

Enabling civil society in conflict resolution

Recommendations for international donors on their relationship to Cyprus's inter-communal movement

Despite international interventions, a solution to the Cyprus conflict remains elusive, particularly since national elites use the conflict to maintain their own positions of power. Only the peace-related segment of Cyprus's civil society has found ways of escaping ethno-nationalism. By prioritizing elite talks and linking funding to conditionality, donors are losing out on opportunities to achieve society-wide mobilization and reconciliation away from the limitations of elite-level negotiations. International donors continue to underestimate the importance of peace-orientated civil society and instead attempt to institutionalize, co-opt or marginalize them. As a consequence, civil society has been confined to an isolated political space. Only through the moving of such a 'peace space' from the periphery to the centre of society will it be possible to facilitate a locally-accepted rather than an internationally-driven peace process. Accordingly, this policy brief offers recommendations as to how international donors could be more helpful than harmful by guarding the 'third space' rather than trying to manage it.

Key Questions

- What role has civil society played in Cyprus's peace process?
- What influence have funding policies had on Cyprus's inter-communal movements?
- How does civil society in Cyprus interact with other layers of governance?
- What general conclusions can be drawn from the Cyprus case regarding the provision of support for more sustainable, locally led peace processes in other conflicts?

Birte Vogel

University of Manchester

Oliver P. Richmond

University of Manchester

Background

For more than 50 years, Cyprus has been ridden by conflict over territory, sovereignty and identity – despite international peacekeeping, UN mediation, EU governance reform and civil society investment. High-level negotiations have so far failed to effectively promote a breakthrough. However, there has long been a de facto peace process taking place among Cyprus's inter-communal, peace-orientated civil society movements, which has remained hidden from the spotlight of international politics (Vogel and Richmond, 2014). This inter-communal movement seems to be Cyprus's best chance for overcoming the island's protracted conflict and thus should be supported by international donors in a meaningful way.

The problem with elite talks

Despite years of unsuccessful peace talks, most state actors and international organizations continue to claim that a solution to the 'Cyprus issue' can only be found at the international level, with questions of governance and territory being seen as obstructing conflict transformation. Rather than leading to a possible solution, however, elite and nationalist governance and the UN-supported high-level peace process have become mutually self-sustaining: The peace process allows local elites to maintain their power, as well as to access resources and alliances (Richmond, 1998). It is this, rather than the potential for cooperation, that sustains the elites' interest in the current peace process. The existing approach also retains political agency at the level of the island's political elites, who have taken advantage of and instrumentalized negotiations on both sides of the Green Line to control the relationship with citizens and civil society, often playing upon fears of a return to violence or the possibility of a 'bad' peace as a way of maintaining their influence. In the current situation, then, political elites are unlikely to promote change.

Cyprus's inter-communal peace movement

Cyprus's inter-communal movement has contributed significantly to keeping channels of communication open between the island's Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot communities even when they have been separated by



Area in the UN-controlled buffer zone dividing Greek Cyprus from its Turkish counterpart, which has been abandoned since fighting erupted between Greek and Turkish Cypriots in 1974, Photo: Eskinder Debebe/UN Photo

closed borders. In periods when negotiations seemed to be progressing, the inter-communal movement often got special permission to meet in the Buffer Zone (Loizos, 2006). In more difficult times, its members found other ways – such as through meetings in Pyla or abroad – to exchange information countering the state propaganda on both sides (Papadakis, 2005). The inter-communal movement thus echoes a long history of cooperation and hybridity in Cyprus – a trend that has been kept alive by its participants. The list of their achievements is long and offers an insight into how a lasting peace might be achieved on the island: Indirectly and subtly, they have reached into many corners of Cyprus's polity, economy and societies. They do not challenge the legitimate rights or long-held identities of any of the parties to the conflict. Their challenges to power are subtle. They have been open to divergent perspectives on peace, and have developed a range of internal operating procedures that facilitate debate, cooperation and reconciliation, despite identity differences or competing claims of various types. Their initiatives are bottom-up, locally resonant, internationally legitimate and empathetic. Such a tradition offers a useful model for peace and governance, government, and cooperation in heavily politicized post-

conflict environments. It also suggests possibilities for how internationals and elites might proceed if they wish to establish a platform for a constructive peace process.

From a theoretical perspective there are many reasons why peacebuilding should support local civil society. First, it has been frequently argued that civil society and democracy reinforce each other, with the former's democratic potential and capacity for controlling political elites being emphasized (Paffenholz, 2010). Second, inter-group contacts can help in the rebuilding of broken social relationships within a conflict area (Lederach, 1997); and, third, civil society promises sustainability and local ownership (Donais, 2012).

Donors and (Cyprus's) civil society

It is against such a backdrop that the international community has been supporting NGOs in attempts to foster dialogue between Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities even though the public image of such organizations is shaped by the seemingly dependent nature of their relationship with the international community. The internationals tend to regard Cypriot NGOs as tools within the liberal peace framework (Chandler, 2011; Rich-

mond, 2002), and thus as a vital part of an internationally envisioned solution to the Cyprus conflict, as well as the island's 'Europeanization'.

Following a global trend, internationals prefer to engage with civil society in an institutionalized form that seems easier to manage. Worldwide, this development has forced many grassroots projects into donor-driven agency in their efforts to secure the funding they need. This trend has been mirrored in Cyprus. Following a turn to civil society in the 1990s, UNDP and USAID have developed a 'strategic approach' in which they now work exclusively with 'selected' partners who have already proven to be reliable, comply with international standards and run projects fitting the criteria of bi-communalism, public visibility and long-term reconciliation. Often, however, these funding criteria and the envisaged outcomes are not in line with local needs. Why, for instance, do internationally financed publications, movies and conferences frequently offer translation/subtitles from Greek to English, but not from Greek to Turkish? Such an approach clearly favours an international audience instead of integrating larger parts of the Turkish-speaking community into projects.

Accordingly, Cyprus's current problem is that peace-related civil society actors are closely interlinked – both with each other and to some extent with international organizations – but tend not to connect publicly to large parts of the population on either side of the Green Line. Local organizations often admit that their outreach remains limited and that they need to mobilize larger segments of society if they are to exert the critical amount of pressure on local governments. This has proven difficult, however, as NGOs have been reduced to operating in a small, confined space, limited partly by themselves and partly by external actors – a 'third space' of conflict resolution. In this third space, peace-related civil society operates in an internationally protected and financed public space, but is unable to connect to larger parts of society. Instead, it creates its own (in)formal community (Vogel and Richmond, 2014). The process is driven by a range of different factors, which can be located in the local social, national political and international sphere:

- **Social stigmatism:** Peace activists face complex and subtle sanctions in their political, professional and social lives, as cooperation with Cypriots 'from the other side' still contradicts the social norms of non-interaction postulated by nationalists.
- **Local governments** play a role in further limiting the outreach by setting formal boundaries.
- **Local governments** also support social stigma by 'othering' inter-communal interactions and trying to deprive them of their legitimacy.
- **Donor conditionality:** International donors create barriers through their funding requirements and their lack of sensitivity towards local needs. Their agendas do not connect to grassroots politics and everyday life in the wider society.
- **Civil society actors** adapt their institutional setups to international norms, shifting their priorities towards donor agendas rather than concentrating on identifying local needs, which creates a gap between these actors and society at large.
- **Recent changes** in the funding policies of the main international donors have led to a situation in which a few key 'compliant' players obtain most of the funding.
- **The peacebuilding apparatus** is thus increasingly institutionalized, suppressing the heterogeneity of peacebuilding required in Cyprus's diverse context.
- **Participants** design the third space in a way that is most suitable for the more sophisticated and contextual peace project that they now envisage.

What support is needed?

Donors have been prone to adopting a rather negative view of the capacity of peace-related civil society, which is stereotyped as being ineffective, inefficient and comprised of the 'usual suspects' – a reference to the small bi-communal commune it has established. Such a view shows little understanding of the structural, social, political, professional and cultural constraints and sanctions to which NGOs and peace activists are subject to in Cyprus. If the 'Cyprus problem' is to be resolved, the political discourse will need to be led by those

who have long shown the way in the process of political and social accommodation across a range of boundaries. This will create a potential for further developing a local infrastructure for peace, which may then offer the possibility of a new polity that transcends old and dysfunctional conflict lines.

It will, however, require more external support and recognition – if only on the discursive level – to transcend the many boundaries that exist around the third space. Rather than remaining trapped by ethno-nationalist rhetoric, internationals could do far more to enable the possibilities of the peace movements. Below follow some general recommendations (which are of relevance beyond the Cyprus context) for multilateral and unilateral donors:

- At the symbolic level, offer legitimacy-boosting rhetoric that portrays participants in the civil inter-communal movement as peace exemplars to help counter the ethno-nationalist discourse that depicts them as traitors or a threat to the political order
- At the material level, provide core financing, rather than conditional financial and technical support.
- At the normative level, validate the peace movement's inclusive and cooperative philosophy.
- At the 'project level', provide support for the numerous projects that seek to facilitate co-existence and cooperation, including those within schools, academia, various professions, politics, economics and trade, tourism, heritage, etc.
- Ensure that the third space remains safe and legitimate and available for all to enter and develop, and work to reduce the boundaries around it.

Donors would do well to see themselves as servants and guardians of this third space and its hidden agency and potential, rather than its managers.

Conclusion

The location of Cyprus's main centre for peace-related activities in the UN Buffer Zone illustrates the reality of what local ethno-nationalism and an international lack of support has meant: in one sense, the island's peace movements have retreated; in another



Example of true grassroots resistance and engagement outside the donor frame: The Occupy Buffer Zone Movement that has, amongst others, opposed international policies and involvement in Cyprus between October 2011 and April 2012. Photo: Birte Vogel

sense, they have occupied an alternative space. This space is currently isolated, but it preserves ideas deemed too subversive for the wider Cypriot society, or the two states that currently exist, and even for the internationally sponsored peace process. While formally peace-orientated civil society seems to have transformed into a donor-dominated peace industry – which is certainly the case for some parts – other activists in the third space have created informal networks around Cyprus – and indeed around the world. Hence, the space is more expansive than it might appear to the untrained eye. This is the sustainable positive impact that the inter-communal movement has had: the creation of formal and informal structures of cooperation that exist not because of funding, but because of local interest and needs.

Rather than providing these organizations

with the support they need, however, changes in funding policies in conflict governance – namely, the concentration on only a few key actors – further limit the outreach of their activities beyond the third space. The ambitions of the international community seem contradictory: calling for inter-communal engagements while reducing civil society support and supporting a public peace process based on ethno-nationalist power struggles is not a viable international strategy for any conflict. Such an approach has contributed to a widening gap between mainstream and peace-oriented civil society, in Cyprus as well as elsewhere in the world. A solution to the Cyprus problem and other so-called intractable conflicts is unlikely without this third community's example being heeded on a far larger scale. The inability of the various spaces – the international, the local and the third

space – to connect might partly explain the lack of any progress in terms of conflict resolution in Cyprus within the last 47 years. ■

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THE AUTHORS

Birte Vogel is a doctoral candidate at the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute, working on Cyprus. Email: birte.vogel@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk.

Oliver Richmond is a Research Professor in IR, Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Manchester. Email: oliver.richmond@manchester.ac.uk.

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