

**ENGAGING CIVIL SOCIETY IN PEACEBUILDING:  
TAKING STOCK OF PAST PRACTICE**

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## **Introduction**

In the current international discourse, the importance of civil society's role in peacebuilding has become a sort of mantra, a 'mum-and-apple-pie' notion that few would dare dispute. The issue is no longer *whether* international actors should partner with local civil society in their peacebuilding efforts, but rather *how* such partnership should be effectively promoted.

This paper represents a critical analysis of this normative idea, placing into closer scrutiny its key underpinning assumptions. It sets out to contribute to a reflection on the involvement of civil society in peacebuilding processes, in particular by unpacking the underlying assumptions about the possible role of civil society in peacebuilding.

We start by tracing the rise of civil society in the peacebuilding policy discourse and by interrogating its role and the degree of its involvement in the current policy practice. We show that a number of challenges that are evident in peacebuilding policy practice go back to the conceptual confusion about how civil society and its primary roles should be understood. In order to clarify these issues, we further unpack the concept of civil society according to three major theoretical approaches: 1) civil society as associational life (an analytical approach), 2) civil society as public sphere (a relational approach), and 3) civil society as the good society (a normative approach). Each of these approaches has implications for what the role of civil society in peacebuilding could be that we briefly discuss.

# 1. Civil Society and Peacebuilding: A review of policy practice

## 1.1 The emergence of peacebuilding as normative discourse

Post-conflict peacebuilding is today a well-established, and ever growing, field of theoretical reflection and practice. First introduced in the international discourse by the UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali in his 1992 Agenda for Peace<sup>1</sup>, the notion has subsequently been elaborated in a number of UN documents<sup>2</sup> and given institutional recognition with the establishment of the UN Peacebuilding Commission in 2000<sup>3</sup>. Peacebuilding elements have come to be routinely incorporated into the mandate of UN peacekeeping operations, which have moved from a minimalist objectives of maintenance of the *status quo* to a much more ambitious goal of managing multiple, and complementary, processes of transition<sup>4</sup>.

Outside the UN system, peacebuilding has also thrived, and an increasing portion of the aid budget of bilateral donors is today allocated to post-conflict countries, with the explicit aim of rebuilding the political, social and economic foundations of peace. Fundamental to the peacebuilding discourse is the idea of the post-conflict period as a ‘window of opportunity’ for advancing a series of social, cultural and political values, which are believed to make society more resilient to future violence<sup>5</sup>.

In the eyes of many, however, this transformative project is not working – or at least, not well enough to justify the amount of intellectual, human and financial resources that have been poured into it for more than a decade. Some have questioned what is really ‘new’ in peacebuilding – whether it is only old wine in new bottles, traditional development prescriptions applied to post-conflict countries. Other common critiques include a lack of a long-term vision (with many ‘peacebuilding strategies’ being, at a closer scrutiny, merely a compilation of targets and benchmarks), use of ‘one-size-fits-all’ solutions that are oblivious to (or ignorant of) local realities, and low legitimacy vis-à-vis local populations<sup>6</sup>. More fundamentally, the peacebuilding project has been criticised for being exclusively rooted in Western political thought (a ‘liberal Wilsonian Triad’ of peace, democracy and free markets), resembling a modern, polished, politically-correct version of the colonial *mission civilisatrice*<sup>7</sup>.

Certainly, the articulation between global discourse and local practice is proving challenging, and there is no shortage of analyses and case-studies pointing to the gap between the declared benefits of peacebuilding interventions and the far more sobering reality on the ground. For the purposes of this

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<sup>1</sup> In the Agenda for Peace, peacebuilding was defined as a construction of a new environment in post-conflict settings, and, in this sense, “should be viewed as the counterpart of preventive diplomacy, which seeks to avoid the breakdown of peaceful conditions. ... Preventive diplomacy is to avoid a crisis; post-conflict peacebuilding is to prevent a recurrence” (par. 23).

<sup>2</sup> See, in particular, the UN Secretary General Report on the Prevention of Armed Conflict (2001) and the Progress Report (2006).

<sup>3</sup> On the creation and functioning of the UN Peacebuilding Commission, see Ponzio, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> On new multidimensional peacekeeping missions, see Fetherston, 2000; Paris, 2000; Richmond, 2004a, Pouligny, 2004, among many others.

<sup>5</sup> See Tschirgi, 2003. The image of post-conflict as a window of opportunity is particularly strong in the gender literature – see among many others Strickland and Duvvury, 2003; Pankhurst, 2000; Meintjes, Turslen, Pillay, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> See Kumar, 1997. For a discussion of the impact and shortcomings of peacebuilding interventions, see Alger, 2000; David, 2002; Doyle and Sambanis, 2000; Hampson, 1997; Fetherston, 2000; Ramsbotham, 2000a, 2000b; Richmond, 2004a, 2004b.

<sup>7</sup> Paris, 2002. For an analysis of the notion of liberal peace, see Heathershaw, 2008.

paper, what is interesting is to analyse the role of civil society in the design and implementation of the peacebuilding project – and the role that civil society played in the success or failure of peacebuilding strategies.

## 1.2 The role of civil society in the peacebuilding discourse and practice

The imperative of civil society represented a fundamental element of the peacebuilding normative discourse from the outset. From the Agenda for Peace onwards, all key UN policy documents on peacebuilding insist on the crucial role played by civil society. Most expanded UN peacekeeping operations missions envisage some kind of interface with civil society organisations, and international actors routinely involve civil society in their peacebuilding strategies and activities<sup>8</sup>. The resolutions establishing the UN Peacebuilding Commission refer to civil society by “recognizing the important contribution of civil society and non-governmental organisations, including women’s organisations, to peacebuilding efforts” and “encourage the Commission to consult with civil society, nongovernmental organisations, including women’s organisations...engaged in peacebuilding activities”<sup>9</sup>.

Yet, as noted by a recent World Bank’s report, this massive rise of civil society involvement in peacebuilding initiatives has not been “matched by a corresponding research agenda and debate on the nexus between civil society and peacebuilding. To date there has been little systematic analysis of the specific role of civic engagement and civil society in the context of armed conflict and even less regarding its potentials, limitations and critical factors”<sup>10</sup>.

Peacebuilding practitioners often report frustration in their attempts to interact with civil society in post-conflict settings. For a start, they find it hard to identify civil society organizations that are both genuinely rooted in communities and have the necessary capacity and expertise to serve as a reliable partner. In spite of commitments to ‘go to the grassroots’, international actors often find themselves dealing primarily with urban NGOs, which at times act as intermediaries with rural civil society groups. Without a sufficient grasp of social dynamics on the ground, international actors can find themselves unintentionally reinforcing discriminatory practices and networks of patronage<sup>11</sup>.

While these risks are not exclusive of post-conflict countries, they do assume particularly important proportions in such contexts, due to a combination of massive and sudden influx of international actors (all eagerly looking for civil society partners) and the scarcity of other employment opportunities, which make the civil society option particularly appealing. As a result, an all too common feature of post-conflict settings is the proliferation of NGOs and civil society groups, many created with the primary goal of attracting donors’ funding.

The thrust of this paper is that these problems are not merely operational and practical shortcomings – rather, they derive from a fundamental lack of clarity as to the rationale for civil society involvement in peacebuilding. The nexus between peacebuilding and civil society is elaborated along two different dimensions. At one level (what we would call the *prescriptive dimension*), civil society is seen as one of the fundamental elements of the model of social organisation that should emerge from the process of peacebuilding – civil society as an end. At another level (an *operational dimension*), civil society is seen as a partner in the process of building peace – civil society as a means. The contradiction is not merely academic: in practical terms, the two dimensions translate in different types of interventions and activities, and are measured by different indicators of success.

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<sup>8</sup> See Pouligny, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> S/RES/1645 and A/RES/60/180, 20 Dec. 2005.

<sup>10</sup> World Bank, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> On elite capture in civil society support, see Platteau, 2004.

The *prescriptive imperative* of building civil society is implemented primarily through capacity-building programmes, which envisage the transfer of technical skills to local organizations<sup>12</sup>. The success of project is often measured by its impact on building the capacities of local civil society. Programmes often aim at ‘formalizing’, ‘strengthening’, or ‘empowering’ civil society, on the underlying assumption that a strong, organized civil society represents a resilient factor against the resurgence of conflict. This is in itself a problematic assumption, if one thinks, for example, that a vibrant and highly formalized civil society existed in Rwanda on the immediate eve of the genocide<sup>13</sup>.

Within the *operational imperative*, civil society organizations are seen as partners in all dimensions of the peacebuilding process. In practice, the key role that civil society is called to play is to support in the delivery of social services, such as water supply and health care. In post-conflict reconstruction, the practice of outsourcing social services delivery to civil society actors is widespread.

The risk of NGOs service delivery to weaken and delegitimise assumes a particularly relevant dimension in post-conflict countries, where the status of the government is, almost by definition, weak and controversial. According to a recent World Bank’s assessment, “lack of government presence contributes to the dismissive attitude of citizens toward the state, even when these are elected bodies”.<sup>14</sup> Using civil society as service delivery agency, with no clear exit-strategy, raises important issues related to sustainability, accountability, and synergy of action. An often-quoted case of such bad practices is given by the international community’s reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. Assessments carried out by different donors arrive to very similar conclusions, noting that the Afghan government has been distressed by the tendency of “some foreign and foreign-supported NGOs to actually replicate the state’s tasks and thereby undermining its position in society”<sup>15</sup>.

In short, the role and position of civil society in the peacebuilding project is today widely recognized and undisputed. At the same time, it remains vague and controversial in its actual contents: what does it mean, exactly, to ‘involve’ civil society? Is civil society something to be ‘built’, or simply ‘found’? Should international actors be selective in their partnering, choosing civil society organisations which certain requirements aligned with the peacebuilding normative contents, or should they be sensitive to the context and partner with civil society organizations that are expression of such context? As the following section will explore, the difficulty of answering these questions is rooted in an unresolved ambiguity as to the exact meaning of civil society, and the rationale for its involvement.

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<sup>12</sup> See Belloni, 2001, for the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

<sup>13</sup> Uvin, 1998. The author dedicates a chapter to civil society (“And where was civil society?”), noting that civil society in Rwanda was not “the reflection of the presence of a civic space conquered by people going beyond the boundaries of family, ethnic group and location”. Rather, it was an exogenous creation, “the reflection of externally defined policies by governments and foreign aid agencies, backed up by significant resources and social pressure – all within the context of a profoundly authoritarian and vertical system, with an omnipresent state”. According to Uvin, the donor community’s tendency to favor the inflation of an artificial civil society is by no means an exclusive of pre-genocide Rwanda: “Foreign donors reward local NGOs for their mastery of the language and for adopting the goals of what they themselves adhere, and discourage organisations with political goals or with non-standard projects”.

<sup>14</sup> World Bank, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Swanstrom and Cornell, 2005: 13.

## **2. Civil society for peacebuilding: A review of theory**

As we have illustrated above, despite the prominent role attributed to civil society in the peacebuilding discourse, peacebuilding policy is characterised by a number of contradictory assumptions and problematic practices. This confusion is caused by mixed understandings of who belongs to civil society, what its contribution to peacebuilding can and should be, and as a consequence, how the involvement of civil society in peacebuilding can be supported by international actors. We argue that these problems go beyond the operational level and instead, are produced by the conceptual confusion underlying the policy debate on the role of civil society in peacebuilding. In this section we unpack the concept of civil society in order to lay bare this conceptual confusion.

### **2.1. What is the recent “associational revolution” all about?**

The end of the Cold War has increasingly turned everyone’s attention to the concept of civil society. Peaceful revolutions in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union that brought about the regime change put civil society in the spotlight both in academia and in policy-making. From an obscure theoretical concept civil society got transformed into a dominant policy approach to democracy building in different parts of the world. It is now argued to be a major means to achieve society-wide and long-lasting change as well as a final goal of any intervention be that for creating sustainable development, facilitating transitions to democracy, or post-conflict reconstruction.

The popularity of civil society in policy discourse and practice (in general as well as specifically for peacebuilding) poses a number of concrete analytical questions: who makes part of civil society, what it has to be doing and what kinds of relationships it creates and sustains internally as well as with other spheres of society.

Even though academic debate on civil society is vast and booming, none of these questions have had an undisputed answer. Even the definitions of civil society adopted by different scholars and research centres vary according to the school of thought they privilege as well as to the objects they focus on in their empirical research. The phenomena that qualify as civil society can range from different organizational forms to the public sphere in general, to the multitude of interpersonal links in a given society. Each take on civil society depends on the context and perspective concrete studies, such as of democratic practices and democratisation, security and conflict prevention or development to mention just a few.

The complexity of civil society theory as it evolved up to date can be illustrated with the help of one of the best known definitions proposed by the Centre for Civil Society at the London School of Economics:

*Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.<sup>16</sup>*

At the core of this definition there is voluntary collective action aimed at sustaining shared values and acting towards common good. It avoids delineating a clear cut space for civil society as opposed to other spheres such as state, market or family. It also refrains from establishing any equivalence between

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<sup>16</sup> [http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what\\_is\\_civil\\_society.htm](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm), accessed May 20, 2009

civil society and particular institutional forms by saying that civil society can be characterised as a totality of institutions but also as a diversity of spaces and actors. In the second part of the definition it provides several examples of potential civil society organizations, this list undoubtedly reflects an inclusive or “thick” understanding of civil society and civil society organizations.

These conceptual choices correspond to a number of important issues raised in academic debates on the concept of civil society during the last two decades. It also reveals three interrelated sets of questions about civil society: 1) analytical questions about who constitutes civil society, 2) operational questions that refer to the mode, in which civil society does or should operate, and 3) normative questions that refer to norms and values that civil society does or should uphold.

In this paper we propose to disentangle the concept of civil society according to three major theoretical approaches: 1) the analytical approach that deals with civil society as associational life, 2) the relational approach to civil society as public sphere, and 3) the normative approach to civil society and the values it should uphold.<sup>17</sup> Without going in much detail into each, we briefly bring up here those conceptual dilemmas that are of direct relevance to the debate on the role of civil society for peacebuilding.

## 2.1. Analytical approach: Civil society as associational life

Who belongs to civil society? An analytical approach consists in identifying a number core characteristics that set civil society organizations apart from other organizational forms. These include their voluntary, non-governmental, and non-profit character as well as the idea that civil society organizations are usually formed on the basis of shared values and ideas. These core characteristics are meant to set civil society apart from the state and the market, even though in reality the boundaries between these three realms are blurred and the relationships more complicated than is often admitted. A more inclusive list of civil society organizations usually enumerates non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as various associations (faith-based, women’s, youth and so on), charities and foundations, self-help groups, community organizations, advocacy organizations and their coalitions, social movements<sup>18</sup>, business associations and trade unions.

Some organizational forms are often seen as disputed cases. Should *political parties* be considered as part of civil society? In current working definitions, civil society is normally separate from political society – in other words, the former does not include groups that explicitly seek to gain political control of the State, although it is acknowledged that the border between the two ‘societies’ is often blurred.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, in Western countries, the notion of civil society has gained strength during the 1990s precisely in opposition to party politics, and was partly due to a growing disaffection of citizens towards traditional political processes. However, many authors writing about non-Western contexts have questioned the

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<sup>17</sup> In his book *Civil Society* (2004) Michael Edwards follows a similar logic and examines three inter-related visions of civil society: analytical (the forms of associational life), normative (the kind of civil society they are supposed to generate), and civil society as the “public sphere” (as an arena for public deliberation, rational dialogue, and the exercise of “active citizenship” in pursuit of the common interest).

<sup>18</sup> TILLY (2004) defines social movements as groups of people organized and coordinated to make collective claims through contentious performances, displays and campaigns. Social movements are often contrasted to NGOs, to highlight the conceptual political and organisational tensions between the two. For an extensive analysis of the *NGOs vs. social movements* debate, see BENDANA (2006).

<sup>19</sup> Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers critically note that “doing so helps defend the claim that it is possible to support democracy without becoming involved in partisan politics or otherwise interfering unduly in the domestic politics of another country”. See CAROTHERS/ OTTAWAY (2002).

validity of this distinction, and have argued for the inclusion of political parties in the definition of civil society.<sup>20</sup>

The boundaries between civil society and the market are also often blurred. *Professional and business associations* are often well developed in post-conflict settings, even if mostly in areas of relative peace and normalisation. They often comprise better educated professionals. Even though these organisations always represent the interests of their members and do not aim explicitly at general welfare and well being of the society as a whole, the contribution they can have towards building trust, improving dialogue, and aiming at normalisation of social relations should not be overlooked. In fact, the challenges posed by the conflict in many cases strengthened such associations by pushing their members to cooperate and look for collective solutions.

Next, there is a number of “traditional” forms of associational life that exist in non-Western contexts and have not had an easy entry in “Western” debate as well as in peacebuilding policy practice, where they are often excluded from the list of eligible civil society members and in any case their potential is little explored.<sup>21</sup>

*Traditional elders and religious leaders* play a significant role in their communities. Under the conditions of conflict they often represent the only source of authority and are particularly important in resolving disputes. Up to date, however, they have not been involved significantly either in the country-wide peace process or in specific donor programs. It is only in few places, like for example in Somalia, that traditional leadership of elders plays an equally important role at the community level and as part of the state structures (i.e. the Somaliland parliament). As a rule, however, traditional leadership remains a parallel structure and its potential is not integrated enough into other peacebuilding efforts.

*Community-based organisations (grassroots)* are very well developed, they act exclusively at the local level to sustain the well being of its members. These forms of civic participation tend to demonstrate a powerful sense of collectivity that translates into a whole range of successful self-help projects as well as in the efforts to rebuild education and health services and sometimes even local security. These are particularly visible in out-of-reach areas, where the presence of international and local NGOs is limited, if not non-existent.

*Churches and faith-based organisations* play an important role in many post-conflict settings. They are characterized by well developed networks throughout the country and strong links with their constituencies. By their nature, these are organizations that are primarily concerned with citizens that share their moral and behavioural codes. This characteristic does not by default prevent faith-based organizations from collaborating with other organizations or individuals that do not belong to it. It does present a practical issue in each particular case that has to be investigated to see whether it is open to other churches or religious groups and whether the goals they are pursuing contribute to peace, dialogue, and reconciliation. For example, in Liberia the links between specific religious communities and nation-wide initiatives, such as the Liberian Council of Churches, the National Muslim Council of Liberia or the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia, remain weak and more dialogue is desirable. In any case, these are civic organisations whose potential should be explored and built upon.

For peacebuilding policy, there are two potentially problematic characteristics that these organizations demonstrate: 1). they often function only within a given community (no-intercommunal ties) and therefore may reinforce the divisions that were formed during the conflict, 2). these organizational

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<sup>20</sup> For example, in his analysis of civil society in India, Ashutosh Varshney notes a double role of political parties, which “constitute an important component of civil society in a multiparty democracy but not in a one-party system. In the latter, political parties become an appendage of the state, losing their civil function. Since India is a multiparty democracy, its political parties are part of the nation’s civil society, along with its unions, business associations, reading clubs, film clubs, NGOs, and so on” - VARSHNEY (2002).

<sup>21</sup> See for example, Lewis (2001) for the discussion of civil society in non-Western contexts

models are often adopted by radical organisations like Hamas or the Muslim Brotherhood who play a significant role on the community level and may use the acquired support for igniting the conflict. Ironically, the role played by these organizations in service delivery is very close to that assigned to civil society in international development discourse. Ekaterina Stephanova aptly notes that

“in Muslim-populated areas in particular, Western-backed NGOs, as well as local interest groups and professional bodies, are not likely to enjoy wide grassroots support, in contrast to more traditional charitable organisations such as Islamic community networks and associations. The extensive outreach of the latter is the greatest strength of most radical Islamic organisations”.

This link is ever more problematic for the international community in the light of the recent events. The terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, and the subsequent Global War on Terror (GWOT), had a strong impact on international community's support to civil society. The same civil organisations that had been, until then, praised for their contribution to a democratic life (charities, religious groups, and student associations) entered in the list of potentially terrorist organisations, especially in the Arab World. From the outset, central to GWOT has been the focus on suppressing the financing on terrorist activities. A detailed array of measures to this effect was already listed in the UN Security Council resolution 1373 adopted on September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Allegedly, these measures have also touched networks and systems whose involvement in terrorism is unsubstantiated. An often-quoted case is that of Al-Barakat, a Somali Bank that operated through the hawala system<sup>22</sup>, and was widely used by the Somali diaspora in Europe to send remittances at low cost. Its closure, on the grounds of terrorist linkages, is believed to have had huge economic and social implications in Somalia.

Similar processes took place in the early 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The wish to move away from the “old” communist regimes and from all they represented was so strong that any activity that seemed in any way related to the left-wing ideology was purposefully excluded from the radar of the international community. As some of the conclusions reached after a three-year collaborative research based at the Columbia University point out:

Fearing they might lose funding, the USAID and US-based NGOs have been reluctant to provide Congress with the information showing that communists or nationalists have in any way benefited from or been affected by democracy assistance. The evidence suggests, however, that if ideas and practices take hold, they usually do so in ways that encompass a wide spectrum of political actors with varied commitments to democratization.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the potential richness of associational life in different parts of the world, in practice international community tends to deal exclusively with NGOs. Over the last two decades, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have come to be a ‘universal’ form of civic activism. The global spread of NGOs has meant that their organisational form, agendas, operational modes, and even social composition are very similar, if not the same, in otherwise very different countries. These organisational features of NGOs ‘travel’ through such channels as international conferences, transnational networks, and foreign aid industry.<sup>24</sup> NGO sector all over the world has developed into a major social and economic force that accounts for a far larger share of national employment and recent

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<sup>22</sup> Hawala (also known as hundi) is an informal value transfer system of a huge network of money brokers which are primarily located in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. The unique feature of the system is that no promissory instruments are exchanged between the hawala brokers; the transaction takes place entirely on the honor system. As the system does not depend on the legal enforceability of claims, it can operate even in the absence of a legal and juridical environment. No records are produced of individual transactions; only a running tally of the amount owed one broker by the other is kept. (Wikipedia)

<sup>23</sup> (S. E. Mendelson & Glenn, 2002) For the report of the other findings of this project see also (S. Mendelson & Glenn, 2000)

<sup>24</sup> For the description of so-called processes of NGO-isation, see (Lang, 1997; Richter, 2002)

employment growth than is widely assumed. It also boasts substantial operating expenditures.<sup>25</sup> NGOs are ever more formalized and professionalized, and they increasingly resemble bureaucratic corporate structures.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, contractual relationships between NGOs and their donors introduce undemocratic incentives for NGOs by emphasizing effective implementation over democratic practice. The moral mission of NGOs is often in conflict with issues of organizational survival. NGOs have to compete with each other for resources.<sup>27</sup> They tend to downplay difficulties or problems and to focus on easily quantifiable successes that can be attractive to the mass media in order to increase their profile and improve their track record. In the words of Simmons, “even legitimate, well-established groups sometimes seize on issues that seem to be designed more to promote their own image and fundraising efforts than to advance the public interest.”<sup>28</sup>

The stimulus to engage in an NGO (as opposed to other types of civic activism) is always an external one. For example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where events such as the National Sovereign Conference of 1991-1992 and the ‘Inter-Congolese Dialogue’ created a demand for NGOs. Each Province was entitled to present four delegates from four types of civic organisations: development NGOs, human rights NGOs, churches, media, women and youth organisations, and trade unions. Whereas 1980s in the DRC were characterized by virtual absence of any civic organisations, already in 1991 there were 112 registered organisations. By today, this number has increased by ten times.

A similar development has been noted in Liberia. The Accra Agreement included in its provisions the dialogue with civil society, and civil society representatives had to be appointed to the National Transitional Government and National Transitional Legislative Assembly. The allocation of these posts did not go without power struggles, which to a certain extent even discredited the term ‘civil society’ in the public opinion. Under such circumstances it was easy for opportunistic individuals to create NGOs in order to pursue their private political or economic interests. When the enthusiasm for NGOs together with generous ‘civil society’ funding arrives in a country, NGOs become a source of stable, well-paid employment for many. Many NGOs tend to be dominated by local elites, often they are controlled by male urban intellectuals, and in multi-ethnic contexts represent the ethnic majority. Even though some of these NGOs may still be doing valuable work, the means and the ends of civic activism become reversed.

As has been outlined above, an analytical approach to civil society as rich associational life has been particularly proficient in identifying a whole variety of forms of civic organizations. The “thickness” of the definition of civil society is one of its major contributions of direct relevance to peacebuilding policy. It can be concluded that policy-makers should aim at culturally sensitive and comprehensive assessments and evaluations of civil society in each particular post-conflict setting.

The issue of goals and thus, of primary activities of civil society remains open in the analytical approach. The emphasis on richness and multiplicity of forms of associational life implies that civic groups and organizations can be doing a variety of things and in a way, it does not really matter what they end up doing, as long as these are voluntary, non-state, and non-profit activities. Here lie two

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<sup>25</sup> (Salamon & Anheier, 1999)

<sup>26</sup> However, this proximity to the “traditional” bureaucrats may dull the critical edge of those NGOs. In this sense, there is always a tension between gaining more power and influence by entering the traditional power structures and staying outside of them out of fear of cooptation. Such concerns are expressed, for example, in the analysis by Birchfield and Freyberg-Inan of the future potential of the ATTAC movement. The authors caution that to retain its popularity and political impact the organization should try to maintain a “balancing act” between “becoming institutionalized into the political mainstream or being resigned to the status of permanently alienated opposition.” (Birchfield & Freyberg-Inan, 2004; Freyberg-Inan & Birchfield, 2005)

<sup>27</sup> (Cooley, 2000; Cooley & Ron, 2002; Henderson, 2002)

<sup>28</sup> (Simmons, 1998)

pitfalls for peacebuilding policy practice. First, such vagueness about the goals of civil society has been responsible for the tendency towards instrumentalisation of civil society by international donors towards their project implementation needs, be those projects of service delivery or of good governance. Second, this approach supports the understanding of civil society as a means in peacebuilding.

## 2.2. Civil society as “public sphere”: A relational approach

As highlighted above, civil society should not necessarily be seen as a totality of actors or organizational forms. In the course of its long history civil society theory has led to different understandings of what civil society is about. In this section, we focus on the approach that defines civil society as public sphere.

According to this stream of literature, famously represented by Habermas, civil society should be understood as a “discursive public sphere” where rational dialogue on common concerns can take place between citizens. According to Keane, public sphere “is a particular type of spatial relationship between two or more people [...] in which non-violent controversies erupt concerning the power relations operating within their given milieu of interaction” (1998: 169). In other words, civil society refers to “citizens acting collectively in the public sphere” (Diamond, 1999: 221).

Despite the differences between different authors on what exactly should be happening in the public sphere, how consensual it should be and whether and how it should regulate societal conflicts, one common feature that sets these theories apart is their understanding of civil society in relational terms, that is as a sphere of interaction.

Theories of public sphere imply a different understanding of politics itself. Edwards summarises this implication as “a return to the practice of politics, not as an elite occupation in which the public takes part once every four or five years through elections, but as an ongoing process through which ‘active citizens’ can help to shape both the ends and means of the good society” (2004: 59).

These theories are closely related to theories of participatory and of deliberative democracy. As summarised by Fiorino “new forms of participation are necessary in a world in which people increasingly lack control over social decisions that affect them” (1990: 228). This literature highlights the importance of reviving the democratic meaning of politics in contemporary societies and emphasises that being a citizen first and foremost means participating in decisions that affect oneself and one’s community (Bachrach, 1967; Pateman, 1970; Thompson, 1970; Warren, 2001). This literature often contains a political critique in that it emphasizes the need to empower the marginalized and all those normally excluded from politics and to increase their ownership over policy process and outcome. According to Carole Pateman (Pateman 1970), participation engenders civic competence by building democratic skills, overcoming feelings of powerlessness and alienation, and contributing to the legitimacy of the political system.

Public sphere represents a search for a mechanism that provides for sustained discussion, deliberation, search for shared values and collaboration, as for example in different theories on forms of deliberative democracy (Dryzek, 1990; Fung & Wright, 2003; Gutman & Thompson, 2004). It is argued that well functioning public sphere facilitates legitimate consensus over the issues of common concern, equality of voice and access, and overall collaborative ethics. It is also believed to be more creative and open to innovation and thus, indispensable in protracted societal conflicts, where old solutions do not work any longer and are part of the problem themselves. It therefore has particular value for reconciliation, as they teach “how to live with the many different forms of social conflict” (Walzer, 2002)

From this point of view, civil society is a means towards achieving a just and democratic society and as such can be understood as an end in itself, especially in places where politics has been disrupted by violent conflict. This approach does not privilege a particular organizational form or associational life

as a whole, rather it focuses on a sphere and a type of interaction. Translated into peacebuilding terms, this means that focusing exclusively on civil society actors (according to either “thick” or “thin” definition) does not fully correspond to the goal of supporting civil society. Instead, such support should envisage investments into collaborative practices between different types of actors and across communities and facilitation of dialogue. The focus should be not on concrete results but on creating an enabling environment for these processes to flourish, it is by definition a long-term process that can be triggered by peacebuilding initiatives but has to be sustained by local actors in order to thrive.

### 2.3. Civil society as good society: A normative approach

Civil society has gained such a prominent place in the discourse of international community as it is believed to generate a number of important values, such as trust, cooperation and tolerance (what we refer to as the prescriptive dimension of peacebuilding).

Here it is important to distinguish between two different lines of reasoning:

1. the one that sees civil society as a realm of “civility”, as the ethical sphere of society, i.e. the sphere that by definition is meant to generate and uphold norms and values in the society;
2. the one that assumes that associational life, once it is rich and vigorous, generates high levels of generalised trust and cooperation and in this sense contributes to strengthening democracy.

Even though these two lines of thinking come to the same point, which is explicitly attributing a normative value to civil society, the relationship between morality and civil society is different for the two. While for the former norms and values are the reason for existence of civil society, the latter sees them as a (by)product of civil society. In fact, some scholars have argued that there is no evidence that positive lessons learnt in associational life will always have a spill-over effect in the political realm (Rosenblum, 1998).

One of the most influential studies on social capital and associationalism is Robert Putnam’s *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*.<sup>29</sup> Starting with similar assumptions Putnam has taken this argument further by postulating in his research on democracy in Italy that civicness and social trust are necessary preconditions for democracy and development.<sup>30</sup> Although some criticism was leveled at this study on methodological and historical grounds,<sup>31</sup> it became a reference point for civil society research since. An important addition to the civic culture argument made by Putnam is that what matters for democracy are not only the formal institutions of representative democracy but also the informal institutions, social relations and patterns of trust, in which formal political processes are embedded. On the basis of an extensive study of the impact of the regional reforms introduced in Italy in 1970, he argued that the social capital generated through a variety of informal institutions explains the relative performance of democracies. As Putnam states in the oft-quoted conclusion: “Tocqueville was right. Democratic government is strengthened, not weakened, when it faces a vigorous civil society. [...] Building social capital will not be easy, but it is the key to making democracy work.”<sup>32</sup> A so-called “Putnam link” – a link between building trust, values, and skills through voluntary association and enhancing democracy – has been considered eye-opening for the study of civil society in both democratizing countries and established democracies.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> This work is highly indebted to James Coleman’s work on social capital. See (Coleman, 1988, 1990)

<sup>30</sup> (Putnam, 1993)

<sup>31</sup> (Piattoni, 1995; Tarrow, 1996)

<sup>32</sup> (Putnam, 1993)

<sup>33</sup> (Putnam, 1995, 2000)

Criticizing Putnam many scholars have argued that notwithstanding the contribution of his study on exploring relationships of cooperation and social trust, it fails to demonstrate a causal relationship between civil society as he conceives of it and the success of democracy. Quite on the contrary, it has been argued that a vibrant and robust civil society, if developing alongside weak political institutions, can produce non-democratic effects. For example, Berman shows that the Nazi movement in the Weimar Republic emerged from a vibrant and well-organized civil society.<sup>34</sup> Other, closer to date examples include the rise of extremist groups like the Russian National Unity and the Romanian National Union or the World Church of the Creator and the Nation of Islam. For Putnam any association or network regardless of its goals and the nature of its political engagement (or lack thereof) makes for a rich associational life; he fails to make a distinction between democratic and non- or even anti-democratic values that may be at the core of these organizations and networks. To quote Amy Gutmann's critique:

Among its members, the Ku Klux Klan may cultivate solidarity and trust, reduce the incentives for opportunism, and develop some 'I's' into a 'we' ... [but] ... the associational premises of these solidaristic ties are hatred, degradation, and denigration of fellow citizens and fellow human beings.<sup>35</sup>

To extend this criticism: Putnam fails to address the challenge of "bad civil society".<sup>36</sup> Drawing on examples from various historical contexts in which voluntary associations actively and publicly challenge the values of civility and reciprocity through the promotion of hate, bigotry, racism, anti-Semitism, and aggressive xenophobia, Chambers and Kopstein argue that - counter to the direct causal link between dense associational life and democracy - such groups present a threat to democracy and democratic values.<sup>37</sup>

When talking of networks of trust and solidarity, it is important to acknowledge that their impact on tolerance and pluralism in society is highly dependent on their composition (are they exclusively white or male or upper class?) as well as on their connections with other networks. That is to say that such networks do not generate democratic values per se: "Knowing that a church-based women's reading group is essentially a bonding experience does not tell you whether they are reading 'The Turner Diaries' or 'The Color Purple'."<sup>38</sup> To address this criticism, Putnam later developed the typology of "bonding" and "bridging" social capital, i.e. social capital based on developing solidarity within a group and social capital developed by connecting across different kinds of groups differentiated by class, race, gender, and so on. In his analysis of Muslim-Hindu relationships in India, Varshney arrives at similar conclusions, distinguishing between intra-communal engagement (corresponding to Putnam's bonding capital) and inter-communal engagement (corresponding to bridging capital). While the latter is a bulwark against external shocks, the former is not. "Organized civic networks, when intercommunal, not only withstand the exogenous communal shocks - partitions, desecration of holy places - but they also constrain local politicians in their strategic behaviour" but "if engagement is only intracommunal, small tremors ... can unleash torrents of violence".<sup>39</sup>

During violent conflict, bonding capital is rewarded while bridging capital is, by definition, discouraged (although forms of inter-communal interaction and association survive in most situations of violence). Supporting civil society in the immediate aftermath of conflict - for example, by delegating them to

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<sup>34</sup> (Berman, 1997)

<sup>35</sup> Gutman quoted in (Chambers & Kopstein, 2001)

<sup>36</sup> (Chambers & Kopstein, 2001) See also (Fiorina, 1999)

<sup>37</sup> (Chambers & Kopstein, 2001)

<sup>38</sup> (Chambers & Kopstein, 2001)

<sup>39</sup> VARSHNEY (2002).

deliver social services – might reinforce such forms of associations at the expenses of embryonic forms of social capital.

The normative approach to civil society clearly poses civil society as a framework for establishing and evaluating the ends as opposed to the means of peacebuilding. It implies that civil society - be that different forms of associational life or a public sphere - should be instrumental to generating and upholding certain values in the society. From this perspective, the discussion should not be on whether certain forms of associational life qualify as civil society, nor should it be about what the international community should do to involve civil society in peacebuilding. Instead, it should be about the terms of “civility” itself at which all peacebuilding interventions should aim (either with the help of civic groups or despite them). This means that effective peacebuilding should simultaneously focus on different societal realms and strengthen a range of institutions. In fact, the goals of participation, dialogue, empowerment, and local ownership – inconceivable as they are without the engagement of civil society – should not (in fact, cannot) be delegated to civil society only.

### **3. Conclusions**

A common operational challenge in post-conflict settings is that due to a prolonged conflict and absence or malfunctioning of state institutions, civil society organisations have taken on multiple functions, such as service provision, representation, advocacy etc. They often combine political, social, and humanitarian agendas. It is important to build on these initiatives as a source of genuine civic activism. However, it is also crucial to acknowledge that this multi-functionality of civil society is a reaction to the state of emergency and dire need and thus, the functions of civil society have to be gradually transformed as the situation normalizes.

In this paper we have argued that the challenges of involving civil society in peacebuilding go beyond the operational dimension. It is the conceptual confusion that is at the heart of the debate and policy practice on engaging civil society in peacebuilding. We have shown that more clarity is needed on three sets of related questions: 1) analytical questions about who makes part of civil society, 2) operational question about what civil society should do, 3) normative questions about the values it should uphold. In order to clarify these questions and to make explicit some conceptual challenges, we discuss three major approaches in civil society theory: 1) associationalism, 2) public sphere and 3) the good society. We have shown that while the first one helps us think of civil society as a certain organizational form that is distinct from others such as state and market, it does not help specify what exactly it should be doing. The second approach, instead, is all about the type of interaction that civil society should create and sustain. Both approaches could be understood as a description of civil society as a means that has (or does not) a particular value for peacebuilding. The third approach, on the contrary, deals with civil society as a norm that corresponds to a certain notion of “civility” in a given society, and thus, an end in itself. From this perspective, peacebuilding policy has to clarify the normative ends for its activities and should look for the means that are instrumental for achieving it. There is therefore no *a priori* recommendation for engaging one or another type of actor in one or another manner.

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