

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While long recognized as a crucial element in gauging the health of the democratic structures of a country, civil society also has an important role to play in ensuring the protection of civilians caught up in internal wars. Over the past two decades, internal wars and state collapse have claimed the lives of millions of innocent victims in Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe. From Africa, a continent that has seen the highest incidence of warfare, to Europe, where the bloody implosion of the Former Yugoslavia caught the world by surprise, civil society has been faced with the challenges of engaging governments and regional bodies in an effort to protect civilians.

In many cases, internal wars and state collapse have had wider regional implications, causing instability in neighboring countries that led to further warfare. In these instances, civil society found itself further confronted by the challenges of networking across national borders to face common threats. Additionally, a lack of outside donor funding and coordination strategies have repeatedly hampered efforts of civil society organizations to better address the issue of civilian protection. Overall, outside of the United States and Western Europe, civil society remains a weakly developed sector. In all four regions, there exists a strong need for civil society to be empowered to better address threats to civilians at the national and regional levels.

In recognition of this need, the Fund for Peace and regional partner organizations in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe, convened six workshops on the role of civil society in early warning, humanitarian intervention and post-conflict peacebuilding from October 2003 to January 2005.

Participants were asked to discuss the criteria for military intervention to stop mass civilian casualties and relate their experiences in engaging national, regional and international organizations in their work. They were also asked to define the main security threats in the region and assess the impact of conflict on vulnerable groups. Finally, participants were asked to evaluate critically how they could improve their capacities to protect and promote human security and enhance their efforts to work across ethnic, religious, and national boundaries.

Human Security

Although the experiences and views of civil society organizations varied regionally based on historical and cultural factors, there were themes common to all four regions. It was also stressed, at each conference, that the term “military intervention for humanitarian purposes” had to be very carefully defined. The US-led invasion of Iraq, later justified on humanitarian reasons, and the resulting civilian casualties made many participants highly skeptical of using the phrase. It also led participants to debate the concept and various interpretations of human security which, in all four regions, is defined very broadly.

Human security, participants stressed, must be seen as part of a continuum of security needs if it is to be properly addressed. Particularly in Latin America and Asia, participants stated that human security is viewed quite separately from security achieved through military intervention. Both regions were subject in the past to outside military interventions that caused massive civilian casualties. There is a reluctance to tie the concept of security, achieved through military means, to development

or human rights. Participants felt that Western countries tend to view human security as a condition that must be “established or restored” rather than promoted across all sectors over time. A participant from Latin America noted that the U.S., in particular, tends to see human security in terms of a “black and white picture which then leads to black and white answers.” She noted that this narrow vision leads nations who have this view to see conflict resolution using non-military means as ineffective. Similarly, in Asia, several participants pointed out that this narrow view of human security makes the decision to turn to a military intervention to restore security “too much of an easy option.”

The overall failure of Western nations to recognize that human security must be viewed on a continuum, and not only as an “end-state,” has contributed to the overall failure of many military interventions and follow-on peacekeeping missions. The reluctance to get involved early and half-hearted attempts to build functioning institutions in the wake of internal wars have led to more instability and civilian trauma, it was noted in all conferences. Human security stems not only from stopping wars but from creating the conditions in their aftermath that allow for a country’s citizens to rebuild a functioning society. Establishing food and environmental security, as well as freedom from disease and the restoration of human dignity, are important factors in reducing the threat of armed attacks on civilians. The international community, participants felt, tends to get the military side of an intervention right while failing miserably at the development and institution-building side. One of the participants to the Europe conference summed it up: “The international community tends to leave and turn the lights out, but they don’t seem to remember that we are the ones they are leaving in the dark.”

Civil Society’s Role in Intervention

The failure of the international community to consult civil society prior to an intervention was also cited at all the conferences as being a main shortcoming in protecting civilian lives. As civil society organizations are closest to the ground and to the

populations at risk, participants felt that their input prior to an intervention was critical. Particularly in Africa and Europe, participants recounted how lack of consultation contributed to inaccurate military planning resulting in the deaths and injuries of innocent civilians. The Economic Community of West Africa’s (ECOWAS) first intervention in Liberia, where women and children came under fire, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) intervention in Kosovo, when civilians fleeing the violence were struck by bombs, were cited as two examples. On this particular point, however, a dilemma emerges surrounding the nature of military interventions, which are planned in secret in order to surprise the aggressor. A more practical solution would be to have more civil society representations within international, regional and subregional bodies that already possess local knowledge and can help guide military planners, so there is minimal collateral damage or unintended civilian casualties.

The failure of international, regional and subregional bodies to engage civil society actors was another theme common to all conferences. Overall, these organizations were seen as “elitist” and “disengaged” from the daily realities happening on the ground in the regions. This has led, participants believed, to poor decision-making processes and wasted time and resources. Although a few subregional organizations in Africa and Asia have recently made strides in including civil society representation at their headquarters, participants from these two regions still felt these efforts were inadequate. In Latin America and Europe, the confusing structures and unclear mandates of regional organizations have led to frustration on the part of civil society. An African participant noted that, to most African citizens, regional and subregional bodies are “organizations in the sky” that few understand, while a participant from Latin America stated that regional organizations are “too far removed” from the daily lives of people.

Funding

Civil society, in all four regions, is also heavily dependent on outside donor funding which has led to a sense of disempowerment on the issue of

agenda-setting. It was noted repeatedly that, although civil society organizations can identify the needs of local populations, they often do not get to address the real issues since outside funders set the criteria for projects. Reliance on outside funding has also created a dynamic of competition as civil society groups vie for scarce resources. This has discouraged cooperation nationally as well as regionally. Being self-critical, participants also agreed that relying heavily on assistance from outside the country or region has led to a lack of knowledge about how local organizations can raise revenue and influence the international community about threats to civilians. One participant in Africa stated: “We complain that they [the international community] are not addressing local needs but we are not doing a good job at making them aware of what’s really happening either.”

An issue that has further compounded the difficulties of civil society in getting the much-needed funding for their initiatives is the lack of foundations and private philanthropic communities outside of the U.S. and Western Europe. In Africa, the Americas, Asia and Eastern Europe, local NGOs are dependent upon government or intergovernmental bodies for funding. The sheer size and confusing application and accounting mechanisms of these agencies have made the procurement of money for local initiatives extremely complicated. Participants at all the conferences related how difficult it was for small, grassroots organizations to negotiate the myriad layers of bureaucracy in international organizations in order to get funding. In addition to a general lack of understanding of funding processes, there is usually not enough human capital available to dedicate to the task of procuring and managing resources. A participant to the Kenya conference noted, “We don’t have the time to fill out tons of paperwork and simultaneously try to address the needs of the people on the ground.” A participant from Asia related the same dilemma but suggested that institutions of higher education, often closer to national governments and regional bodies in that region, should be encouraged to assist local groups in fundraising to overcome the difficulties.

Threats

The current threats faced by civilians varied regionally but the common theme emerged that civil society remains the most authentic voice on security concerns faced by civilians. These threats are often far below the radar screen on the international agenda and are often missing from national security agendas as well. In the Horn of Africa, participants indicated that the transnational threats that stem from pastoral and agricultural conflicts, generated by environmental changes such as drought and desertification, have a particularly destabilizing effect. They also receive inadequate national or international attention. In Latin America, the threat posed by arms trafficking undermines regional security while internal land disputes have pushed some countries to the brink of collapse. Civil society remains one of the most crucial, and often overlooked, sources of early warning about these threats and it is a sector that should be engaged nationally and internationally to prevent conflicts before they emerge as large-scale humanitarian crises. It was agreed that a collective effort needed to be made at all levels to bring civil society more fully into the discussion and decision-making process.

Youth

Another saddening trend, common to all the regions, is the rising rates of disaffected and traumatized youth. In Africa, the wars that have ravaged the continent have left in their wake entire generations of children orphaned, maimed, or psychologically injured. The prevalence of child soldiers was given at all three African conferences as one of the most disastrous consequences of war. In Latin America, the increasing numbers of gangs made up of young boys and a general spike in the number of homeless children was cited as one of the continent’s largest tragedies and looming threats. In Asia, severe poverty and the aftermath of conflict have put children at particularly high risk to be injured by landmines, disease, and sexual exploitation. Lastly, European conference participants reported that a failure to rebuild institutions in the aftermath of the wars in the Balkans has resulted in a generation of young

people with few chances for employment and education. This has led to a sense of hopelessness and has contributed to the worrisome trend of greater youth participation in nationalist and anti-Semitic groups. “They have become easy prey for nationalists and war-monger politicians,” said a participant from the Balkans. On all four continents, the most vulnerable populations are children, and with them, future generations of these war-torn countries.

Regional Networking

Finally, aware that many of the threats are regional in nature, civil society needs to improve its capacity to network across national borders. Particularly in Africa and parts of Europe, where conflicts tend to be cyclical, and porous or ill-defined frontiers pose major threats to national stability, civil society has to develop strategies of communication and coordination to confront these issues. Participants said that civil society succeeded most in regional coordination on initiatives related to the protection of vulnerable groups. On issues thought of as more traditional “hard security” threats, such as weapons trafficking and land disputes, civil society has yet to develop clear regional strategies.

International Role

The international community has a clear obligation to engage civil society in all regions. Moreover, regional and subregional organizations, in order to be truly effective in confronting threats to human and national security, need to bring civil society organizations more fully into consultations on policies and processes they are adopting that affect the lives of civilians on the ground. Civil society itself, however, needs to decrease its heavy reliance on outside organizations for funding and develop the institutional capacities and awareness to be able to pursue money for their initiatives. Unless there is a coordinated effort by all actors to engage each other across sectors and national boundaries, civil society is likely to remain weakly developed and unable to play a large role in addressing the threats that cause regional instability in Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe.

Note: At each conference, participants were asked to develop a series of specific recommendations that addressed how to improve the capacities of civil society in each region and subregion. These can be found at the end of each section.