

# LESSONS FROM PEACE PROCESSES FOR US COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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During the years I was most active in public policy consensus building and dispute resolution — 1996 to 2010 — community engagement was an important part of my work. Examples included policy deliberations on how to reduce ozone air pollution; inter-governmental cooperation on cleaning up closing military bases; and public consultation on whether, where, and how to build a major new roadway. With a government agency typically the convening authority, my main role was usually to facilitate or mediate a sustained dialogue and negotiation among “stakeholders” — that is, organized interest groups such as environmental organizations and industry associations as well as related government entities (often at multiple levels — local, state, and federal). In most of these cases, my colleagues and I made additional efforts to get input from the general public, so that those who were not necessarily part of these organized stakeholder groups could also make their voices heard. Techniques here included public meetings, newsletters and news releases, information booths at public events and in high-traffic areas, and means such as hotlines and websites through which members of the public could comment. These activities — both the sustained processes with organized stakeholder groups and the broader outreach to the general public — are part of the field of practice variously known as public participation, community engagement, and similar terms.<sup>2</sup> I practiced these solely in the United States.

In 2010, I began doctoral studies in order to advance my long-term career goal of working internationally in peace processes. In picking my dissertation topic, I was interested to explore some aspect of the peace negotiation *process* rather than content. The topic that offered me the richest literature to build on was that of inclusivity. There are many aspects of inclusivity, of which I chose two prongs: inclusion of armed groups and inclusion of civil society in peace talks. After a while I realized that *civil society* means more or less the same thing as *stakeholders* and possibly *the public* or *community*. Moreover, “including” such groups in peace processes does not necessarily mean having them directly at the negotiating table. Instead it can mean engaging them in a variety of ways (Paffenholz 2014) — many of which are the same techniques my colleagues and I had used in domestic public engagement. I find it frustrating that these two lines of practice and thought — community engagement on the one hand and civil society inclu-

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<sup>2</sup> The terms *public*, *community*, and *civic* are used more or less interchangeably, as are the terms *participation*, *involvement* and *engagement*. See Goerke ND. Globally, use of the term *community engagement* is increasing while the term *public involvement* is decreasing. See [BangtheTable.com](http://BangtheTable.com) 2014.

sion in peace processes on the other — have been so isolated from one another. At the same time, I am intrigued by the potential for mutual learning and enrichment that can come from comparing the two. My aim in this article is to begin to do that. In what follows, I will expose the reader to examples of civil society inclusion in peace processes and suggest some lessons from these cases that might be applied to community engagement in the US. While there are several lessons, my most emphatic argument is that community engagement practitioners in the US should think bigger: that community engagement has untapped potential to aid in solving major policy problems of our time.

### **Civil Society in Peace Processes**

A large body of research suggests that peace processes that include civil society in a significant way are more likely to result in full and enduring peace (e.g., Wanis-St. John and Kew 2008, Nilsson 2012, Paffenholz 2015). Several reasons for this are theorized, among them that civil society's involvement leads to greater legitimacy and public ownership of the peace and that civil society groups help bring greater transparency and accountability during the implementation stage. My own research (Ghais 2016) suggests that civil society actors help ensure that the peace process addresses underlying sources of conflict and help limit the private gains to armed leaders (such as amnesty or high-level government posts), resulting in greater public support for the peace.

Many peace processes are substantially supported by foreign governments, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), regional organizations (such as the African Union or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), and the United Nations (UN). In these circles, the need to “include civil society” has been promoted for many years. Several organizations — such as the Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative, Conciliation Resources, and Inclusive Security — make civil society inclusion in peace processes a major goal of their work. The UN's guidance for mediators (UN Peacemaker 2012, 11–13) has inclusivity as one of the eight “fundamentals” of peace mediation.

Despite the well-supported arguments and advocacy for involving civil society in peace processes, it is not always done, much less done well. Nevertheless, there are several examples of robust civil society engagement in peace processes. Unsurprisingly, these are among the comparatively more successful peace processes, although the risks of relapse into civil war remain to varying degrees. Practitioners of community engagement will likely recognize some of the mechanisms for participation in these examples, as well as noticing some (such as ceasefire monitoring) that are specific to peace processes.

### **Case Study #1: Liberia's Comprehensive Peace Agreement, 2003**

The first case is the negotiations that took place among the government of Liberia and the two major rebel groups that had engaged in Liberia's second brutal civil war. The negotiations led to the “Comprehensive Peace Agreement” (CPA) signed in August 2003 in Accra, Ghana. Several civil society organizations participated as official delegates (Nilsson 2009; NDI 2004, 7; Hayner 2007, 12) and signed the CPA as “witnesses.” The signing organizations included the Inter-Religious Council for Liberia, the Mano River Women Peace Network, the Liberian National Bar Association, Liberians in Diaspora, the Liberia Leadership Forum, and the Civil Society Movement for Liberia. These representatives engaged in the plenary sessions and spoke to the warring parties directly (Nilsson 2009, 41). Numerous other civil society activists were permitted to attend informally as observers (Hayner 2007, 12). While the three

armed parties were the “central actors at the talks” and were the only parties to the ceasefire agreement signed June the same year, “[f]or the remainder of the negotiations towards the CPA, ... national civil society actors also played an important role in the plenary sessions, giving input and pressing points” (Hayner 2007, 11).

It should be noted that activist groups were also outside the room during the peace talks applying pressure for the delegates to reach agreement. When the negotiations in Accra commenced, seven women from the various groups within the Women in Peacebuilding Network went to Ghana and mobilized Liberian refugee women there to protest with them outside the conference room. As a result, more than 200 women demonstrated, at one point staging a sit-in and locking arms to forbid delegates from exiting (even to use the bathrooms). Their demand was simply that the negotiators reach an agreement. A stand-off lasted at least two hours before the women agreed to release their human chain on several conditions, including that a peace accord be signed within two weeks. The agreement was in fact signed two weeks later (Gbowee 2009, 51; Hayner 2007, 13).

Several observers (e.g., Nilsson 2009; Harris 2006, 393–394) credit civil society participation with helping bring about a durable end to the fighting in Liberia, although a robust UN peace mission also facilitated this. Liberia has had many problems — including corruption, poverty, and the now-resolved Ebola epidemic — but a return to war has not been among them. In 2017, with president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf stepping down due to term limits, Liberians voted for a new president, leading to the country’s first peaceful transfer of power between two democratically elected presidents since 1944. It was also Liberia’s first election run without help from the UN.

## **Case Study #2: The Philippines’ Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, 2014**

After armed conflict dating back to 1969, the government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the largest separatist group representing the Muslim population of the southern Philippines, signed the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in 2014. Both the government and the MILF included civil society representatives on their negotiating teams (Herbolzheimer 2015, 5). The government negotiating team was led by a female professor and also included a Muslim women’s rights leader (Busran-Lao 2014, 28). Members of civil society have also observed the negotiations. Additionally, several implementation mechanisms, most notably the Third-Party Monitoring Team, includes civil society representatives (Herbolzheimer 2015, 5). Both the MILF and government leaders held numerous community consultations (South 2017, NP; Busran-Lao 2014, 29).

As was the case in Liberia, civil society groups also carried out their own activism related to but separate from the peace negotiations. These included “the creation of peace zones, inter-religious dialogues, capacity-building in the theory and practice of conflict resolution, the consolidation of citizen agendas, lobbying the armed actors, and the creation of ceasefire monitoring mechanisms” (Herbolzheimer 2015, 5). Academics, religious groups, local NGOs, and indigenous people’s organizations engaged in peace-building activities (Busran-Lao 2014, 29).

After some delay, the Bangsamoro Organic Law—the legislation that implements the peace agreement, the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro—was signed in July 2018. It was overwhelmingly ratified to create the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. Although ongoing

terrorist activity by groups outside the peace process has dampened hopes for peace, the comprehensive accord is being implemented.

### **Case Study #3: Colombia/Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC), 2016**

The armed conflict between the government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC) is often referred to as the longest running war in the Western hemisphere. A peace agreement to end it came into force December 1, 2016 after four years of negotiation. An earlier version of the agreement had been rejected by the voters of Colombia in a referendum, but rather than returning to war, the parties returned to the negotiating table, working out an amended version that was signed November 24, 2016. The peace negotiations, held in Havana, Cuba, provided for public forums and roundtable dialogues to be held throughout Colombia. Additionally, the negotiating teams invited written proposals via the Internet or mail, and they invited select civil society representatives to meet with them in Havana. Both negotiating teams “have regularly engaged with key social, political, economic and institutional stakeholders throughout the peace talks,” and civil society has been involved in ceasefire monitoring (Herbolzheimer 2016, 8; see also Sánchez-Garzoli 2016, NP). The parties also arranged to receive input through mayors’ and governors’ offices; national officials attended meetings of the National Federation of Municipalities to receive their proposals (Bouvier 2013, NP). Additionally, the UN Development Program in partnership with a university program conducted in-depth consultations with academics, civic groups, think tanks, and more on such critical matters as rural development (Bouvier 2013, NP).

This peace process has introduced several innovations. One is eliciting the voices of conflict victims: five groups of 12 victims each, carefully chosen for diversity by the UN, met with the negotiating delegations (Herbolzheimer 2016, 4). Another, following “significant pressure from women’s organizations,” was the creation of a Gender Subcommission “tasked with reviewing all documents issued as part of the peace process and ensuring that they contained gender-sensitive language and provisions.” The commission invited delegations from civil society groups working on gender issues (Herbolzheimer 2016, 6).

Similar to both Liberia and the Philippines, Colombia has “a thriving civil society that has impressive levels of experience in monitoring human rights violations and promoting peace at multiple levels” (Herbolzheimer 2016, 8). Outside the official peace process, there was “an upsurge of additional civil society initiatives that also seek to influence the peace process” which itself was a response “to ‘the clamor of the population for peace,’ notes the preamble to the agreement” (Bouvier 2013, NP). “Social movements (notably of peasants and indigenous communities) have continually asserted their own agenda; universities have joined efforts in a National Network for Peace; religious leaders are promoting dialogue and reconciliation at multiple levels; and the private sector has promoted innovative processes of individual and collective commitment to peace” (Herbolzheimer 2016, 8). Implementation of the peace agreement is underway.

## Lessons for Domestic Community Engagement

### ***Strong Engagement Comes from Strong Civil Society?***

One feature common to all three peace processes profiled above was a strong domestic civil society — specifically a strong peace movement — in each country involved. This is certainly not the case in all civil wars or all peace processes. For instance, in Chad's peace negotiations with a rebel group in 2002 (Ghais 2016), there was not a strong civil society in Chad at the time, and there was no civil society involvement in that peace process. In the three countries featured here, civil society gained entry to the peace processes by demanding it over time through activism and advocacy. Is there a parallel in the domestic sphere in the US? Our country has an incredibly rich civil society, with an association or advocacy group for seemingly every possible interest or subgroup. Is this why the US has been a major contributor to the growth of the field of community engagement? (The International Association for Public Participation, for example, was founded in the US.) In other words, while government agencies at various levels make efforts to engage the public, is this perhaps because there were active interest groups and publics pressing for such opportunities in the first place?

It is difficult to answer these questions, but the potential implications are intriguing. Public engagement practitioners sometimes struggle with how to engage marginalized groups such as the illiterate, immigrants, and non-native speakers of English (see, for example, PBS&J 2006). I have, for instance, heard frustrations from community engagement colleagues who dutifully get all their materials printed in Spanish, provide translators, and reach out to Latino communities, but no Spanish speakers show up at events. If a robust civil society is the stimulus for richer community engagement efforts, this shifts the question in an interesting way. Instead of a government decision maker asking, "How can I elicit and utilize the public's input" in order to enhance legitimacy for a decision or action, the more relevant question is perhaps, "How can I stimulate the growth of civil society in representing marginalized interests?"

Of course, the answer to this is no easier. For example, if governments provide grants to civic groups, such groups may spring up in an artificial way to bid for those grants (something that happened, for instance, in the former Yugoslav republics after the Bosnian war). By its nature, civil society depends on the free will and initiative of individuals to organize around their common concerns. Still, can governments perhaps facilitate this without creating "artificial" organizations? Perhaps by creating inviting public spaces? By putting up websites to enable citizens' exchange of information? By providing free meeting locations? Are governments somehow getting in the way, such as by scaring immigrants about deportation (thus making them wary of interacting with local officials)? And if so, can governments somehow get out of the way, without leaving our laws unenforced?

### ***Think Big***

Community engagement is used in many forms of administrative decision making in the US, from passing new regulations, to siting new facilities, building roads and transit, solving environmental problems, and many more. Still, these efforts seem highly limited and/or localized compared to a peace process wherein a whole country riven by civil war seeks both to bring peace among armed groups and to address the political, economic, and social problems that generated conflict in the first place. The agenda for the Colombian negotiations, for example, addressed agrarian reform, political participation, illegal

drugs, conflict victims and transitional justice, and reintegration of fighters. A public engagement effort to, say, end homelessness in one American city, though certainly complex and challenging, seems small-scale in comparison.

Our country is facing a host of serious, divisive problems: to name a few, the growing disparity of wealth, high rates of gun violence (particularly mass shootings), a broken health care system, an opioid epidemic, tense race relations, and a broken immigration system. These issues get debated freely and abundantly in the news media, on social media platforms, and in people's homes, but consensus fails to emerge. Our democratic process would normally have Congress address such issues, but Congress has become dysfunctional, too often unable to bridge partisan differences. One predictor of armed conflict is the belief among citizens that their political and legal institutions are unable to address their grievances. The existence of right-wing armed militias and occasional left-wing violent demonstrators suggests that a few Americans are already feeling that way, if perhaps around the fringes. We urgently need new ways to bring citizens together to find consensus on our big, complex problems. Would it be difficult? Of course. How much more difficult, though, than for a country like Liberia or the Philippines or Colombia to settle a civil war? I am anxious to get in front of these problems before political violence in our own country increases.

There are some groups undertaking such work on America's big, divisive issues, among them the Millennial Action Project of Search for Common Ground and the Keystone Center. Still, I have yet to see, for instance, a nationwide public engagement process on health care reform (at least not since then-First Lady Hillary Clinton's efforts in the 1990s), or one on immigration. I have seen many local dialogue and consensus building efforts, but I fear our field is prone to assuming that resources are scarce and our work is "alternative" rather than mainstream. Maybe we need to get a lot more ambitious and insert ourselves into the mainstream.

### ***Get International Help***

The most effective peace processes have benefited from tremendous amounts of outside assistance. In most peace processes, representatives of foreign countries, international NGOs, regional organizations, and the UN are swarming the relevant capitals or meeting locales, seeking the gratification and/or the glory of helping to make peace. Several countries and foundations disburse funds to promote peace. Anyone in the conflict resolution field knows that sometimes relatively detached, outside interveners can bring a helpful, fresh perspective and can synergistically partner with local insiders. Why not invite a few foreign experts from the Organization of American States (OAS), the UN, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to help us with our seemingly hopeless internal divisions? In our globalized world, one country's internal problems create spillover effects for other countries, such as migration, terrorism, and disease. Other countries therefore see some interest in devoting resources to help troubled societies. This is not to suggest the US is in as bad a condition as, say, Syria, but rather that our divisions may be serious enough that some outside perspectives may help.

## Conclusion

My first goal in this paper was to begin the process of sharing between the two distinct sub-fields of community engagement and inclusive peace processes. I have only begun. I also emphasize that the lessons can be applied in the other direction — that is, peacemakers can learn from the methods and examples of community engagement — and I plan to help in that arena too. I have described how a vibrant civil society is a key way to bring forth the voices of the marginalized, how we need some large-scale peacemaking here in our own country, and how we might benefit from outside help. Others may draw different conclusions, and I welcome the discussion.

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