Building and sustaining an inclusive peace:
The role of local civil society and community engagement in operationalizing the Sustaining Peace agenda and ensuring that no one is left behind

Summary Note

In discussions on the 2020 UN peacebuilding architecture review currently underway, there is consensus that international policy and practice must focus on the implementation of the UN peacebuilding and sustaining peace resolutions and achievement of concrete results at regional and country levels. With that in mind, the Dag Hammarskjold Foundation (DHF), the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), and the International Peace Institute (IPI) has initiated a series of roundtable discussions to examine the strategies towards the operationalization of Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace.

The twelfth event of the series held on 30 September 2020 provided a space to share examples of how meaningful partnerships can bring tangible impact at the country and community level; to discuss challenges in community engagement; and to identify concrete steps in which the normative commitment to inclusivity of diverse civil society and local community actors can be operationalized. Participants included experts from permanent missions to the UN in New York; representatives from UN departments and entities at Headquarters and country level; and civil society actors working with international and local organisations. This summary aims to capture key themes raised and examples shared during the discussion as well as recommendations and next steps for action that were put forward to address persisting challenges.

It is well-documented that inclusion is a prerequisite for peacebuilding and sustaining peace. Any transformation within a society – including the transition towards more peaceful institutions – starts with individuals and is often led by civil society. For instance, during the 2016 elections in the Gambia, a civil society coalition formed a group of 124 observers across the seven regions in the country to monitor electoral processes, establish situation rooms and observe activities.[1] This helped create a framework for peaceful elections and good governance, which is a key element of sustaining peace.

Inclusivity and community engagement received recognition in the outcomes and format of the 2020 Peacebuilding Architecture (PBA) Review, reinforcing the acknowledgment of inclusion as imperative for sustaining peace enshrined in the 2016 resolutions. The informal stage included numerous consultations co-organised by civil society to incorporate local perspectives. The key outcome documents that emerged from the informal stage recognized

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[1] Foroyaa, "Civil Society Coalition (CSO) on Elections- The Gambia," December 13, 2016, https://foroyaa.net/civil-society-coalition-cso-on-elections-the-gambia-press-statement-on-the-rejection-of-results-of-december-1-presidential-election/

the centrality of inclusion to drive sustaining peace. The recent 2020 Secretary-General's Report on peacebuilding and sustaining peace suggests that the progress made in advancing inclusivity is one of the best defenses against conflict.[2] The Independent Eminent Persons' Letter to the Secretary-General as input to the 2020 PBA review indicates that "international and national civil society organizations, women's groups, youth organizations, the private sector and academia to participate in peacebuilding, political and economic processes in a meaningful and sustainable way [because] this would help generate positive change, carrying forward community voices and holding Governments accountable."[3] The Letter from the Chair of the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) to the General Assembly and the Security Council summarizing input from a series of consultations conducted as input to the review recognized the need for "partnerships with civil society, including women and youth-led organizations to measure impact on the ground and that "inclusion is a central aspect of peacebuilding."[4]

However, challenges to meaningful community engagement remain due to the ad-hoc nature of the UN's approach to inclusivity, lack of appropriate follow-up including by intergovernmental bodies, like the PBC, and shortages of flexible funding for civil society organizations. COVID-19 risks have exacerbated these challenges by diverting funding from peacebuilding to humanitarian response, shifting the focus from local to national responses, and limiting conflict-sensitive analysis.

- *Institutionalization of community engagement at country-level is critical to the implementation of global policy frameworks.*

International normative frameworks, including on sustaining peace, Women, Peace and Security and Youth, Peace and Security, provide strong guidance for Member States, international and regional actors on how to achieve a systematic change in power dynamics and ensure that all peacebuilding efforts reflect the needs of communities. They also call for systematic, meaningful and diverse participation of communities and civil society, through their direct and indirect engagement. These frameworks provide an advocacy tool for the UN at the country level and for local civil society to call for community engagement in programmatic work, political and peace processes at all levels and across all UN pillars - human rights, development, and peace and security. Clarity on how to operationalise them is still lacking within UN Country Teams (UNCTs) and local civil society, however, and there is a need to translate or 'decode' what is considered technical language to identify what they require in specific contexts.

In peacebuilding efforts, this normative foundation has already translated into a variety of tools, processes, and initiatives by the UN to institutionalize community engagement, which were shared by roundtable participants. For example, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) in the

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[2] United Nations General Assembly, "Report of the Secretary-General: Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace" July 30, 2020, (para 2).

[3] United Nations General Assembly, "Identical Letters Dated 6 July 2020 from the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Security Council," July 13, 2020, https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/2009354e-2_1.pdf

[4] United Nations, "Peacebuilding Commission Letter on 2020 Review President of General Assembly to President of Security Council," July 2, 2020, https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/pbc_letter_on_2020_review_pga_psc._approved.pdf

Gambia is using capacity mapping tools to conduct training and to facilitate dialogue sessions,[5] based on an understanding that mapping civil society is a first step towards meaningful participation and helps ensure that civil society-led peacebuilding initiatives are supported and strengthened, rather than duplicated. The recently developed UN System-Wide Community Engagement Guidelines on peacebuilding and sustaining peace is another tool that can strengthen a meaningful and effective partnership between the UN at the field level and local communities, if consistently implemented.

Further implementation of available tools requires committing to institutionalized, diverse, risk-informed civil society participation. One way to operationalize community engagement is by the integration of the Guidelines in the development of UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks, for example through joint UN-civil society working- and advisory groups, such as the CS-UN Prevention Platform in the Gambia. Intergovernmental oversight and accountability for the implementation are critical to ensure that implementation will make a difference at country level.

- *Expanding forums and protecting safe spaces for local civil society engagement results in better programmatic outcomes at country level.*

Context- and conflict analysis that is conducted to inform peacebuilding approaches should draw on the insights and collective wisdom of all actors in peacebuilding, including civil society. An opportunity for this is the development of the Common Country Analysis (CCA) and the Cooperation Frameworks, as well as the work of the PBC.

At the country level, there are several good practices for local civil society engagement in analysis and mapping. In the updated CCA in the Gambia, civil society is engaged in a multi-sectoral platform for coordination, implementation, and monitoring of programs on governance and peacebuilding that includes civil society and the UN System[6]. In Colombia, at the beginning of the process to develop the UN Verification Mission, extensive consultations took place with civil society, including women's peace organizations[7]. This resulted in one of the most gender-sensitive implementation processes for a peace agreement, where women's needs and priorities have been recognized and followed-up. In Kenya, civil society led the development of a multisectoral national strategy on COVID-19 response, which addresses the peace and human rights concerns arising from the pandemic.[8]

As demonstrated in the example of the peace process in Colombia, early consultations with civil society can result in buy-in from local communities and build their commitment to driving the peace process at the local level because local actors felt that their opinions have been taken into consideration and have resulted in more informed decision making that reflects their realities. Many peacebuilding interventions fail to deliver sustainable peace because local actors do not develop an attachment to the ideals and goals of international interventions that

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[5] UNFPA, "Capacity Building on Peaceful Political and Constitutional Debate Processes as a Gateway to Inclusivity and Active Participation of Youth," December 8, 2019, https://gambia.unfpa.org/en/news/capacity-building-peaceful-political-and-constitutional-debate-processes-gateway-inclusivity
[6] UNDP-DPPA, CDA, and WANEP, "Conflict and Development Analysis: The Gambia," June 2019, https://dppa.un.org/sites/default/files/final_2019_updated_cda_report_18_july_2019.pdf
[7] United Nations Security Council, "United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia: Report of the Secretary-General," June 26, 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/S_2020_603_E.pdf
[8] UNAIDS, "Civil Society Organizations in Kenya Call for A Response to COVID-19 that Respects the Rights and Dignity for All," May 26, 2020, https://www.unaids.org/en/20200526_Kenya_cs

offer a version of peace that seems distant from the reality of everyday life. Moreover, roundtable participants emphasized that effective engagement must go beyond simply consulting civil society and must ensure that their insights are integrated into decision-making and programs.

At the global level, the PBC has provided a platform for civil society to share their perspectives and experiences, and influence member states' decision-making. However, the existing engagement is not always transparent and has limited follow-up. The PBC could take up leadership on supporting inclusivity by inviting a diverse range of civil society experts, more regularly following up with them regarding changes in the situation, for better impact of peacebuilding at the field level.

- *Financing should be accessible directly to local peacebuilders to operationalize the sustaining peace agenda at the local level.*

Funding for civil society is an essential element in the implementation of peacebuilding and sustaining peace. The 2020-2024 Peacebuilding Fund (PBF)'s strategy maintains core focus by scaling up support for cross-border and regional approaches, transition contexts, and inclusion of women and youth in political and peacebuilding processes.[9]

In particular, through its Gender and Youth Promotion Initiative (GYPI), the PBF supports initiatives aimed at advancing gender equality and women and youth leadership in local communities. In many contexts, creating impactful peacebuilding activities is not possible without local expertise and knowledge.

Nonetheless, the PBF is neither designed nor does it have the resources to cover all of the funding needs of local civil society in peacebuilding contexts. To date, civil society receives limited funding for its peacebuilding work and priorities, with core grants to civil society diminishing, and overall funding is likely to be further constrained by Covid-19. Heavy eligibility and reporting requirements and complex application processes can limit access to funding for diverse civil society organizations, including in particular women- and youth-led organizations, and other community actors. Financial, bureaucratic and political constraints as well as a limited understanding of local priorities by the donor community play into funding decisions and can ultimately impact the success of local peacebuilding work, especially outside of capitals and in urban areas.

Next year, the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) is conducting a series of thematic reviews, including one on the PBF, which could serve as an opportunity to reflect on how it could scale up opportunities to strengthen local action and make funding more accessible to local actors. It is important that this review assesses opportunities to maintain focus on local peacebuilding, including in the context of crises, and identifies better strategies to avoid duplication of funding in the spirit of "good peacebuilding donorship." Donors should provide long-term, flexible core funding opportunities available directly to civil society organizations and support innovative approaches to grant-making that take into consideration the administrative capacity of civil society organizations.

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[9] United Nations Peacebuilding, "Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund: 2020-2024 Strategy," https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/pbf_strategy_2020-2024_final.pdf

- *The UN should prioritize its engagement in protecting civic spaces and in building trust between the government and civil society.*

The distrust between the government and civil society in many contexts creates significant challenges to peace. On the one hand, civil society often views the government with suspicion, questioning their intentions – particularly where limits on freedom of association, independent media and other human rights violations are rife. On the other hand, governments are often distrustful of civil society, wary of criticism and outside influence. These dynamics have worsened in the context of COVID-19. The United Nations could support ongoing training for governments and civil society for building up joint capacities for action, including under the umbrella of the UN System-wide Community Engagement Guidelines.

Sustaining peace requires a multi-stakeholder approach that is guided by 1) inclusion, through ensuring effective participation of civil society; 2) the establishment of relationships based on mutual respect and responsibility to empower stakeholders' actions; and 3) accountability and transparency at every level of decision making. This could be strengthened through the following recommendations:

- The UN PBSO, in close coordination with the Development Cooperation Office (DCO), should support **UNCTs to understand and integrate the CEG with existing policies and mechanisms** to ensure institutionalization of engagement with civil society and build on existing examples of joint UN-civil society working groups and advisory groups. The Core Team on implementation of Sustaining Peace in coordination with civil society should advocate for **intergovernmental monitoring of and accountability** for implementation of the UN System-Wide Community Engagement Guidelines at country level.

- UNCTs should assist national and local actors in **adapting or decoding the language of global normative frameworks that call for inclusivity** to ensure resonance with local contexts and national policies, and in doing so clarify the links between frameworks to facilitate monitoring, reporting and accountability.

- UNCTs should **support ongoing training for governments and civil society** for building up joint capacities for action, including under the umbrella of the UN System-wide Community Engagement Guidelines.

- The Common Country Analysis and the Cooperation Frameworks should as standard practice **include local civil society as partners alongside government** to ensure effective information exchange and joint action for prevention and response.

- The Peacebuilding Commission should provide **leadership on supporting inclusivity** by inviting relevant and diverse civil society experts to meetings more regularly, with appropriate follow-up, and provide a platform that would allow Member States to reflect on the experiences and expertise of civil society in conducting its work for a stronger impact at the field level.

- The Peacebuilding Fund and other pooled funding mechanisms should **scale up opportunities for strengthening local action.** The forthcoming review of the PBF should maintain focus on local peacebuilding and in that regard explore effective

strategies for making funding more accessible to local peacebuilding organizations, including in the context of crises, in the spirit of "good peacebuilding donorship".

- Donors should **increase long-term, flexible core funding** that is provided directly to civil society organizations and support innovative approaches that take into consideration the administrative capacity of civil society organizations.