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Civil society protests and inclusive peace talks

Desirée Nilsson, Isak Svensson, Utami Sandyarani

WHAT ARE THE DRIVERS of inclusion in peace negotiations? How can meaningful participation in peace processes be ensured? This research brief shows that civil society engagement, in the form of non-violent protests, demonstrations, or other forms of street action can help shape the conditions for inclusive peace talks in civil wars. We also present trends and patterns based on data on civil society engagement across civil wars in Africa, the Americas, and the Middle East. We propose three recommendations directed at international peacebuilding actors who strive to promote inclusive peace processes.

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Policy recommendations



1. Engage with and, when feasible, support, non-violent social movements in peace processes.
2. Assess and address the actor-specific barriers to civil society engagement in peacemaking. For example, youth actors and women's organizations are generally not well represented in formal negotiations, so more proactive measures may be needed.
3. Design and ensure meaningful inclusive negotiation processes. When it is difficult to include civil society actors in formal peace processes, consider other avenues for civil society engagement outside the table. In particular, facilitate effective feedback-loop mechanisms that ensure substantive inclusion in the negotiation process.

Introduction

IT IS GENERALLY RECOGNISED as important to create more inclusive peace processes. Strong arguments for inclusion of non-warring actors are made both from a rights perspective – actors who are affected should have a say – and from a sustainability perspective: more inclusive processes are associated with a higher chance of long-term success. While research and policy have been converging toward the value of inclusivity in the context of peace processes, particularly in peace negotiations, less attention has been paid to the steps leading up to inclusion. The drivers behind the inclusion of civil society and other non-warring actors are not sufficiently discussed nor systematically explored in either research or policy debates. In this research brief, we address this issue, and in particular, we zoom in on the role that civil society actors may play in shaping inclusive peace processes. How can civil society contribute to inclusive processes in the context of internal armed conflicts? Enhancing our knowledge on this topic is essential

because it opens up a broader understanding of how to empower civil society actors. In this research brief, we present evidence showing that the mobilisation of civil society through protests and demonstrations increases the chance for inclusive peace processes, based on an analysis of civil society engagement in Africa and the Americas.¹ In addition, we discuss some related trends and patterns regarding the role of non-warring actors' involvement in peacemaking efforts, which also includes the Middle East.

The premise of this research brief is these basic assumptions: 1) civil society actors need to be taken seriously and incorporated systematically into analyses of peace processes; 2) civil society actors have agency and can take measures that potentially affect the dynamics of peace processes, and 3) in order to build better policies that can foster greater inclusivity, we need to know more about the processes, conditions, and factors creating more inclusive peace processes.

What do we know?

CIVIL SOCIETY IS a broad term for many different types of organisations, networks, and actors that operate outside the realms of the state, the market, and the family.² It is an important category of non-warring actors that may have contacts and ties with the government and armed challengers, but are not identical to either of them. Our definition of civil society is therefore broad and is not restricted to actors with only democratic, pro-peace, or progressive agendas. In addition to civil society actors, we also study political parties, which can play an important role in many conflictual societies but are sometimes overlooked in the study of inclusion.³

In line with a growing field of research focusing on the inclusion of civil society actors, we adopt a broad approach when studying civil society engagement. It is not only about whether civil society organisations are officially represented at the table. Civil society organisations do so much more than that. They mobilise broadly outside the context of formal negotiations and organise different tracks and processes of dialogue and consultation.⁴

Why can we expect to see more involvement from actors other than the main warring actors at the negotiation table, involving stakeholders such as

civil society actors and political parties? The reasons may be multifaceted but can broadly be divided into four different categories.⁵ First, third party actors engaging in the role of mediators play a unique role, as they are able to influence who gets a seat at the negotiation table, and as they are instrumental in setting the agenda for peace talks both in terms of the issues discussed but also in terms of who gains access.⁶ Second, certain types of warring parties could be more open to including other stakeholders at the talks.⁷ Third, the overall political system as well as the conditions needed for civil society to operate in the first place, including how vibrant civil society organisations are and how freely they can function, may shape the conditions for inclusion. Such structural aspects may also pertain to the degree of economic development or the type of civil war.⁸ Fourth, civil society organisations may themselves, through their engagement in different forms of peacemaking, influence and help widen the set of actors that are included in negotiations. In this brief, we pay particular attention to civil society actors'

own engagement, recognising that the other factors discussed above also may shape the conditions for inclusion.

Civil society involvement – protests, for example – has been found to help sustain conflict resolution processes. The question of if, how, and when, to seek inclusion in peace processes is a strategic decision for movements.⁹ Civil society engagement through nonviolent resistance campaigns is found to be a strong predictor of negotiated settlements in civil wars. In fact, the attributes of resistance campaigns – such as their scale of mobilisation and their variety of supporters – can enhance negotiated settlements' chance of success.¹⁰ Civil resistance campaigns may also pave the way for negotiations to take place, as actions taken by protestors make it costly for opponents to maintain the status quo. In other words, protests or boycotts may create or increase civil society's leverage when it comes to persuading warring parties to engage in peace negotiations.¹¹

The impact of protests

THIS RESEARCH BRIEF shows that civil society engagement in the form of protests, demonstrations or other forms of street action can, in some contexts, help shape conditions for inclusive peace talks in civil wars. The brief also points to the broad set of actors that are involved in peacemaking; while some actors are prominently represented at the negotiation table, others engage in different forms of peacemaking outside of the negotiation room. For example, among civil society actors engaged in protests and demonstrations, we see actors like youth groups – groups who are less commonly invited to participate in peace talks.

Using data from Americas and Africa during the time-period of 1989–2018, it is found that the mobilisation

of civil society is generally associated with a higher chance of inclusive peace talks.¹² Therefore, it is more likely that peace talks will include non-warring actors if civil society actors take to the streets. We interpret this finding as a question of leverage: civil society can mount pressure on governments and rebel groups, and force actors other than the warring sides to join the negotiation table.

In Liberia in the spring of 2003, the women's organisation WIPNET (the Women in Peacebuilding Network) was instrumental in organising the Women of Liberia Mass Action Campaign, which orchestrated large demonstrations to pressure President Charles Taylor and the warring factions to come to the negotiation table and end the civil war.¹³ This mass

mobilisation is often emphasised as a successful example of how civil society organisations and the larger populace can help exert pressure on warring actors and campaign for peace. During the peace talks that were later held in Accra, not only the government and the two rebel groups were represented, but a number of civil society organisations and political parties also had seats at the table: including the Mano River Women’s Peace Network, the Liberian National Bar Association, and the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia.¹⁴

The study also finds that civil society mobilisation is associated not only with the presence of wider society at the table, but also with their more substantial inclusion at the peace talks, either as full participants or mediators. While observers also could play important roles in some processes, observer status generally carries less weight compared to being full participants or mediators. Participants and mediators alike can generally engage in the negotiation process; for example, by making proposals, suggestions, or by trying to influence the representatives of the armed actors. Separating observer status from participation and mediation is a way of distinguishing meaningful inclusion from some of the more nominal, façade-esque forms of inclusion.

Which types of non-warring parties, including both political parties and different forms of civil society organisations, are present at peace negotiations? Focusing on all intrastate armed conflicts 1989-2018 across Africa, the Americas, and the Middle East we find that political parties and religious actors are the most common types of non-warring actors represented at the table (see Figure 1). Although not as frequent as political and religious actors, it also is quite common to see other specific interest groups present at peace negotiations, which we categorise as ‘other civil society’ actors. Such groups include human rights organisations, community leaders, refugee representatives, and other interest groups that do not fall into the existing categories. ‘General civil society’, which makes up 13% of the cases, refers to when civil society members are reported to have been present without any specific mention of the type of organisation. Although there is a great diversity of non-warring actors represented in peace talks, it

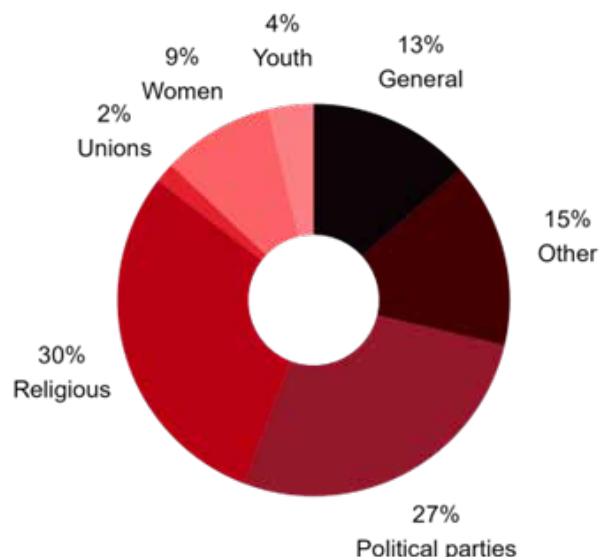


Figure 1: Types of non-warring actors at the negotiation table in Africa, the Americas, and the Middle East, 1989–2018.

remains relatively rare to see trade unions and youth groups at the negotiation table in comparison to other actors.

The composition of civil society actors engaging in peacemaking through collective actions – such as nonviolent protests, demonstrations, and mass action on the street – varies (see Figure 2). Of all the collective actions that occur during intra-state armed conflicts across Africa, the Americas, and the Middle East, 41% were reported to have involved general civil society actors without any information as to the specific interests they represent. This is possibly due to the difficulty in discerning the specific actors civil society movements represent when thousands of people take to the streets. Interestingly, while youth actors are fairly underrepresented at negotiation tables, their presence is more visible in protests, as they comprise 17% of all cases. Religious actors, however, are not as commonly engaged on the streets as they are at negotiation tables. Trade unions are almost as rare on the streets as they are at negotiation tables. Women’s organisations make up about 12% of cases and have played critical roles in cases such as

Liberia (discussed above), and Cameroon. Thousands of civilians took to the streets in Cameroon’s capital in autumn 2022 to demand dialogue and peace talks between the rebels in the Anglophone south and the government in the otherwise French-speaking country.¹⁵ Women played a leading role in protests for peace. Mediation attempts – made first by Switzerland and later by Canada – tried to create openings for negotiation and initiate the peace process. The case of Cameroon shows how civil society can mobilise in the context of peace processes to mount pressure on actors to move stalled processes ahead.

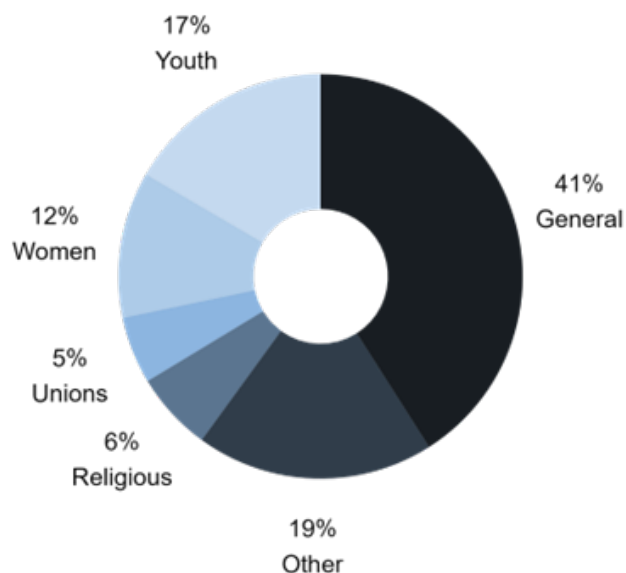


Figure 2: Types of civil society actors in protests in Africa, the Americas, and the Middle East, 1989–2018.

Policy recommendations

FROM OUR RESEARCH, we gain two main insights: first, there is a positive link between civil society actor’s engagement in peacemaking through street actions and participation by civil society and political parties at the negotiation table. Second, civil society cannot be treated as a single actor, as civil society actors play multifaceted and diverse roles in peacemaking. Based on these findings, we present three recommendations directed at policymakers and practitioners in the UN, missions, or in organisations supporting peace processes around the globe who aim to improve inclusiveness in peace negotiations.

Engage with and support nonviolent resistance movements in peace processes

Our research shows that protests by civil society organisations are positively linked with non-warring actors’ inclusion at the negotiation table. It strengthens the importance of international peacebuilding

actors to take nonviolent resistance movements in civil wars seriously. If refusing to work with non-violent so-called “street activists”, third party and international peacebuilding actors may risk limiting access to peace negotiations on their own and possibly the warring actors’ terms, negatively impacting the legitimacy of the process. There are various activities that international actors can undertake to support nonviolent resistance movements in peace processes, among them increasing civil society’s capacity, enabling diverse tactics, supporting coalition building, facilitating strategic communication, and many others. International peacebuilding actors can also promote learning across movements in different countries under similar contexts. International actors should be mindful of their timing and tactics when engaging with civil resistance movements based on the complexity of the conflict.

Assess and address actor-specific barriers to civil society engagement in peacemaking

Our research demonstrates that some actors are more visible in peace negotiations but are less visible in street-level protests, and vice versa. For example, religious actors are more present at negotiation tables than in the streets, while the pattern concerning youth actors is the opposite. This means that while it can be convenient to lump various civil society actors into one category, it should be noted that civil society is comprised of various spectra of society and therefore a cookie-cutter approach to including them in peace processes may not be effective. International peacebuilding actors should therefore assess why particular civil society actors are underrepresented in negotiations or protests. Since youth actors are generally not well represented in formal negotiations, more proactive measures may be needed to engage youth actors in peace processes. While there has been progress in including women in peacemaking processes, women's organisations do not participate as frequently as other types of non-warring actors.¹⁶ There is therefore more work to be done to promote the inclusion of women's groups in peace processes.

Design and ensure meaningful inclusive negotiation processes

Third party actors should strategically design participatory processes that not only bridge warring actors in formal negotiation processes and non-warring actors in informal dialogues, but also create an effective feedback loop that ensures substantive inclusion in negotiation process. The UN-facilitated Libya Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), initiated in 2020, is an example of including civil society through a trajectory other than protests: multi-track dialogue efforts. The LPDF, which consisted of 75 people – 23% of whom were women,¹⁷ aspired to represent various social and political spectra in Libyan society including traditional leaders, and regional and ideological representatives. In addition to the main political dialogue, the UN Special Envoy to Libya, Stephanie Williams, also facilitated the inclusion of women, youth, and municipality sub-tracks which were designed to directly inject specific recommendations into the main dialogue. Furthermore, to broaden civil society involvement,

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the UN facilitated a digital dialogue, which involved 1000 Libyans whose recommendations were fed into the political conversation.¹⁸ The LPDF is a noteworthy case, as it exemplifies the unique role that third parties can play in strategically designing and ensuring inclusive negotiation processes. The mediation facilitated by the UN in Libya shows what can be achieved when a third party does more than simply ensure representation in formal negotiation processes, but broadens and diversifies platforms for participation, and takes extra steps to create a feedback loop between various tracks. Therefore, it is important that third party actors design, push, and ensure civil society inclusion in creative ways. In particular, when it is difficult to include civil society actors in formal peace processes, it becomes even more important for external international actors to think about other opportunities to engage civil society outside the negotiation table and to increase their leverage so that their demands can influence the negotiation agenda.

Endnotes

- ¹ The research brief builds on a study by Desirée Nilsson and Isak Svensson; “Pushing the Door Open: Nonviolent action and inclusion in peace negotiations,” *Journal of Peace Research* 60, no. 1, 2023. We thank Tim Gåsste for excellent research assistance, and we gratefully acknowledge research support from the Swedish Research Council (no. 2021-03247 and no. 2020-01796) and the Folke Bernadotte Academy (no. 17-00297 and no. 20-00293).
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- ¹⁷ “Women’s participation in Peace Processes. Libya Case Study,” Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/libya-4>
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Author biography

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