South Africa (Chair)

B. The Role of Civic Forums

Panellists included:

- Rev. Akuila Yabaki, Executive Director, Citizens Constitutional Forum, Fiji
- Chris Gibson, Chairperson, Civic Forum for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland
- Kate Fearon, Political Advisor, Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, Northern Ireland (Chair)

Exchange visits were facilitated which gave participants the opportunity to share their experiences with the Scottish Civic Forum.

Civil Society in Transition

The role of civil society has been broadly identified as facilitating interaction between the political arena and society at large. The term ‘civil society’ embraces a wide range of actors including religious leaders, traditional and business leaders, women’s organisations, NGOs, and scholars and intellectuals. A strong civil sector is often regarded as being an important characteristic of the modern democratic state. As defined by CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, ‘a strong civil society is one that is an effective and legitimate partner in democratic governance, that is, in making public policy and in implementing it’ (CIVICUS, 2000, p. 5).

Speakers at the workshop identified the role of civil society as:

- Mobilising people,
- Providing an enabling environment and resources,
- Facilitating dialogue for understanding,
- Transforming the state and its institutions.

The South African Experience – challenges of transition

Traditionally the role of civil society in South Africa was in opposition to the apartheid regime. However, as Roelf Meyer pointed out, during the workshop, these forces did not only come from outside the government, there were also significant civil society actors who were working towards change from within the establishment.

Depending on the context in which it operates civil society has to work with the state, against the state or around the state. In a context where the civil sector is primarily concerned with societal change this raises the question about what happens to the protagonists for change after that change has been achieved, are revolutionaries still revolutionaries after the revolution?

Gyimah-Boadi writes,

Developments in post-apartheid South Africa provide a good illustration of the problem. South Africa's civic associations, vital in the struggle against apartheid, are undergoing a post-apartheid crisis. Some of them have lost their leaders to political parties and the state bureaucracy; funding from abroad is in precipitous decline (as such funds are now channelled directly to the government instead of to the NGOs); and many are having trouble defining a role for themselves in relation to the new South Africa and its Government of National Unity, which is led by the NGOs' erstwhile ally, the African National Congress (Gyimah-Boadi, 1997).

During the LILP workshop some of the major challenges, which can face civil society during transitions were identified as follows:

- *Defining a new relationship with government.* In a post-conflict context it may no longer be clear how civil society should relate to government. In the reality of apartheid there was little doubt as to an organisation's position against state structures, however the post-settlement context provided civil society with the opportunity to positively redefine its relationship with government. Brandon Hamber pointed out that his own organisation coined the phrase 'critical partners' in order to define its role in the new South Africa.
- *Loss of Autonomy.* The status of civil society groups may change as the relationship with government is re-defined so to is the independence of the civil sector. They no longer define themselves in direct opposition to government, hence face new constraints on their autonomy. In South Africa the new reality entailed a focus on cooperation, and taking into account the role of official actors.
- *Crisis of Ideology.* After the end of a conflict what should happen to those groups who helped bring about its demise?

In South Africa not only was it no longer clear how civil society should relate to government, but its whole reason for being came under question. Previously the civil sector largely existed because of its opposition to the apartheid regime; in the post-settlement reality what was its role?

- *Social Utility.* The activity of civil society decreases as the peace process moves forward. Civil society can find itself in competition with state provision of social services; in essence, the social utility of the civil sector decreases dramatically. For example in apartheid South Africa the civil sector played a large role in the provision of local health services, a role which the democratic government began to take on, after the transition.
- *Loss of Leadership.* As other opportunities arise, civil society may lose many of its prominent figures and leaders. In South Africa, many civil society leaders found new roles in government and international positions, leaving a vacuum in their place.
- *Loss of funding.* In a post-conflict situation international donors may channel their funds into the new government rather than the NGO sector. In South Africa as a result of the dramatic change in the nature of funding the larger civil society organisations came to monopolise or subsume the smaller ones.

Identifying a New Role for Civil Society

Governmental transition necessitates an adaptation on the part of those organisations and structures that operate around it. In a post-settlement context, what is the new role for civil society? Drawing on the South African experience a number of important areas of civil society activity in post-conflict society have been identified.

These include:

- Supplementing government,
- Participating in the policy-making process,
- Monitoring government performance,
- Partnering in service delivery,
- Striving to close societal gaps,
- Fostering effective leadership,
- Providing resources,
- Fostering a spirit of volunteerism and civic participation.

These evolving characteristics of civil society imply a shift in orientation. The skills, structures and modes of interaction involved in political resistance differ sharply from those involved in reconstruction and development, hence require a new approach.

Lessons

Drawing on the lessons of South Africa and their experience of the Northern Irish transition, the workshop speakers articulated a number of key areas which could be taken into account by civil society in Northern Ireland. These included:

- The importance of open processes so that civil society itself does not become a mechanism for exclusion. Eldred de Klerk stressed the importance of the question of alignment and openness. It is not necessary for civil society groups to remain impartial and neutral but they should be open about real or potential alignments.
- The need to re-define societal relationships. In particular it is crucial to consider the relationship with the new government. In order to ensure the utility of the civil sector it may be necessary to re-assess its role in the new political and societal context.
- The need to identify innovative roles in order to facilitate a new 'drive' or purpose. If civil society groups are to survive transition they need a reason for being, or mandate that reflects the requirements of the new context.

Civil Society in Transition and the Role of Civic Forums

- The importance of being aware of, and taking action against post-settlement trends such as loss of leaders and funds. By taking into account the potential problems of transition it may be possible for groups to overcome these challenges.
- The necessity to encourage a spirit of volunteerism, particularly amongst former government and business leaders in order to sustain the spirit of civil society. Without this resource it may prove very difficult for civil organisation to overcome the challenges of transition.

The Role of Civic Forums

Through the formalisation of the role of civil societies in modern states, civic forums have come to the fore. Where organised civil society already exists, a civic forum represents the institutionalisation of this sector. Though there are many different types, ranging from established governmental structures to non-governmental bodies, they share a vision of civil participation in government and social justice. Civic forums have sought to ensure that everyone has a voice.

The Citizens' Constitutional Forum

The Citizens' Constitutional Forum (CCF) in Fiji was founded in June 1995. The CCF is dedicated to creating space for dialogue and debate aimed at achieving a sustainable constitutional settlement. Since 1995 the activities of the organisation have developed to include:

- Improving the sustainability of the democratic institution,
- Monitoring government structures,
- Fostering multiculturalism,
- Educating citizens, political parties, and national leaders about the constitution,
- Monitoring human rights issues,
- Conducting seminars and workshops involving government and other experts to formulate policy,
- Fostering informal channels of discussion,
- Supporting the constitutional review,
- Producing publications, such as a simplified version of the constitution,
- Building up citizen awareness on key issues.

The Scottish Civic Forum

The Scottish Civic Forum (SCF) was launched in March 1999. Now that the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive are a reality,

the SCF exists to ensure that the partnership between parliament and people is sustained. The vision of the SCF is that:

It will help break the mould of old fashioned politics. It will increase participation, find new ways to open up dialogue, raise awareness and stimulate debate on the many challenges facing Scotland. It will have a vital role in creating a more open and broadly based political culture.

The activities of the SCF include:

- Monitoring the parliament and executive,
- Publishing an annual audit of democratic participation,
- Encouraging legislative participation through policy forums and public dialogue,
- Training and guidance on participation,
- Promoting and identifying civic priorities,
- Producing publications.

The Civic Forum for Northern Ireland

In the recent political negotiations, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) in particular, advocated a greater role for civil society in governance in Northern Ireland. Consequently the party was a driving force behind the establishment of the Civic Forum for Northern Ireland. The Forum arose from a desire to see greater civic participation in decision making in order to open up the political process. Hence it was devised as a means for citizens who wish to be more active and influence policy.

The Civic Forum was established as a result of the Belfast Agreement. Paragraph 24 of Strand One of the Agreement provides that the Civic Forum will act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues. The forum consists of sixty members, who are selected from a range of sectors and who serve for three years. To date the forum has looked at a number of issues including, poverty, education and peace building.

Challenges

Through the LILP workshop discussions a series of potential challenges for civic forums were identified, these include:

- Establishing a relationship with government in particular addressing problems of *visibility* as members of government and other groups do not actively listen to them. Questions of power and securing influence arise; how does the forum provide a mechanism for civil society to feed into government?
- In cases where forum representatives come from a divided society, such as Northern Ireland, this can prove difficult both in terms of operation and maintaining a *cohesive voice*.
- Making sure that structures such as civic forums are *representative* and reach grass-roots levels of society.
- As civic forums tend to be voluntary there are serious challenges in terms of human resources.

Conclusions

The Local International Learning Project has promoted the exchange of models and ideas between Northern Irish and international practitioners and policy makers within the field of conflict resolution and community relations. An important area of debate in the 'post-settlement' context in Northern Ireland has been the question of civil society in transition and the role of civic forums.

From the South African case it is clear that transition poses a number of serious challenges for civil society, however there are lessons that can be drawn from this context to offer some guidance to practitioners and policy-makers in Northern Ireland, and in other international contexts. These include being aware of the need to address practical problems such as the decrease in funding opportunities, and visionary questions of identifying new roles for civil society.

Civic forums represent the institutionalisation of the civil sector and are proving a valuable model in many contexts. Though their exact form may vary, they have an important role to play in ensuring civil participation in government and social justice. There are a variety of mechanisms open to them not least educational programmes, and government consultation and monitoring.

LILP provided the opportunity for discussion of the challenges that face civil society during periods of transition. We hope that this is but one step in an ongoing process that will allow for lessons to be drawn from such experiences that will prove useful in the management of transition.

Resources

Organisations

Citizens' Constitutional Forum, 7a Thurston Street, P.O. Box 12584, Suva, Fiji, www.ccf.org.fj

Civic Forum for Northern Ireland, Room E.5.03, Castle Buildings, Stormont, Belfast, BT4 3SR, Northern Ireland, <http://www.civicforum-ni.org>

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, www.civicus.org

Civil Society Initiative, P.O. Box 2435, Brooklyn Square, Pretoria, 0075, South Africa. http://www.idasa.org.za/csi/w_education.htm

Scottish Civic Forum, 21 Queen Street, Edinburgh, EH2 1JX, Scotland, www.civicforum.org.uk

The Common Wealth Foundation, Marlborough House, Pall Mall, London, SW1Y 5HY, United Kingdom, www.commonwealthfoundation.com

The London Civic Forum, 18A Victoria Park Square, London E2 9PB, England, http://62.7.246.144/lcf_about.asp

The National Economic and Social Forum, First Floor, Frederick House, 19 South Frederick Street, Dublin 2, Ireland, www.nesf.ie

Web Sites

CASIN, 'Post-conflict Rehabilitation: Social and Civil Dimensions', www.casin.ch/gover/cluster/notes.htm

Civil Society Programmes, Commonwealth Foundation, <http://www.commonwealthfoundation.com/programmes/>

Development Update – Various Issues, <http://www.interfund.org.za/ARCHIVE.HTM#currentissues>

INTRAC, www.intrac.org/civil.html

The Community Agency for Social Enquiry, <http://www.case.org.za/>

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