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The importance of dialogical relations and local agency in governance initiatives for conflict resolution

This policy brief examines the role of dialogical relations and local agency in governance initiatives for conflict resolution on the basis of field research and analysis carried out within the project ‘The Role of Governance in the Resolution of Socioeconomic and Political Conflict in India and Europe (CORE)’. Because a sustainable conflict resolution process should be a collaboration among all conflict stakeholders, we focus on the importance of positive dialogical relations among all actors who are involved in conflict resolution initiatives, emphasizing the need to allow these actors to exercise their distinct local agency. We demonstrate that ensuring open and frequent communication and dialogue among different conflict stakeholders and acknowledging the importance of local agency in conflict resolution processes can notably improve the outcomes of governance initiatives in this field. We give specific examples from the cases under investigation within the CORE project. The examples presented in this brief are based on the field research carried out by other CORE project partners and may not be representative of all governance initiatives for conflict resolution within each case.¹

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The role of communication, dialogue and hybridity

Communication and dialogue are a basic requirement of conflict resolution processes. Without communication, information exchange and relationship-building between actors involved in these processes are not possible. Communication and dialogue are essential not only between conflicting parties, but also between different peacebuilders. However, despite its importance, communication is often insufficient or missing, as in the case of the local government elections in Jammu and Kashmir in 2011. These originally evoked great expectations for development through self-governance as well as for peacebuilding in the region. So far, however, the promised devolution of functions, funds and functionaries to the local representatives has not happened in the Kashmir Valley, and the newly elected representatives have felt ineffective without powers and tasks. Field research revealed a severe lack of communication and dialogue between the citizens, the newly elected representatives and the state government in the aftermath of the elections (Das-Gupta & Singh, 2012: 2). The insufficient information from the government concerning the delay of the promised devolution has led to disappointment and deepened mistrust on the part of a large number of citizens and elected representatives. In a context of protracted conflict, such frustration risks inflaming the bigger conflict around the denial of justice and lack of democracy that exists in Jammu and Kashmir.

While lack of communication has so far prevented these elections from fulfilling their potential to function as a peacebuilding initiative in Jammu and Kashmir, dialogical interactions between the central government of India and Naga women's organizations have had the positive effect of contributing to a reduction in tension and violence in Nagaland (Banerjee & Dey, 2012: 15). Here, women activists and central government representatives directly interact around and during peace talks that are regularly held between the underground armed movements and the state security forces. The women are involved in these talks as mediators between the security forces, the armed movements and the wider society. Both the central government and the women activists are willing to enter into nego-

tiations with each other, to consider each other's demands, and to revise their approaches accordingly. This dialogical exchange results in both parties benefiting from each other in order to achieve their goals. With the government as a supporter of their demands for nonviolence and social and political rights, the women's activists have become more successful in achieving these goals. The government benefits from the women's peacebuilding capacities, their good relationships with the underground movements, and the legitimacy and trust they enjoy among their communities when striving for stability, peace and development of the region. In a broader sense, the dialogical exchange has led to gender relations being changed within Naga society in terms of a better status for and a more visible role of women in the public and political sphere. Moreover, by breaking the Naga community's taboo of working and negotiating with the government, the women activists changed the longstanding antagonistic relationship the Naga community had previously had with the government. Finally, the dialogical exchange between the women's organizations and the central government has resulted in a growing sense of empathy on the side of the government and – resulting from that – increased acknowledgement of the diversity of interests that help shape governmental policies. Consequently, the government has formed a mixed or 'hybrid' approach to conflict resolution and development in the region by combining some of the women's demands (non-violence, social welfare, social and political rights) with classic infrastructure development initiatives and economic advancement. Since this hybrid approach takes the women activists' ideas and demands into consideration, it can be assumed that it will be accepted by a larger part of society than an approach that fails to include demands from society. This example of a hybrid approach demonstrates that at the point where different actors with their ideas and initiatives interact, a potential for interesting alternative initiatives can emerge, which can be promising for peacebuilding.

Another example of a governance initiative that has gained legitimacy and sustainability owing to its hybrid character is the village-level government system in India, the *panchayats*, constitutionally recognized in 1993. The

traditional format of the *panchayat* that people were familiar with from former village-level organization was complemented with democratic norms and procedures, such as equal and inclusive participation, free elections and increased decision-making power of the local representatives. In this sense, the *panchayat* is a hybrid system based on a traditional format with democratic norms, and as such has become more valuable and attractive for its constituencies, including some of the insurgent Naxal groups. By participating in the *panchayats*, these Naxal groups have made an ideological compromise in becoming part of a system – the government – that some Naxal groups officially oppose. This is a compromise that may risk their credibility among their supporters. It has yet to be seen whether Naxal participation in the *panchayats* will result in a de-escalation of violence, but the CORE research has given indications in this direction. Several people, including governmental actors in Jharkhand, stated in interviews that giving Naxal groups a position in the official system and guaranteeing them a role in local decision-making processes could be an incentive for the movement to give up its armed struggle (Prakash et al., 2012: 11–12). Interesting to note here is that the 'hybridization' of the *panchayats* did not happen in a dialogical process but rather through a top-down initiative by the central government of India. However, owing to their democratic norms and procedures, the *panchayats* have become a structure in which dialogue among diverse societal groups at the local level has become possible.

Acknowledging local agency

Another important finding that has come out of the CORE project research is how essential the acknowledgement of local agency is in the design and implementation of governance initiatives for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Unfortunately, local agency is not taken into sufficient consideration in the design of many initiatives, or in some cases is widely disregarded. We see this, for instance, in the 'State Strategy on Occupied Territories', a policy document of the Georgian government. This was intended to promote interaction between Georgia and its breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, not only were no Abkhazians consulted in the drafting of this document, but

the document does not even recognize Abkhazia as being a party to the conflict (Mikhelidze, 2012: 4) – a blatant denial of Abkhaz agency. Furthermore, it labels Abkhazia as an ‘occupied territory’, while the Abkhazians do not regard themselves as being under occupation. As a result, the initiative has not achieved what the Georgian government had hoped, as the Abkhazians have chosen not to support or cooperate with the strategy in any way.

The legitimacy of local agency is often contested specifically when it takes the form of resistance to certain governance initiatives for conflict resolution. In such cases, resistance is usually regarded as individuals or groups trying to ‘spoil’ the peacebuilding process, but it is rarely acknowledged as a political statement. For instance, the implicit societal understanding among Greek Cypriots that products from the northern part of Cyprus should be subjected to a boycott (Vogel, 2012: 4) renders ineffective much of the Green Line Regulation – an EU mechanism to encourage trade between the north and the south. This resistance to bi-communal trade is an example of local agency expressing itself in response to what many Greek Cypriots feel is an unsatisfactory initiative, as such trade is understood to implicitly recognize the government in the north.

Resistance is also encountered in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a response to the internationally sanctioned ethnic separation that has been prevalent in the political and social spheres in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the signing of the Dayton Agreement. Such a separation was deemed necessary at the end of the war by the designers of the Agreement in order to end the violence, and can therefore be seen as a conflict resolution mechanism. In retrospect, however, this separation has led to an ethnically divided society and often to political stalemate. Many individuals have therefore chosen to resist this ethnic separation in any small way they can – for instance, by refusing to declare their ethnicity on official forms (Stavrevska, 2012: 19). Such action could be seen as an attempt, however insignificant, to criticize the ethnic separation and its effect on the peacebuilding process. In this context, it is important to recognize that agency is speaking by resisting. It is essential for sustainable peacebuilding to acknowledge the underlying reasons for such resistance and to



Indian women participate in a village meeting in Kutch, Gujarat, in July 2009. Photo: Anna Bernhard

develop approaches for recognizing and responding to it.

However, thankfully not all governance initiatives in the field of conflict resolution disregard local agency. There are a number of positive cases within the CORE research in which such initiatives do indeed take the expression of local agency into account in the design and development of initiatives. These include, for instance, many of the bi-communal civil society initiatives that are active in Cyprus, which, although funded by international donors, have activists who are Cypriot citizens and are intimately involved in the conflict resolution process (Vogel & Richmond, 2013). These individuals embody the local agency that can be exercised in favour of peacebuilding. A similar example is the initiative ‘Engagement Through Dialogue’ that has been active in bringing young professionals from Georgia and Abkhazia together for dialogue workshops. This programme is a fine example of an initiative that brings together local people on either side of the conflict to work towards common solutions to the conflict. These civil society initiatives in both

Cyprus and Georgia have met with resistance from the more nationalistic elements in society (present in the Greek Cypriot, Turkish Cypriot, Georgian and Abkhazian societies), which does limit their outreach to a certain extent (Vogel, 2012: 14; Mikhelidze, 2012: 10). Nevertheless, the initiatives have been successful at overcoming this prevalent nationalist discourse within their own work, have exercised their own agency to make themselves heard, and can therefore serve as a positive example for the building of sustainable peace.

Another positive example of the acknowledgement of local agency is a very specific initiative for conflict resolution carried out in Meghalaya state in northeast India. In 2003, the Garo Baptist Church was asked to help facilitate negotiations between the Indian government and an armed group in the state, the Achik National Volunteer Council (ANVC). The church plays a significant role in public life in the state and is greatly respected by the population (Bang, 2008: 253). This could certainly be one reason why the church was asked by the state to become involved in

the facilitation of peace processes with armed groups. Furthermore, although the state initially approached the Garo Baptist Church with the request that it become involved, the church was allowed to work according to its own methods, and its activities were entirely organized and implemented by local actors who had ownership of the process (Malaviya Centre for Peace Research, 2012: 14–16). In this case, sufficient space was given to local agency and, in the long term, the initiative was successful in that it encouraged the ANVC to take part in negotiations. As we can see from the examples above, recognizing the role that local agency can play in conflict resolution and providing space for the agency of local actors to become actively involved in governance initiatives can have a positive impact on the outcome on such initiatives.

Conclusion and recommendations

Communication and dialogue between different actors involved in conflict transformation are essential for sustainable conflict transformation. The lack thereof in a context of protracted armed conflict risks evoking even more mistrust and anger, as in the case of local elections in Jammu and Kashmir. Dialogical elements in the collaboration between different actors can lead to a range of positive transformative outcomes, as is evident, for instance, in the case of Nagaland. On the basis of these findings, we recommend that academics, practitioners and policymakers first develop a profound understanding of the different actors, as well as their interests, fears and expectations, and build a significant level of trust with these actors. After this trust has been built, channels for transparent, inclusive and sustained communication need to be established between the different actors involved, through which the goals, activities and timeframes for conflict resolution can be

discussed in a participatory manner. This can then lead to mutual learning and collaborative approaches within projects of common interest, which will further enhance trust and understanding.

Acknowledging the existence and importance of local agency, and in particular the positive role that local agency can play in peacebuilding processes, is imperative in order to ensure the participation of all actors and to build an inclusive and sustainable peace. Specifically, local agency in the form of resistance can be an important indicator of dissatisfaction with the initiatives. Instead of disregarding this resistance, it is imperative for the ultimate aim of sustainable peace that the underlying reasons for such resistance are acknowledged. Only a solid understanding of why and how resistance is used can assist in the development of approaches for recognizing and responding to it, as well as the adjustment and improvement of the initiatives in question.

Policymakers, practitioners and researchers in the conflict resolution field must not forget that a peacebuilding process is a collaboration between different conflict stakeholders. More explicitly, there can be no successful peacebuilding – let alone sustained peace – without cooperation with local actors. Therefore, when designing and implementing initiatives for peacebuilding, practitioners should encourage dialogue and aim for serious and promising alternative approaches, which may possibly be hybrid. These alternative approaches should allow the voices of local agency to be heard and to shape the initiatives. ■

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Notes

¹ For more detailed information about these topics, see the reports 'Translation of peacebuilding rationalities into practice and its effects: Local agency and everyday resistance' by Janel B. Galvanek, and 'The dynamics of relations between different actors when building peace: The role of hybridity and culture' by Anna Bernhard. Both reports are available at the CORE project website: www.projectcore.eu.

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THE PROJECT

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