PARTNERSHIPS IN CONFLICT

How violent conflict impacts local civil society and how international partners respond

Monica Stephen
With case studies by
Elizabeth Drew (Myanmar),
Christina Ellis (DRC) and
Rabia Nusrat (Afghanistan)

international alert

OXFAM

What this report is about

This report summarizes the findings of new research on the impact of violent conflict on civil society organizations (CSOs) and the implications for international actors who partner with them. Where international actors struggle to get access to contested territories and rely on national or local CSOs to reach conflict-affected communities, partnerships allow life-saving resources to reach the people who need them most. And as commitments to localization grow, international funding flows to CSOs are set to increase. Yet this study finds that international actors often fail to understand the highly politicized and insecure environments they operate in and do not do enough to support and strengthen the CSOs with whom they work.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, thanks are due to our interviewees. These included representatives from Oxfam partner organizations in Afghanistan, DRC and Myanmar, Oxfam staff from these and other countries affected by violent conflict, and other CSO representatives working at local, national and international levels on relevant themes. For your time, insights and ideas, the research team would like to thank you. We hope we have done your contributions justice and that this report will help to drive improvements in the support available to those working in conflict settings.

Thanks are also due to the project advisory group made up of staff from Oxfam and International Alert who together created the space and offered insights and encouragement to make this piece of work happen. They are Phil Vernon, Summer Brown, John Magrath, Yo Winder and particularly to Annabel Morrissey, who contributed hugely to the report. Thanks also to Kathryn O'Neill for editorial support.

As with all reports of this nature, a multitude of people contributed their time, reviewed drafts and shared insights and ideas to produce the final product – thank you. We hope the final product will be useful to you.

Front cover photo In Masisi territory in North Kivu, eastern DRC, the effects of conflict mean that some people walk for days to sell everything from coal, to wood, and vegetables. The region has been affected by conflict for decades. Photo: Eleanor Farmer/Oxfam.

Back cover photo: A group of refugees from Afghanistan crosses the border from Serbia to Croatia, October 2, 2015. Photo: Sam Tarling/Oxfam

FOREWORD

FOREWORD

Violent conflicts cast a shadow every day over millions of lives around the world. Countless communities have been devastated and record numbers of people forced to flee their homes – more than the entire population of the United Kingdom.[1]

In troubled regions, a range of groups – local charities, business people, advocacy groups, aid organizations and many others – are playing a crucial role. They respond to critical human needs and in myriad ways hold the social, political and economic fabric of society together. Civil society voices and activism support and shape development and peace-building efforts in ways that promote progressive reform, stability and sustainability.

In too many conflicts, however, civilian populations, their organizations and infrastructure are increasingly targeted – and not only by armed extremist groups. Hospitals and medics have been attacked in Syria, Afghanistan and Yemen by pro-government forces, for example. Repressive regimes and rebel forces alike often seek to stamp on progressive voices and action.

Development, peace-building and humanitarian activities work best when they are owned and delivered by people from and in the countries concerned. Oxfam and International Alert recognize this and know that our impact depends on how we engage with civil society in the countries where we work. In conflict-affected contexts, getting this right is particularly important.

Civil society helps shape its context, but is also shaped by it. Not only does conflict often have a devastating impact on people's freedoms, their safety and their well-being, but it also influences the choices that civil society organizations make about what to focus their efforts on, and where and how to do so.

Sometimes that is for the good – for example, when women's organizations that have played a leading role supporting vulnerable community members during conflict, continue to provide leadership after the guns fall silent. Other times, civil society actors can be diverted from their basic purpose – for example, as when an organization created for political activism to address the underlying causes of poverty takes on a role providing humanitarian relief and dealing only with the consequences.

This study provided a welcome opportunity for our own two civil society organizations to collaborate, by bringing together our combined expertise in local activism for change, human rights, peace and conflict. Both Oxfam and International Alert have long experience engaging with local partners in fragile and conflict-affected areas. We often play the intermediary role between international donors and local groups, which is why it is so important that we continue to understand how our own actions and those of others can strengthen or weaken local civil society and our partnerships with them.

Within the international community, there has been a spate of initiatives to put local civil

society in the lead in humanitarian and development programmes. However, shockingly, this is not yet the norm, especially in conflict-affected contexts. Unfortunately, this report finds that when it comes to partnering with local civil society organizations, international actors still do it poorly – despite aspirations to do it better. They still tend to dominate the agenda, transfer risks to local partners, fail to provide the kind of long-term and predictable support which they know is needed, and they continue to fund large, Western-style organizations rather than small and medium-sized ones that might be more in tune with community needs. 'Capacity building' – criticized by some as patronizing – too often reflects the priorities and needs of international donors, especially for reporting requirements, and too little the needs of groups seeking to work effectively in violent and politically polarized environments. The research findings from Myanmar, Afghanistan and DRC sometimes make for uncomfortable reading on the failings of our sector, including our own organizations, to change enough. There are of course good valid reasons – such as the fact that we are ourselves caught by rigid donor requirements – but these must never become excuses; we must be bolder in changing the practices of our own organizations.

In places affected by conflict, a special effort is required to get this right, and international agencies need to examine their role in providing adequate and transformative support to civil society actors – and avoid being yet another of the numerous challenges civil society actors come up against.

The findings from this research underline the importance of continuing to improve the way we engage within civil society. In this respect, we recommend the findings and recommendations to donors, international NGOs, and to civil society organizations in the countries where we work. Whatever the extent of one's experience – between Oxfam and International Alert we have more than 100 years of experience – there is always so much more to learn to improve the way we make our contribution to peace and progress.

Harriet Lamb, CEO, International Alert

Mark Goldring, CEO, Oxfam GB

CONTENTS

How to navigate this document
Click on the contents list below to take you to the relevant page.
To get back to the contents, click anywhere on the page numbers.

Acknowledgements 2

Foreword 3

Executive summary 8

Abbreviations 12

1 INTRODUCTION 13
Civil society in context 15

2 FINDINGS: HOW DOES CONFLICT AFFECT CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS? 17
2.1 Heightened violence in society 18
Heightened risk to CSO staff on the front line 18
CSOs forced to redirect their work and resources 19
Increases in sexual and gender-based violence 19
Protracted violence weakens CSO capabilities 20
2.2 Diverse and competing claims to power 21
Basic service provision as a pathway to power 21
State-driven restrictions on civic space 22
Blurring of lines between political space and civic space 22
Traditional and customary authorities and civic space 24
2.3 Dynamics within civil society 25
Trust and 'trust deficits' within civil society 25
CSOs' identities do not predetermine the people with whom they work or the values that they promote 26
Divisions across civil society on women's rights 28
Building networks across conflict divisions 30
2.4 The nuances of partnership approaches 32
Partnership approaches: are they about transactions or transformation? 33
Engagement without conflict analysis is high-risk 34
Whose capacities need building? 35
Responsible risk and security management 37
Problems linked to funding 38

3 CONCLUSIONS **41**
Building more equal and effective partnerships in conflict settings 42
How can international organizations develop enabling partnerships with national and local CSOs in conflict settings? 42
Choosing partnership approaches that support and strengthen CSOs in conflict settings 43

Bibliography **45**

Annex 1: Key concepts and terms **46**

Annex 2: Overview of case studies **48**

Notes **51**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Violent conflict destroys, disrupts and reshapes relationships across society. Despite many years of working in partnership, international organizations often do not sufficiently understand how violent conflict affects local and national civil society organizations and how their own actions (e.g. decisions about which groups to partner with and the terms of partnership, which geographical areas to work in and what activities to focus on) affect the prospects for sustainable peace, security and development.

International actors increasingly work in violently contested territories and rely on national or local CSOs to reach conflict-affected communities. As support for the localization agenda and the Charter for Change[2] grows, partnerships in conflict settings will be increasingly common and vital to ensure that life-saving resources reach the people who need them most.

This report aims to contribute to building more equal, effective and enabling partnerships in conflict settings. It is based on research commissioned by Oxfam (a leading multi-mandated international NGO) and conducted with International Alert (a leading peace-building international NGO) in three protracted conflict settings: Afghanistan, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Kachin state in Myanmar.[3] It examines the impact of violent conflict on civil society and on CSOs and their staff, and calls on international actors to develop a more sophisticated and nuanced approach to partnerships – one that strengthens rather than undermines the role of CSOs in conflict settings.

The findings highlight areas of strain and tension but also of opportunity in relationships between international actors and their local civil society partners. Particular areas within partnerships that need to change if both international actors and their local partners are to maximize their impact are highlighted in the key findings and summary of conclusions.

While the messages in this report may not be new, they demand an urgent response; not least because of their security and ethical dimensions. International and local partners must redouble their efforts to forge strong and mutually reinforcing partnerships that put localization into practice and meet the needs of vulnerable communities living in the grip of protracted violent conflicts.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Heightened violence in society:** High levels of violence in society change the work CSOs do, and these changes can be difficult for CSOs to manage. Marginalized and excluded communities face acute pressure when violence escalates, but at the same time their support systems and networks are fragmented and weakened by violence and displacement. CSOs on the front lines often shoulder an increased risk burden with limited support, and the 'transfer of risk' from international organizations to local organizations needs to be addressed. Exposure to protracted violence and insecurity destroys education systems and causes trauma, impacting the way CSOs in conflict settings learn and work.

- **Diverse and competing claims to power:** Provision of basic services is an important pathway to popular legitimacy and power for competing conflict actors, and this can make CSO resources and activities a target. Where violent groups are active and cultures of impunity reign, it is dangerous for CSOs to tackle issues that governing authorities perceive as a threat to their power and interests. When the power of state actors is threatened, state-driven restrictions on freedom of expression, association and assembly commonly challenge CSO effectiveness, security and survival.
- **Dynamics within civil society:** Opportunities for dialogue and engagement on issues of common interest to CSOs from across conflict-divided communities can help to reverse 'trust deficits' that characterize conflict-affected societies. Where identity is an important conflict dynamic, their identities can enable CSOs to work more effectively within certain communities, and struggle to engage with others, but this is not always the case. Where formal mechanisms for engaging with governing authorities are fractured, CSOs and international actors alike may need political connections on all sides of the conflict in order to operate.
- **How international actors respond:** International assistance is a conflict commodity, but international actors often fail to analyse the interaction between conflict dynamics and their engagement, putting themselves, their partners and the communities they serve at risk. 'Capacity building' initiatives are often loaded with power dynamics and their content and format is often poorly tailored to CSO priority needs in conflict settings. On risk management, international actors often transfer risk to their partner CSOs via remote programming, and systematically provide different levels of security provision for international actors and their CSO counterparts. Funding patterns can weaken the development of local civil society, in effect leaving behind smaller, grassroots CSOs and those working with marginalized groups. Conventional approaches to partnership often 'professionalize' CSOs or can limit them to sub-contracting modalities, but fail to support their influence in strategic decision making, and weaken CSO ties with the communities they serve. Overall, international actors typically underfund their engagement (INGO and CSO operations) in conflict settings, not recognizing the heightened costs of operating responsibly in violent conflict.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

Building more equal and effective partnerships

- **Invest in more nuanced and more frequently updated conflict and political analysis that is gender-sensitive, to make informed decisions that do no harm and are not subject to political manipulation by parties to the conflict (including the state).** In the humanitarian sphere, conflict-sensitivity, or politically informed humanitarian action, is critical to upholding the humanitarian principles of independence and impartiality. In the months following humanitarian crises, international actors need to ensure they conduct more in-depth analyses to adapt the subsequent phases of humanitarian programmes. Access

to country-specialist conflict advice can transform how international actors understand and manage conflict-related risks with partners and the types of impacts they and their partners should and can expect to achieve.

- **Reframe partnership approaches and models to give more effective and appropriate support to CSOs in conflict settings.** Acknowledging the power asymmetries that underlie partnerships is an important first step to building more enabling partnerships, and this requires trust and honest conversations. International actors need to embark on frank internal reflections reviewing their own commitment to partnership and what this means for how they choose to allocate funds, especially unrestricted funds, to CSOs; how they hire dedicated partner support teams that can work with and within partner teams; and how they ensure that INGO staff have the necessary knowledge, skills and capacity to meet the staff and organizational development needs of CSO partners when working in conflict settings. International actors also need to consider how their funding patterns and project timeframes play a role in strengthening or weakening the institutional capacity of CSOs and local civil society as a whole. Building more enabling partnerships is expensive, with overheads up to three times higher in conflict settings. So finding ways to finance responsible partnerships that advance localization in conflict settings is an urgent priority.
- **Support partner staff and organizational development based on partners' expressed priorities.** CSOs operating in conflict settings have unique and context-specific needs and opportunities. International actors need to listen more carefully and be more responsive to supporting the staff and organizational development needs of their partner CSOs. This typically involves tailored support packages that go well beyond one-off capacity building workshops.
- **Manage risk, manage the transfer of risk.** The transfer of risk from international actors to CSOs via remote programming in conflict settings is an issue that needs attention. Given the power differentials between international actors and their CSO partners, international actors have a responsibility to work with their CSO partners to identify solutions that help to practically manage risk. Enabling CSOs to develop appropriate security management and resourcing when risk is transferred is essential for their staff safety and organizational legitimacy and effectiveness.

ABBREVIATIONS

CSO	Civil society organization
DFID	Department for International Development (United Kingdom)
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EU	European Union
IDP(s)	Internally displaced person(s)
INGO	International non-government organization
KIO/A	Kachin Independence Organisation/Army (Myanmar)
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NGO	Non-government organization
NGC/KC	Non-Government Controlled/Kachin Independence Org. controlled areas (Myanmar)
ODA	Official development assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
UN	United Nations
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Violent conflict destroys and disrupts lives and livelihoods, traumatizing people and polarizing communities. Protracted violence, political pressures from parties to the conflict, and tensions between and within communities vastly affect the civic space in which local and national civil society organizations (CSOs)[4] operate. Put simply, it affects what CSOs do, where they work, and how they work. Many CSOs have struggled to manage the organizational and other pressures experienced as they try to respond to people's needs in extremely challenging day-to-day circumstances.

Internationally, there is growing support for the localization agenda, and the proportion of international assistance directed to conflict settings is increasing. Localization in conflict settings calls for international partners to think and work differently with their local partners. Support for localization stems from the acknowledgement that outsiders can have disproportionate power and influence over strategy and programming, at the expense of people who live in the context. The debates around localization are not straightforward and there are important challenges that need to be addressed. However, the aim of this report is not to focus on these wider debates but to examine how local actors themselves are impacted by violent conflict, and what international actors can do to better support civil society within these contexts. It addresses the practical question, how should INGOs support localization in practice and how should they reframe partnerships to deliver the kind of support CSOs need in violent conflict settings.

The research that informs this paper was commissioned by Oxfam and conducted with International Alert in three protracted conflict settings – Afghanistan, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Myanmar (Kachin state). The research included 68 interviews with key informants, more than 40 of them from local and national CSOs, the rest were thematic experts from international NGOs, think tanks, donor governments and intergovernmental organizations. A literature review was also carried out. Most CSO staff interviewed were current Oxfam partners; typically, registered CSOs working on humanitarian, development and advocacy issues.

Oxfam's Keystone Partner Survey 2014 indicated that there is room for significant improvement in how Oxfam works with local partners.[5] Some issues raised by the survey have particular relevance to partnership building in conflict settings. For example, partners reported that financial support from Oxfam is not flexible; that partnership negotiations are quick but not open to being tailored to partner needs; that partner staff and organizational development support is mostly below average; and that there is a need for much more support to help local partners protect themselves from threats.[6]

This report examines the interaction between civil society and violent conflict. Four broad dynamics are explored: heightened levels of violence in society; diverse and competing claims to power; dynamics within civil society; and how international actors respond. The conclusions of the paper explore how to build more enabling partnerships in violent conflict settings.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN CONFLICT SETTINGS

CSOs are often referred to as if they constitute a homogeneous group, yet they vary widely in their constituent base, their purpose and values. The term 'civil society' '... commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power' and is often used to refer to '... 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'.[7] CSOs can thus be traditional or modern, local, regional, national, international or transnational. They can include a wide range of alliances and groupings, with membership based on shared values, religion, ethnic identity and other forms of identity. For example, some CSOs support forms of democracy while others support authoritarian rule; some advocate for inclusion/pluralism while others aim to reform the nation in exclusive terms; and some advocate for human rights while others restrict or reject them.

Any assumption that civil society is inherently good for peace and democracy is challenged in contexts where dominant CSOs threaten both.[8] For example, the Taliban in Afghanistan began as a civil society movement that developed into a 'politically repressive, undemocratic and violent regime'.[9] However, in a variety of conflict settings,

Maymana city, Faryab, Afghanistan. Faryab is one of the most insecure provinces in the north of Afghanistan, with frequent Taliban attacks across the province. Oxfam supported a peacebuilding project with partners from 2009 to 2014, building capacity of local peace Shuras. Photo: Annabel Morrissey/Oxfam

many CSOs are playing a valuable role in supporting transitions towards more inclusive and democratic forms of governance and driving progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – both of which are crucial in conflict settings, where global poverty and insecurity are concentrated.[10]

CSOs are not immune to the dynamics of conflict that shape their communities and operating space (see Box 1). Within violent and highly polarized contexts, CSOs may become aligned with parties to the conflict – possibly as a result of fear, distrust or intimidation, rather than any positive commitment to the agendas they pursue. Similarly, CSOs reacting against violence may (perhaps inadvertently) adopt positions or tactics that increase distrust, violence and insecurity. The interaction between changing conflict dynamics and the local 'ecosystem' of CSOs – their identities, values, associations and activities – is rarely considered enough by international partners eager to find partners and get a response underway. What is clear is that the operating space for CSOs in conflict settings is intensely complex and fraught with difficult choices and compromises, which can hamper their ability to receive funding, to work across conflict divides and to work with one another to improve people's security and well-being.

The flow of international resources into conflict settings can also have a major impact on conflict dynamics, either reinforcing conflict dynamics by shoring up the legitimacy and power of different groups or – if carefully directed – it can support efforts to address the common needs and interests of communities across conflict divides in ways that highlight commonalities and create opportunities to build social capital and trust.

BOX 1: PARTNERSHIP CHOICES

All three case studies in this report indicate that CSOs rely on social capital (their local networks and connections) for information, access and protection when working in high-risk settings. In conflict settings, where trust between communities has been eroded, 'bonding' social capital tends to be strong. This reinforces ascribed social affiliations based on ethnic or religious identity (for example). 'Bridging' social capital, which instead relies on acquired social affiliations (such as common values), tends to be weaker.[11] As such, CSO access and security tends to be mediated by – and to reinforce – aspects of identity.

This can be challenging for international partners as they attempt to reconcile realities on the ground with partnership principles that emphasize 'independence' and 'impartiality', especially when those same international actors see that identity is directly linked to violence. In light of this phenomenon, international actors need to judge independence and impartiality on the basis of the values CSOs act on and promote, rather than their identities. This calls for international actors to do more to understand local dynamics and make better informed choices about partnership.

2. FINDINGS: HOW DOES VIOLENT CONFLICT AFFECT LOCAL CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS?

2.1 HEIGHTENED VIOLENCE IN SOCIETY

Local or national CSOs, and their staff, carry much of the burden of working in the most volatile settings, sometimes simply because they have access and their international partners do not. In Kachin state (Myanmar), for example, while ethnic Kachin CSOs may have formal 'access', they face harassment, detention, forced recruitment and violence in their day-to-day work. In some countries, international staff are not permitted to work in areas where many displaced people are located. Yet few international organizations openly discuss how to approach partnerships with local civil society in violent conflict settings, let alone how to manage the transfer of risk that typically occurs when partnerships are developed with national or local CSOs.

Heightened risk to CSO staff on the front line

Civilians, CSOs and public spaces are increasingly targeted during violent conflict by state and non-state armed actors alike, and places widely considered sacrosanct like schools and hospitals are being attacked.[12] In Afghanistan and elsewhere, some international organizations and their CSO partners are perceived as linked to the government because they are providing basic services, and have thus become targets for armed opposition groups.[13]

In situations where state and non-state actors compete to control and govern territory, CSOs perceived to threaten their interests or values can find themselves (and their families and communities) targets of intimidation and violence. When hostilities escalate, CSO staff can be forced to flee their home, region or country. The situation is worse where armed actors operate with relative impunity. Issues considered contentious by state or non-state actors depend on the context, but typically include CSOs working to address inequalities, injustices, human rights and violations (including sexual and gender-based violence), impunity, or working to promote peaceful and inclusive societies. Civilians working to defend human rights are often a target: globally 156 human rights defenders were recorded as having been assassinated or died in detention in 2015 alone – most likely an underestimate, given the difficulties in obtaining information in insecure environments.[14]

CSOs forced to redirect their work and resources

As violence escalates, new needs emerge within communities. Where local authorities are unable or unwilling to provide basic services, CSOs (existing or new) have often stepped in. For example, in Afghanistan, some CSOs emerged in response to the needs of Afghan refugees in Pakistan in the 1990s,[15] while in DRC, CSOs expanded dramatically in response to the influx of refugees from Rwanda in 1994.[16] Many CSOs have focused (or refocused) their energy and resources on responding to high levels of violence – providing humanitarian aid, supporting victims, addressing human rights violations and establishing peace movements. In doing so, they have had to change their vision and mission, reallocating resources or absorbing large sums from external sources (see Box 2), often scaling up rapidly to meet proliferating local needs and opportunities. Understandably, these changes have been difficult to manage. Some CSOs have become overstretched, and redeployment of resources has undermined their ability to meet the longer term underlying needs of communities they work with, storing up development challenges for the future.

BOX 2: CSOs SCALE UP IN MYANMAR

Tens of thousands of people have been internally displaced by the conflict in Kachin state since 2011. Faith-based CSOs, able to cross between government and Kachin-controlled areas, became frontline humanitarian responders, despite little experience of carrying out this role and despite the violence taking a heavy toll on their church infrastructure, with numerous churches damaged or destroyed. Initially, funds acquired through church networks and businesses financed the response and enabled a flexible and locally tailored approach.

Other CSOs have grown rapidly with international funding. One Kachin-based CSO has moved from spending up to $1m per year in 2011 to spending around $7–8m per year in 2016. These CSOs have become extremely stretched as they adapt to a new sector, scale-up rapidly to manage more resources (staff and funds), and respond to urgent needs in a difficult operating environment.

To manage these pressures, some CSOs have scaled back previous areas of work, meaning some vulnerable groups lose out; for example, one large CSO had reduced its programming on HIV, drought and education.[17]

Increases in sexual and gender-based violence

As violent conflict escalates, social and criminal violence often escalates too, with some individuals or groups taking advantage of disorder and a culture of impunity. Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) tends to rise,[18] as does criminal violence associated with gangs and organized crime, often with negative consequences for young people, women and girls, sexual and gender minorities, CSOs and local communities generally.[19]

Just when the needs of vulnerable communities increase, their traditional support systems and networks often become more fragmented and strained due to displacement and insecurity.

Tackling SGBV in violent conflict settings is extremely challenging for CSOs and their staff where survivors remain vulnerable due to ongoing conflict and insecurity, and the associated breakdown in rule of law. Discriminatory social norms and stigmatization of victims of SGBV also contribute to these challenges. Women's organizations in Afghanistan and DRC report heightened pressures on their work due to the conflict. In DRC, gender relations beyond the conflict-affected east are such that women who have a political profile and/or speak out on human rights and/or rape have been subjected to rape as torture by state security forces in prisons.[20]

Protracted violence weakens CSO capabilities

Prolonged exposure to violent conflict traumatizes individuals, families and communities, with long-term impacts on psychosocial well-being. While CSOs may be best placed to provide support, their own staff may also need support to help them cope.

Psychosocial impacts

Communities affected by violent conflict experience high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).[21] A recent study in Syria, for example, found that 50 percent of children suffered from PTSD, while a nationwide study in Afghanistan in 2002, after the fall of the Taliban, found that 42 percent of Afghans were suffering from PTSD.[22] Trauma can take many forms. Interviewees in Myanmar and Afghanistan acknowledged that working in insecure settings and confronting violence and threats on a daily basis can traumatize staff, and noted an absence of trauma support mechanisms available to CSO staff.[23]

Education impacts

Education systems and infrastructure are often destroyed or targeted by conflict actors who seek to spread their ideologies, discourage critical thinking or restrict the education of certain groups. In parts of Afghanistan, for example, the Taliban block girls' access to education and have restructured education to discourage people from questioning authority.

Protracted conflict not only affects the education of individual girls and boys who miss out on school, it also destroys education infrastructure and systems, impacting generations. This has enormous implications for recruiting sufficiently qualified CSO staff in conflict and post-conflict settings. There can also be a gulf between the analytical frameworks and mindsets of international actors and CSOs, which may be further widened by differences in educational background, which have largely been shaped by the conflict.

2.2 DIVERSE AND COMPETING CLAIMS TO POWER

In areas or regions where authority is contested, 'diverse and competing claims to power co-exist, overlap and intertwine' to produce hybrid forms of governing authority.[24] Governance in these settings can encompass a wide variety of mechanisms and interests, public or private, including: local, national, international and transnational; state and non-state; traditional/customary and modern; violent and non-violent; criminal and extremist. What is particularly dangerous in these settings is the 'privatization' of control over the use of force when combined with impunity enjoyed by armed actors, which leaves communities and CSOs highly vulnerable.[25]

Basic service provision as a pathway to power

Governing authorities often use the provision of basic services as a means to build legitimacy and popularity. In conflict settings, where state and non-state actors are competing for authority, they may compete to co-opt CSOs delivering basic services for this purpose. In other cases, CSO activities can be constrained by those seeking to undermine the popular legitimacy of their opponents. For instance, in Kachin state (Myanmar), CSOs working with communities in Non-Government Controlled/Kachin Independence Organization Controlled (NGC/KC) areas have faced obstruction and violence at government-controlled checkpoints, and unusual delays when requesting meetings or travel authorization from the state government. One CSO reported waiting three weeks for authorization to deliver non-food items to people in an NGC/KC area affected by a natural disaster.[26] This suggests that the army may be restricting access to services for groups they associate with the opposition.

To minimize the risk of political manipulation while serving vulnerable people, CSOs engaged in service delivery adopt a range of tactics: they develop relationships with diverse governing authorities (whether state or non-state) – often on opposite sides of a conflict – and they stay attuned to shifting dynamics and alliances among conflict actors at local and national levels. CSOs also ensure that they are seen to be serving vulnerable people across contested areas to avoid accusations of bias toward one or other governing authority/armed group/community.

State-driven restrictions on civic space

State actors involved in violent conflict minimize threats to their authority by regulating freedom of expression, association and assembly, directly affecting the civic space and effectiveness of CSOs. Regulations are often scaled up in response to changes that threaten state power and the position of state actors. Triggers can include: elections, an escalation in violent conflict, CSO activities that challenge state authority (especially where CSOs are thought to be co-opted, voluntarily or not, by opposition groups), or renewed political pressure from external/foreign actors via foreign funding to CSOs.[27] Internationally, researchers and activists have tracked a growing trend of 'public security' and 'anti-terrorism' measures being misused by state actors to control CSOs that challenge their authority.[28]

State actors (of various regime types) are also increasingly regulating the wider operating environment of CSOs – for example, by requiring CSOs to register in order to receive foreign funds, a process that may be difficult to complete without certain relationships with state actors. In Myanmar, for example, where the transition to democracy remains fragile, interviewees noted that freedom of expression online has become constrained recently, with some civil society actors arrested for defamation. Similarly, CSO access to political representatives can be difficult. However, in this research, CSOs were eager to raise these concerns cautiously, and emphasized that ill-informed critique could undermine the emerging democracy and that other hard-won freedoms have already transformed civic space for the better since the end of military rule in Myanmar.[29]

Across all three case studies, CSOs reported that they adopt self-censorship as a matter of survival. As one interviewee in DRC noted: 'We see everything, but we cannot always talk about everything.' Beyond self-censoring, interviewees pointed out that CSOs are able to raise sensitive issues in conflict settings but they need to do so strategically – for example, by presenting political issues in more technical or localized terms that do not aggravate broader conflict dynamics, or by working in coalitions that reduce the risk of individual CSOs experiencing repercussions.[30] In DRC, CSOs reported managing their relations with state authorities by keeping them informed and involved in their activities, thus minimizing the risk of an unexpected crackdown.[31] How CSOs and international actors respond to state-driven restrictions on civic space in conflict settings is informed by the specific circumstances of the conflict context and the aims of CSOs.

Blurring of lines between political space and civic space

Violent conflict settings are highly politicized, and as different actors seek to advance their interests, the lines between civic space and political space can become blurred. The growth of CSOs in DRC is a good illustration of this (see Box 3). In some instances, CSOs need connections to political/conflict actors on all sides so that they can work effectively, but these relationships are also risky and complex to manage.

BOX 3: CIVIC AND POLITICAL SPACE IN DRC

Historically, civil society in DRC was entwined with state power, whereby community associations, parishes, non-government organizations, movements of women, youth, and even farmers became involved in providing basic services.

With the shift towards liberalization in the early 1990s (after President Mobutu decreed the start of 'democratization'), an independent civil society began to grow and diversify. As a result, civil society groups emerged at the same time as political opposition parties; some aligned themselves clearly with the old established order, others engaged with the old order without aligning themselves with it, while still others challenged the existing powers, and in doing so formed a natural alliance with the newly recognized opposition parties.

In a context of ongoing violent conflict, extreme poverty and weak formal mechanisms for political representation, CSOs have been targeted by politicians seeking to advance their interests by attempting to harness CSO resources to their advantage (thereby replicating patrimonial networks in civic space). Equally, some civil society actors move between civic space and political space to further their agendas. This has become so common in DRC that there is a trend of leaders of CSOs seeking conspicuous political roles.

More generally, the vital role of personal connections as a foundation for trust in conflict settings means that CSOs need personal connections to political and/or conflict actors on all sides in order to be effective. In Afghanistan, connections to political and conflict actors were reportedly essential for securing CSO registration (a prerequisite for receiving foreign funds), for negotiating access to insecure areas and for influencing policy/political processes. In Myanmar, some CSOs in Kachin state reported frustration and difficulties implementing activities because they lacked personal connections with the new government and found it hard to access either national or state-level decision makers. This was partly attributed to the new government being wary of CSOs because of concerns about possible links to the former regime. But interviewees also reported that some CSOs working in Kachin state struggle to access international support and confront obstacles because 'the government and Tatmadaw [Myanmar Armed Forces], and some international actors, view some Kachin CSOs as being aligned with the KIO/A, despite CSO assertions of neutrality'.

Traditional and customary authorities and civic space

Traditional and customary institutions often play a major role in hybrid models of governance in conflict settings. Recognizing this, in Afghanistan, for example, international actors increasingly work with religious leaders and tribal elders, partly to address security concerns but also because of their influence with local communities. Yet international actors often adopt this approach without sufficient political analysis to allow them to weigh the likely gains (power and influence for their programmes) against the risks involved (for example, for marginalized groups).

Engaging with traditional and customary authorities in conflict settings is highly sensitive and can produce unintended consequences if approached without careful consideration. Collaboration can help to legitimize and reinforce patterns of privilege that these institutions promote and uphold, reinforcing the marginalization of vulnerable groups just when they need more support. Researchers note that in settings where traditional and customary authorities mediate between communities and CSOs and governing authorities, 'women's interests are often inadequately represented and their needs remain unmet'.[32] On the other hand, challenging the values promoted by traditional and customary authorities can put CSOs and their supporters on the wrong side of powerful actors in the conflict. Embarking on any activities with CSO partners without first having a detailed understanding of the dynamics of the conflict is likely to be high-risk.

2.3 DYNAMICS WITHIN CIVIL SOCIETY

Violent conflict destroys, disrupts and reshapes societal relationships, including those within civil society. In the process, parts of civil society can become polarized. Critical tensions within conflict settings relate to competing visions for society and processes of change. Critically, any assumption that civil society is inherently good for peace and democracy is challenged in contexts where dominant CSOs threaten both.[33] Within these highly polarized spaces, alignment with conflict actors can take many forms and can be driven by fear, distrust and intimidation, including opposition to their opponents – rather than an actual commitment to their agendas. What is clear is that the operating space for CSOs in conflict settings is intensely complex and fraught with difficult choices and compromises, and often, interaction among CSOs across local conflict divisions is hampered.

Trust and 'trust deficits' within civil society

In conflict settings, levels of trust between and within communities are often very low, with people increasingly relying on personal connections to survive. Where conflict actors have exploited or exacerbated tensions by mobilizing along the lines of identity (religious, ethnic or otherwise), people often respond by allying with their specific social group – in effect, reinforcing identity-based conflict divisions. In Afghanistan, decades of conflict that mobilized people based on their ethnicity have reinforced the importance of ethnicity within society; as one interviewee explained, there is a feeling that 'to survive, you had to be with your own people'.[34]

Civil society, not surprisingly, often reflects and replicates these patterns. For example, in Kachin state (Myanmar), where religious and ethnic identities have been mobilized within the conflict, civil society is dominated by local Baptist and Catholic church-related organizations, reflecting the identity and patterns of trust within the largely Christian Jinghpaw (Kachin tribal) population.[35] Similarly, in DRC, the way communities are dispersed geographically reflects conflict dynamics, with different refugee and IDP communities settled separately around local communities with which they have an

affinity. Since many CSOs in DRC have emerged from within their local communities to serve local needs, they have limited exposure to other conflict-affected communities and to the CSOs that serve those communities. Thus, to some degree, CSOs working at the local level in DRC reflect the way in which conflict has shaped society.[36]

In these situations, where there are limited opportunities for dialogue and engagement between CSOs from different communities, it is not surprising that there is a 'trust deficit' between some CSOs, which can hamper their effectiveness. They often have limited opportunities to raise funds or build joint platforms and alliances to engage in advocacy, which can curb their ability to contribute to broader goals such as ending violence and supporting peaceful political change and sustainable development. This trust deficit in turn tends to reinforce the fault lines along which the conflict has developed.

CSOs' identities do not predetermine the people with whom they work or the values that they promote

Identity is often manipulated by conflict actors. As a result, it becomes an important factor shaping society and civil society. However, it is important not to prejudge or pigeonhole CSOs; though their staff or organizational identity may be linked to certain religious, ethnic and/or kinship identities, this does not necessarily pre-determine which communities or groups they support (see Box 4) or the values that they work by or promote.

BOX 4: CSOs WORKING ACROSS CONFLICT DIVIDES IN DRC

In DRC, one interviewee was an ethnic Banyamulenge CSO leader who went out of his way to work with other ethnic groups. However, ironically, some international partners preferred to support the work he was doing with his own community in South Kivu, as he had clearly developed relations of trust there. Donors seemed eager to see his organization as a community-focused organization despite the fact that it uses a peace building approach and has a portfolio that addresses a range of issues affecting communities across conflict-affected areas (including those in which no Banyamulenge communities live). To him, it seemed that international partners were unintentionally undermining his attempts to work across divisions and contribute to building trust, peace and security.

International actors working in conflict settings can fail to distinguish between CSO identities and the values that CSOs promote. This failure can drive accusations of bias, but also undermine opportunities to support CSOs that are trying to go beyond entrenched conflict divisions linked to certain social identities.

North Kivu, eastern DRC, has been affected by conflict for decades. Louise Nyiranolozi is president of the local hygiene committee and member of the women's forum. Photo: Eleanor Farmer/Oxfam.

CSO staff and organizational identities are a complex issue in conflict settings, bound up with issues of effectiveness, legitimacy and trust: interviewees in Afghanistan, for instance, highlighted that some NGOs and even INGOs are led and staffed by one ethnic group only. While this may make international partners uncomfortable, as it seems to contradict principles of neutrality and diversity, operationally speaking, people in conflict settings rely on trust and tend to trust CSOs that have emerged from within their communities, so these CSOs can be more effective for certain initiatives.

Some interviewees also noted that the culture of an organization can be shaped by staff identities, which can produce internal hierarchies and reinforce power inequalities within CSOs. For example, it was suggested that in Afghanistan, a majority Pashtun organization might be conservative in outlook, preserving what many see as important elements of Pashtun culture.[37] Organizational values and priorities can also undermine opportunities for joint working. In Myanmar, for example, a strong culture of centralized leadership and hierarchy in political and religious society is replicated within CSOs, with leaders said to be typically reluctant or unwilling to delegate power and responsibility. Some inter-CSO collaborations to develop common policy positions have failed because powerful CSO leaders were not involved in agreeing them and thus would not support them, despite their junior colleagues having been involved. Internal power dynamics within CSOs can strongly constrain their operations and ability to achieve their goals.

Divisions across civil society on women's rights

Political upheaval is often seen as an opportunity, or 'critical juncture', in which to advance the rights and empowerment of marginalized groups such as women.[38] However, tensions between women's organizations can restrict the effectiveness of women's platforms for change at such critical junctures. The experience of the women's platform on United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in Afghanistan (see Box 5) illustrates how conflict dynamics can intensify differences between civil society groups and threaten the progress of seemingly joint initiatives.

BOX 5: AFGHAN WOMEN AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 is a powerful advocacy tool for promoting women's participation in peace processes and decision making on peace and security matters in conflict-affected situations. Under pressure from women's rights activists and international actors, the Afghan government developed and agreed an action plan under UNSCR 1325 in 2015. Yet implementation has been slow because the plan contained few practical commitments.

Furthermore, interviews in-country and with thematic experts indicated that the UNSCR 1325 process in Afghanistan has been dominated by educated women's rights activists largely based in Kabul, who some consider to be part of an elite that has limited engagement with other Afghan women from diverse backgrounds and communities.[39] It was also noted that forming a joint platform of women is difficult even in relatively peaceful contexts, considering differences based on ethnicity, religion, class, age, etc. – differences that can be further complicated and intensified in conflict settings. In Afghanistan, different groups of women supported different parties to the conflict, including armed actors, while others advocated for peace.

One way to reduce the risk of processes being derailed is to build trust and establish core values as a preliminary step to engagement, recognizing that this may isolate some groups of women and will take time and resources. In practice, many local women's organizations find themselves overstretched by urgent conflict-related needs, and are not adequately supported to engage meaningfully in political and policy dialogues.[40]

In Kabul, Afghanistan, training for women police recruits takes six months; they learn weapons, general policing and the rule of law, gender and human rights awareness. Photo: Ellie Kealey/Oxfam

Alongside tensions among women's organizations, progress on women's rights and empowerment is curbed by the way in which these issues are all too often expected to be addressed by women's organizations alone. The DRC case study notes that by funding women's organizations alone to address women's empowerment, donors restrict approaches that tackle the wider gender dynamics that underlie gender inequalities.[41] This unintentionally reinforces the way that women's organizations are already marginalized within broader civil society networks, alliances and consortia, where they are sometimes not 'in a position to influence other member organizations or the agenda of the network as a whole' and are therefore unable to secure the backing of wider civil society; 'the work they do is seen as separate', rather than an integral part of mainstream efforts to empower vulnerable communities and groups.[42]

Building networks across conflict divisions

Joint platforms and networks can offer an important protective framework for CSOs conducting advocacy around common concerns in conflict settings, especially on issues that may draw a backlash from governing authorities.[43] CSOs in DRC, for example, regularly work through joint platforms to protect their organizations and staff from direct repercussions.[44] Furthermore, joint platforms can help to build trust between communities by providing opportunities for CSOs to work together. Initiatives can be informal or formal, high-profile or discreet, depending on the needs of CSOs and the realities of the context.

Opening up civic space in Myanmar has enabled 'greater connectivity and alliance formation among CSOs', focused on sectors of common interest 'such as food security, or political agendas such as women, peace and security, or shared concerns, such as large-scale development (highway and dam) projects or the conflict in Kachin itself'.[45]

The progress of the Joint Strategy Team (JST) in Kachin state (see Box 6), a locally led humanitarian coordination platform, provides some useful insights on facilitating CSO engagement across conflict divisions and the peace dividends such initiatives can produce. But the JST experience also highlights some of the problems that can arise when CSOs feel sidelined by international actors.

Displaced by civil war in Myanmar, Lamai Kaw Mai attended Durable Solution Awareness Raising Training through Oxfam's Durable Peace Programme in 2016. Photo: Dustin Barter/Oxfam

BOX 6: CSOs WORKING TOGETHER TO BRIDGE DIVISIONS IN MYANMAR...

In Kachin state, the Joint Strategy Team (JST) was set up in 2011 to coordinate humanitarian assistance. It proved an important forum for local CSOs to collaborate and build relationships, evolving 'as a locally led response to CSOs' need to coordinate humanitarian aid'.[46] It plays a vital role in giving local organizations more of a say in shaping the humanitarian response and has encouraged greater cooperation, notably between Catholic and Baptist CSOs. While there remain differences between the participating organizations, the platform is a space in which these differences can be managed constructively.

The JST is funded by international actors, but 'funding has been modest and flexible, and it is likely that this catalytic 'hands-off' approach has helped the JST to feel as CSO-owned as it does, along with the sense of solidarity in the face of shared challenges experienced in dealing with the international community'.[47]

...CAN BE UNINTENTIONALLY SIDELINED BY INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

In 2012, though, as international humanitarian assistance was scaled up, international humanitarian structures were overlaid onto the JST. The Humanitarian Area Coordination Team (HACT) became a key decision-making body, but was the preserve of five or six foreign heads of international agencies. 'Despite a standing invitation, CSOs rarely attend. They object to its closed, internationalised dynamic, feel their influence is not proportional to their positions, and prefer to coordinate among themselves.'[48] Typically, CSOs feel marginalized, and that their presence merely offers a veil of legitimacy to decisions taken in such structures. They report a lack of familiarity with the language, culture and process of meetings, and they enter the space as outsiders to the networks/alliances that exist among the international participants. In Myanmar, the HACT threatens one of the few local platforms that brings together Catholic and Baptist CSOs forging much-needed bridging social capital within the conflict setting.[49]

2.4 HOW INTERNATIONAL ACTORS RESPOND: NUANCES OF PARTNERSHIP APPROACHES

The funding and support that international actors provide to CSOs is vital in enabling them to serve the communities that rely on them during violent conflict. Too often, however, international assistance is shaped more by international agendas than local needs and realities. One issue that often dominates discussions about international assistance in conflict settings is the 'the securitization of aid' – a much discussed but also much misunderstood trend.[50] The term can refer to aid that meets both the security and development needs of poor and vulnerable people in conflict settings, and recognizes human security as integral to development. However, it has also come to describe how aid and development have been skewed towards meeting international and conflict-affected state government agendas on security, an approach which can readily undermine human security.

Donor emphasis on demonstrating value for money and the short-term results achieved by official development assistance (ODA) has also skewed how international actors engage with CSOs in conflict settings. This discourse has restricted how aid is used on the ground in complex conflict settings where 'success' is difficult to predict and measure. There is a direct tension between the way the results and value for money agenda is operationalized in conflict settings and what is already widely known about how to work effectively in these settings: that international assistance needs to be responsive to the local context, flexible to ensure relevance in a shifting and changing environment, and open to risk-taking, meaning that ultimate success may not look the way it was framed at the start. 'Success' may be better judged in small, non-linear shifts.

This section considers how international actors approach partnerships with CSOs in conflict-affected settings, noting some specific areas that strain relationships. It highlights the role of conflict-sensitivity, conflict analysis and access to conflict expertise (for international actors and CSO partners alike) to inform operational and strategic decision making. It explores the limitations of capacity building initiatives and highlights areas where ongoing support for staff and organizational development could

make a significant contribution. It discusses approaches to risk and security management. It then moves on to highlight the consequences of inflexible donor funding modalities and patterns for CSOs, and how their 'professionalization' to meet external agendas can undermine their relations with the communities they serve. It concludes with some observations on the financial constraints and pressures involved in working in such environments.

Partnership approaches: are they about transactions or transformation?

Who makes strategic decisions? In Afghanistan, interviewees reported that international actors typically determine where projects will be conducted and their thematic focus, as reflected in the comment from the Afghanistan case study: 'Southern and eastern provinces have been prioritized to fight insurgency. Here the goal was that the community sees impact, so some quick-impact projects were implemented.' This approach was criticized by interviewees because it is based on a 'simplistic' understanding of the context and is 'not always relevant to the need'.

A key principle for effective engagement in complex and fast-changing operating contexts should be subsidiarity – i.e. where a higher 'authority should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks which cannot be performed at a more local level'.[51] Yet, international actors' funding and partnership models typically involve multiple layers of decision making and oversight architecture that marginalize CSOs, their local structures and the voices of communities they represent (see Box 6).

Dilemmas of transactional and transformational partnerships

Thematic experts interviewed for this research indicated that international organizations often lack clarity about the strategic purpose of their partnerships with national or local CSOs. Partnerships are typically established at the country level on a project-by-project basis, driven by a broad organizational commitment to 'working with partners'. As this study demonstrates, in conflict settings, different CSOs interact directly and in different ways with conflict dynamics, yet international actors do not systematically take this into account to inform their partnership approaches. This represents a significant risk for both CSOs and their international partners, not just in terms of achieving results, but also reputational and security risks. So, for example, rather than adopting blanket bans on working with certain types of organization – perhaps those with connections to political actors or linked to patronage systems – this research suggests that sometimes these actors can be the best partners for achieving certain results.

In Afghanistan, for example, there is growing recognition that some degree of engagement with governing authorities or leaders linked to the Taliban is necessary to address the needs of communities in some conflict-affected areas. However, this recognition has led to a wholesale turnaround in the way some international actors work in the country, whereby many now assume that engaging with traditional leaders or structures (often conservative forces) is always a key element of community work, regardless of the influence these stakeholders have in different contexts and on different

issues. Interviewees pointed out that international organizations designing projects for Afghanistan rarely take the time to understand whether this kind of engagement is necessary to achieve project objectives, or indeed how engaging with these conflict actors might reinforce the marginalization of vulnerable groups.[52]

What perhaps emerges here is that sometimes partnerships need to be transactional – i.e. international actors make a conscious decision to develop a short-term relationship with a CSO because it is well positioned to achieve a certain goal, such as delivering humanitarian aid in an active conflict zone or influencing powerful elites; but that wherever possible, partnerships need to be more transformational, involving long-term support and relationships that, in addition to delivering results in the short term, also supports CSOs to grow and develop as autonomous and sustainable entities, able to advance local needs and interests and amplify the voice of marginalized groups.

Engagement without conflict analysis is high-risk

International assistance as a conflict commodity

Conflict dynamics often shape where international actors work, what they do and how they do it. If their programming is not based on analysing the dynamics of a conflict at different levels, international actors can put vulnerable communities at risk, jeopardize their local partners' security, inadvertently sustain the conflict and, in the process, restrict their own effectiveness. Despite these risks, few international NGOs have the dedicated capacity or skills to deepen their understanding of local conflict dynamics and assess how their decisions and actions affect those dynamics (positively or negatively).

A number of the international NGOs operating in Myanmar, for example (especially humanitarian agencies), have no dedicated conflict adviser. Oxfam Myanmar is unusual (though not unique) in this regard, having a full-time conflict adviser post within the country office, whose role is to guide organizational decision -making but also to support CSO partners to analyse conflict and operate with conflict sensitivity.

Conflict affects day-to-day operations and longer-term strategic direction

In DRC, researchers found that interviewees from local CSOs demonstrated limited interest in analysing the conflict dynamics and had a weak understanding of its underlying drivers. They tended to be most familiar with discussing the security implications of violent conflict for their ongoing work. This represents a missed opportunity to support peace building in eastern DRC through the important entry point of service delivery. While some international actors have taken formal steps to ensure that conflict analysis informs their activities at the strategic and operational levels (driven by harsh critique), others (particularly in eastern DRC) remain 'conflict tolerant', adjusting operations rather than strategy to 'work around' issues.[53]

Whose capacities need building?

Addressing the power dynamics of 'capacity building'

The subject of capacity building provoked strong responses across the case studies and in expert interviews. Respondents disliked the term itself, finding it 'disempowering' and '... insulting, patronizing and simply unintelligent', noting that those who use the term often under-value what local actors bring to partnerships. It also fails to recognize the interdependence of CSOs and international actors,[54] with the latter typically contributing funding, technical expertise and knowledge of international donor systems, while local partners typically bring legitimacy, methodological skills, valuable context-specific knowledge and access to local and national networks.[55] Each needs the other to maximize their effectiveness.

Interviewees noted that terms like 'capacity building' produce a power differential that serves to justify and sustain the dominance of international actors in decision making.[56] While they did not wish to seem ungrateful for the support they have received from international partners, CSO respondents in DRC expressed frustration about the endless stream of invitations to poorly tailored 'capacity building' workshops with little or no follow-up.[57] They called on international actors to reflect on the limitations of this approach, which is driving partnerships that are more transactional than transformative.[58] Support needs to address the context-specific needs of CSOs in violent and politically polarized environments.[59]

Nhkum received a livelihoods cash grant through Oxfam's Durable Peace Programme in conflict-affected Kachin state. She is now earning a steady income to support her basic needs. Peace remains critical for longer term prospects. Photo: Dustin Barter/Oxfam

In eastern DRC, interviewees reported that 'capacity building' has become something of an obsession for the international community, with its content and format driven by external needs (compliance with donor reporting requirements and use of preferred monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tools). Yet there was little expert support available to participants outside of training workshops, which undermined their ability to put what they had learned into practice. In Myanmar, respondents referred to successful models of staff and organizational development: 'One INGO was noted by three Kachin-based CSOs, including smaller ones, for its positive approach to capacity building, providing CSOs with training and accompaniment according to identified needs over the course of several years', and 'one donor was praised by a large national CSO struggling to adjust to expanding demands and rapid growth, for placing two international experts within the organization to help strengthen capacity over two years. One was dedicated to organizational development and another to supporting technical programme development and proposal writing...'[60]

What kind of support do CSOs need?

Interviewees emphasized that the content of staff and organizational development plans needs to be developed in response to an understanding of the needs and realities of those staff and organizations that international actors seek to support, and their specific interaction with conflict dynamics. There were some common themes in their responses about priority areas for support, as follows.

- **Security management:** In Myanmar, for example, 'most CSO representatives noted that more training on security management approaches ... would be welcome ... and a couple mentioned the need for support to develop security policies and contingency plans... [some] noted the importance of tailoring security support to CSOs' particular contexts and practical needs – for example, avoiding form-filling and travel bans that would be ignored.'[61] Thematic expert interviewees highlighted the importance of training on issues such as mine awareness (where relevant).
- **Conflict analysis and conflict sensitivity:** Across all three case studies, international actors and CSOs alike felt their work would benefit from regular conflict analysis. In Afghanistan, respondents recognized a culture of focusing on the deteriorating security situation rather than the underlying drivers of conflict and the shifting conflict dynamics. In Myanmar, demand for such support is growing as international actors and CSOs seek to maximize the impact of their humanitarian and development activities.
- **Advocacy:** Engaging with decision makers was a common challenge for CSOs in conflict settings. In DRC, for example, CSOs struggle to engage in constructive dialogue with political authorities and to secure their participation in peace initiatives, reforms and efforts to increase accountability.[62] Across all three case studies, CSOs felt they would be more effective if international actors supported them to develop locally appropriate advocacy strategies and to build cross-cutting local, national, regional and international advocacy networks and platforms.

- **Understanding the international system:** Interviewees stated that CSOs would benefit from a deeper understanding of how the international aid system works.[63] While they need to be able to service the requirements of international actors throughout the programme cycle (project design, implementation, financial management, and M&E), it is even more important to learn how to fit local needs to international priorities. As one interviewee in Afghanistan pointed out: 'You need to be smart to fit community needs with donor priorities.'

- **Mainstreaming gender, conflict and security:** Interviewees involved in work on gender and women's rights emphasized that the links between gender, conflict and gender-based marginalization and violence are poorly understood and addressed by humanitarian, development and peace building initiatives. There is a risk that a gender-blind approach to programming reinforces marginalization and vulnerability. In Myanmar, a deeper understanding of gender dynamics within conflict encouraged a Kachin church-based CSO to change its practice: 'Despite the church's hierarchical, patriarchal culture, progress had been made with church leaders in camps ensuring women's inclusion in committees thanks to international actors' influence.'[64]

The benefits of longer term engagement

Short programme and funding timescales tend to limit what can be achieved in conflict-affected settings, while longer term investments can be more effective. In Afghanistan, for example, one international NGO adopted a flexible and responsive approach to supporting a local women's association that represented an extremely marginalized community to gain formal recognition over a period of three years. The new CSO needed sustained support as it navigated complex local conflict dynamics alongside the demands of an international donor. Every step of the formalization process was threatened by conflict-related political interests: securing formal CSO registration, negotiating staff recruitment, developing internal systems (including mechanisms to minimize the risk of corruption), conducting needs assessments, developing formal dialogue with local authorities, and submitting project proposals.[65]

Responsible risk and security management

Transfer of risk is rarely acknowledged in partnership negotiations

Where CSOs have better access to conflict areas than international actors, remote programming becomes an option.[66] While this reflects a pragmatic division of labour, the transfer of risks involved is rarely acknowledged in partnership arrangements, let alone adequately resourced in terms of practical support for security management or the provision of much-needed radios and other equipment, for instance. CSOs in Afghanistan and Myanmar reported that they felt obliged to accept risks to secure much-needed funding to help vulnerable communities (often their own) facing crisis.[67]

Risk-averse funding holds back change

According to interviewees in Afghanistan, international actors' need for independent oversight and secure access for international staff can result in foreign donor-funded activities being clustered in more easily accessible areas, leaving communities in other, hard-to-access areas with little or no support.[68] Similarly, international partners' need to demonstrate causal links between project activities and outcomes has often driven short-sighted initiatives that do not engage with the complex dynamics driving and sustaining conflict and insecurity. Donor demand for visible and measurable short-term results not only skews the types of initiatives CSOs undertake but it also ignores the reality that change in such situations is multi-dimensional and rarely linear or quick.[69]

As the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association has so eloquently put it, 'while donors partner with civil society to counter shrinking civic space, their frequently rigid funding systems – which often focus on short-term projects rather than long-term struggles – can actually undermine effectiveness, and hamper support to new movements critical for social change.'[70]

Different security provisions for CSOs and international actors strain partnerships

Interviewees for all three case studies felt that disparities around budgets and security provisions for CSOs and international actors were an issue. Differences can be extreme and highly visible (e.g. budgets for travel, accommodation and communications equipment). In DRC, these differences have fed resentment in working relationships and contributed to declining trust between CSOs and their international counterparts. In Afghanistan, international actors have assumed that CSOs face lesser risks and have therefore allocated less funds for local partner travel and security; yet this merely highlights their limited understanding of the risks for all actors financed by foreign donors operating in the country. Insufficient funding brings many other risks in conflict settings (discussed below).

Problems linked to funding

Underfunding by donors traps CSOs in 'hand-to-mouth mode'

Working effectively with local partners in conflict settings is expensive: the World Bank estimates project overheads are three times higher in fragile and conflict-affected situations than elsewhere.[71] These additional costs are often compounded by sudden price increases brought on by the scarcity of goods and services in conflict settings, and the influx of international actors with large budgets competing for office space, guest houses, vehicles and other goods and services.

Additional funds are needed to support better remote management and project supervision in environments where project resources are vulnerable to elite capture or where security management costs are likely to be greater. There may also be a need to invest more in trust-building, relationship-building and local staff and organizational development where local capabilities have been undermined by the conflict setting.

Finally, there are extra costs involved in investing in conflict analysis expertise to guide strategic and operational decision making.

These additional costs associated with working in conflict settings are often left out of budgets provided to CSOs, which means their core costs are rarely covered. Interviewees across all three case studies remarked that CSOs struggle to cover organizational overheads partly because of projectized grants, which dictate that funds can only be spent on certain activities or elements.

In Myanmar, CSOs reported that projectized sub-contracting left them 'lagging in organizational development and stuck in hand-to-mouth mode'. The problem for small and medium-sized CSOs is acute, as the 'top tier' of CSOs in Myanmar 'increasingly use their weight to negotiate, though the issue [of overheads] remains a challenge for them too'.[72] Similarly, interviewees in DRC highlighted how staff development budgets were always aligned to specific project goals rather than strengthening organizational capabilities – for example, in advocacy or fundraising.[73]

Impact of donor funding patterns on CSOs

Afghanistan and Iraq are prominent examples of the boom–bust tendency of international assistance that accompanies political transition and an international peacekeeping operation. In both countries, funding for CSOs grew suddenly but then shrank. Much has been written about the mushrooming of CSOs styled in the model of INGOs (rather than something possibly more appropriate to the local context) when these funding 'booms' occur – as, for example, in Afghanistan in 2001 after the fall of the Taliban. CSOs often serve as intermediaries between international actors and community-based organizations (CBOs), adapting to needs and opportunities as they present themselves. As one interviewee from Afghanistan said, 'from 2001 to now, NGOs have changed their activities a lot. When there is an opportunity, they also change their mission.'[74]

Interviewees in DRC highlighted dependency on foreign donor funds and noted that desperation for financial support has led to CSOs adapting their focus to reflect donor priorities. They also reported frustration with international partners that did not support organizational development in fundraising to help CSOs achieve greater autonomy and sustainability.[75]

Receiving international funding can also erode local voluntarism. As one Afghan interviewee pointed out, 'between 2008 and 2012, there was so much money in the country, particularly from US donors... money was given out even for work that people had done themselves [voluntarily] in the past'. This has sparked concerns that communities now wait for projects to be initiated from outside rather than undertaking activities themselves (as they used to) using local resources such as *zakat* (charitable tax), *fitranas* (charitable giving during Eid al Fitr) and *waqf* (endowments).

Reducing transaction costs can marginalize smaller CSOs

Donors and international NGOs – continuously seeking to reduce the transaction costs of aid – often give fewer, larger grants to a small number of CSOs (often based in the capital city) that have shown they can manage resources and meet complex reporting requirements. But this precludes them supporting smaller, grassroots CSOs that lack the capabilities to absorb and manage large grants, even though they may be best placed to work with marginalized or hard-to-reach communities. In Myanmar, for example, the emergence of a few large, well-equipped CSOs has created something of a monopoly; when there are calls for proposals, this 'elite' group can be overwhelmed with requests for collaboration from international actors. The result is that those organizations are overstretched.[76] From a broader perspective, excluding smaller and more diverse CSOs from foreign funding and involvement in programming can inhibit the growth of a more broad-based and inclusive civil society.

'Professionalization' of CSOs can weaken their ties with communities

International actors seek partnerships with CSOs in conflict settings because of their ideas and skills, their local knowledge and networks, the importance of local ownership, their ability to work in hard-to-reach and often insecure locations, and the broader contribution CSOs can make to advancing more inclusive and democratic forms of governance. Yet models of partnership often push CSOs and social movements towards 'professionalization', largely so they can meet complex donor reporting requirements. Over time, this can result in community-focused and/or politically active organizations becoming transformed into donor-facing technocratic service delivery organizations – in the process weakening their ties and engagement with local communities, a connection which is vital to effectiveness in violent conflict settings.[77] In DRC, for example, local CSOs reported working with international actors to provide access to specific localities to deliver aid, but their role was mainly limited to implementing pre-defined initiatives. They report having little opportunity to help shape projects based on their understanding of local needs, which in turn affects their relationships with local communities and means they are less able to represent their needs.[78]

3. CONCLUSIONS

CONCLUSIONS

Building more equal, effective and enabling partnerships in conflict settings

Much of the work of Oxfam and other international NGOs is in violent conflict settings, and this trend is likely to continue as protracted conflicts are ongoing in many regions of the world. Given the record to date, as highlighted by the experiences of the CSOs involved in our case study research in Afghanistan, DRC and Myanmar, there is much that international actors could do differently to ensure that partnerships help rather than hinder CSOs in meeting the needs of the communities they serve. With a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of how shifting conflict dynamics affect CSO partners, international actors can provide a more appropriate response at all stages of the partnership, from initial relationship building to programme planning and design through to skill development, implementation and M&E. They may not be able to achieve emphatic outcomes in a short space of time, but they would at least do less harm and develop a clearer vision of contributing to local capacities for peace.

During the research, humanitarian and multi-mandate international NGOs expressed concern that conflict-sensitive approaches to partnership may compromise their adherence to humanitarian principles. However, the findings suggest that conflict-sensitive humanitarian assistance (or politically informed impartiality) is, in fact, vital in contexts where humanitarian assistance is politicized both by international and local political/conflict actors.

The points that follow are not hard and fast policy recommendations. They are suggestions to guide further discussion about the nature of partnerships between international NGOs and CSO partners in violent conflict settings and how those partnerships can be strengthened to maximize their positive impacts.

How can international organizations develop enabling partnerships with CSOs in conflict settings?

Invest in more nuanced and more frequently updated analysis of the local context

The research clearly shows that those making decisions about how best to respond in violent conflict settings very often lack nuanced and up-to-date analysis on the rapidly changing situation, including politics, and the character of gender relations and how these interact with conflict. This means that decisions about partnerships, project locations and activities and how to deliver effective support are often not based on the best information available. At best, such programming may be ineffective; at worst, it could be damaging to the people Oxfam and other international NGOs and their CSO partners aim to help.

- International actors embarking on partnerships with CSOs in conflict settings must do more to understand how conflict dynamics affect CSOs and the communities they work with. Nuanced insights and up-to-date information, based on gender and conflict analyses, are vital if programmes are to avoid reinforcing existing social divisions and further marginalizing vulnerable groups and individuals.

- Providing regular conflict analysis sessions for in-country staff to guide their decision making could provide invaluable insights for operational as well as strategic decisions and is critical to upholding the humanitarian principles of independence and impartiality in conflict settings.

Choosing partnership approaches that support and strengthen CSOs in conflict settings

Take a more long-term and sophisticated approach to partnerships
Acknowledging and unpacking the power asymmetries that often dominate partnerships between CSOs and international actors is an important first step towards building more enabling partnerships; this requires trust and honest conversations. International actors and their partner CSOs in conflict settings need to collaborate to harness their respective strengths.

- International actors may need to revisit how they recruit or access the appropriate combinations of knowledge, skills and talents to meet the staff and organizational development needs of their CSO partners when working in conflict settings.
- International actors need to support locally driven initiatives rather than setting up their own structures and mechanisms for dialogue and coordination, as this can have a negative impact on CSOs and exacerbate any divisions between them.
- As a principle, 'subsidiarity' can be a useful guide to establishing who and where decisions are made within more enabling partnerships in conflict settings, given the need for flexibility as fluid conflict dynamics shift on the ground.
- The 'outsider' status of international actors can allow them to play a bridging or convening role. Within this role, international actors need to consider the value they add in each specific context; and at the invitation of CSOs, consider taking a more active role in challenging restrictions around civic space.

Support staff and organizational development based on partners' expressed priorities
The most common staff and organizational development needs mentioned during our research include the following, with the proviso that efforts to build capacity should be tailored to the local context and organizational strengths and weaknesses, and should emerge from frank and open discussions between the partners:

- security management
- organizational systems
- organizational development – often for rapid scale-up or changes in programme direction
- conflict analysis and conflict sensitivity
- mainstreaming gender to improve the position and leverage of women's rights organizations
- support for undertaking advocacy and building local and/or national networks and alliances
- understanding the international aid system.

Increase funding and improve funding mechanisms
If funding reached beyond large international, national and local CSOs, it would encourage the development of smaller community-based organizations working to support the enhancement of social capital in conflict-affected communities.

- International actors need to consider how their funding patterns and project timeframes play a role in strengthening or weakening institutional capacity of CSOs. Partnership selection processes both at the strategic level and during short proposal development timeframes need to be reviewed to ensure that they support mutually beneficial partnerships and do not further exacerbate divisions among CSOs in conflict contexts.
- Building more enabling partnerships in conflict settings is expensive; figures suggest that overheads can be around three times higher in conflict settings than in other areas, so finding ways to finance international commitments to advancing localization responsibly in conflict settings is an urgent priority.
- Grants should include a proportion to support individual and organizational development needs (as expressed by local partners according to identified need) and encourage an accompaniment and skills-sharing approach rather than short technical workshops.

Take calculated risks, and better manage the transfer of risk
To minimize risks, international actors often retreat into working with NGO-styled CSOs, overlooking the breadth of civil societies (individuals and organizations, traditional and modern, registered and unregistered) that may be well placed to advance specific priorities and objectives in the given conflict setting. The transfer of risk from international actors to CSOs via remote programming in conflict settings is an issue in need of attention, in collaboration with CSOs themselves – is more training and support on security management a sufficient and responsible response? What more can be achieved, in each specific situation?

- There is a need to balance taking risks with finding the best-placed organizations to provide support to vulnerable and hard-to-reach communities. If working with CSOs involves a substantial transfer of risk, this should be openly discussed, agreed, resourced and managed, within the concept of subsidiarity discussed earlier.
- More needs to be understood about how prolonged exposure to violent conflict and trauma affect CSOs – their people, their work and the development of civil society in conflict settings. Greater understanding is needed if international actors are to support and strengthen CSOs in conflict settings effectively.

And finally, this research focused on the impact of conflict on CSOs already engaged in partnerships with international actors. A study of individual activists, community associations, traditional and customary associations, and a much larger sample of women's organizations would complement these findings and expand the purview of international actors seeking to build more effective, impactful partnerships in conflict settings.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Africa Peace Forum (APFO), Centre for Conflict Resolution (CECORE), Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies (CHA), Forum on Early Warning and Early Response (FEWER), International Alert and Saferworld. (2014). *Conflict-Sensitive Approaches to Development, Humanitarian Assistance and Peacebuilding: A Resource Pack*. London: APFO, CECORE, CHA, FEWER, International Alert and Saferworld. Retrieved 21 July 2017 at http://local.conflictsensitivity.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Conflict-Sensitive-Approaches-to-Development-Humanitarian-Assistance-and-Peacebuilding-Resource-Pack.pdf

CIVICUS (2016). *State of Civil Society Report 2016*. Pretoria: CIVICUS.

Dudouet, V. (November 2007). *Surviving the Peace: Challenges of War-to-Peace Transitions for Civil Society Organizations*. Berghof Report Number 16. Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management. Retrieved 20 July 2017, from http://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Papers/Reports/br16e.pdf

Paffenholz, T. (ed.). (2010). *Civil Society and Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment*. London and Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Daikundi, Afghanistan. Representatives from a local community development council gather to discuss a watershed management project. In provinces such as Daikundi, climate change and persistent drought are increasingly leading to conflict between households over resources such as water and irrigated land. Photo: Annabel Morrissey/Oxfam

ANNEX 1: KEY CONCEPTS AND TERMS

Conflict: Conflict is often assumed to be violent and to concern the distribution of resources. Yet conflict is better understood as 'the pursuit of incompatible goals by different people or groups'.[79] Those incompatible goals can relate to needs, interests, wants, fears, concerns, or competition between incompatible ideas.[80] As such, non-violent conflict resolution or management is a good indicator for the good functioning of just and inclusive societies in which people engage with each other and/or the authorities to pursue divergent goals, address real or perceived differences, and advance change. This applies equally to conflict within and between countries. While conflict is vital to progressing social change and transformation, it can descend into violence when societal values, systems and institutions that help to mediate conflict fail, and when one or more sides to the conflict resorts to the use of force.

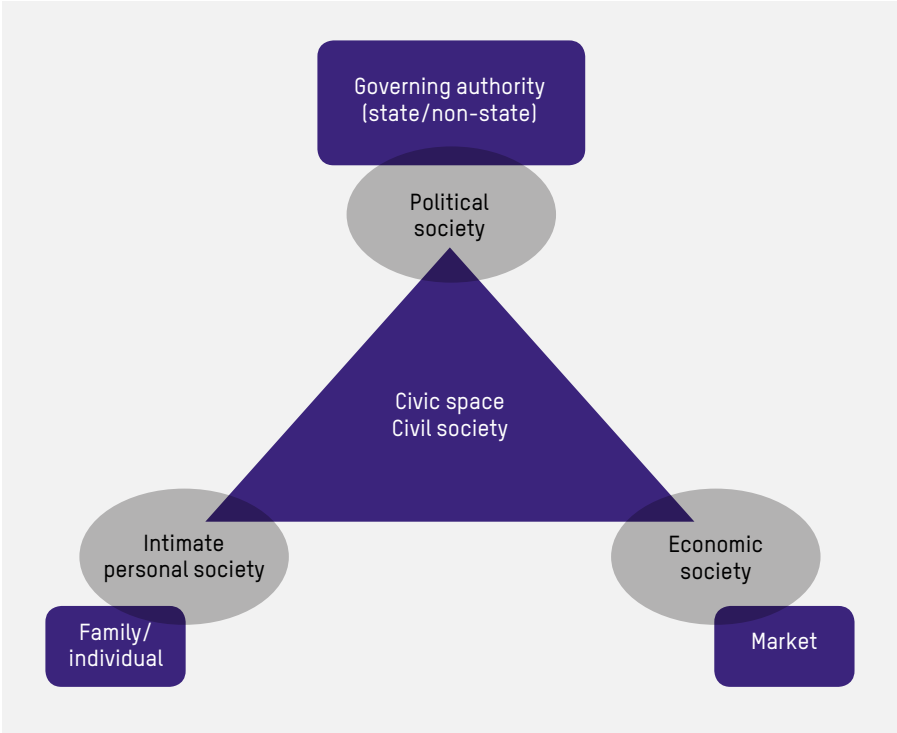
Violence: Violence is often narrowly interpreted to refer only to actions causing physical harm. Yet, 'violence… involves the use of force, be it physical or psychological' and 'inflicts physical or mental harm on others'.[81] Galtung defines structural violence as 'situations where unequal, unjust and unrepresentative structures prevent humans from realising their full potential, thus extending the definition of violence beyond direct physical harm to the organisation of society'.[82] For example, gender specialists draw on concepts of structural violence when they describe violence as an 'assault on a person's physical and mental integrity' and highlight how gender-related violence 'embodies the power imbalances inherent in patriarchal society'.[83]

Conflict-sensitivity: Conflict-sensitivity refers to the ability of an organization to:

- understand the character and nuances of conflict in the context in which it operates;
- understand the interaction between conflict and its plans and actions;
- act on an understanding of this interaction to avoid negative impacts and maximize positive impacts.[84]

Civil society: Civil society is best understood as a part of wider society. 'Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective actions around shared interests, purposes and values… [It] commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power'. For example, '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'.[85] As such, civil society can be populated by actors that are traditional or modern, local, national, international or transnational in character. Essentially, civil society is the space in which other parts of society (political society, economic society, intimate/personal society) interact; civil society serves to influence and/or improve the effectiveness and responsiveness of other parts of society.[86]

Figure 1: Civil society as the space in which other parts of society interact[87]



The boundaries between civil society and these other parts of society are complex, negotiated and blurred. For example, when business entrepreneurs (economic society) work together to demand tax breaks from the governing authority, they are acting as civil society.[88] Or when cooperatives and media outlets combine profit- and value-based goals, they occupy a space on the borders between civil and economic society.[89] Similarly, NGOs 'belong to the civil society sphere but are at times driven by market logics and maintain more or less explicit links with the state'.[90] Furthermore, the boundaries between personal/intimate society, civil society and political society are blurred by traditional and customary entities (kin groups, tribal elders) when they perform functions associated with civil society or governing authority.

Civil society actors: The panoply of individuals or groups that make up civil society.

Civil society organizations: For the purposes of this research, national and local registered or non-registered entities with a common recognized vision or purpose. Oxfam (and many other international NGOs) usually works with registered entities.

ANNEX 2: OVERVIEW OF CASE STUDIES

All three case study locations selected for this research have experienced protracted violent conflict spanning at least 20 years, with very high costs in terms of human life and development. In each case the conflict has also profoundly shaped local civil society and the CSOs that serve the poorest and most marginalized communities.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan[91] is a priority country in terms of international peace and security agendas. Decades of violent conflict have involved a wide range of external powers allied with competing Afghan communities. The current violence is linked to a series of interconnected conflicts: the emergent central state trying to assert itself vis-à-vis well-established and resilient non-state actors; the insurgency involving the Taliban and their associates; the threat of the armed group IS (Islamic State); competition between ethnic groups; violence related to the narcotics trade; localized disputes involving local officials and their opponents; proxy wars linked to regional powers competing for influence; conflicts between different visions of 'progress'; and the effects of international intervention and the US-led coalition war.

While there is a clear legal framework protecting civic space in Afghanistan, in practice, civil society confronts threats and attacks from state and non-state actors alike, including extremist militant groups.[92] Freedom of expression is particularly threatened and CSOs and media self-censor for survival. For example, 'in August [2016]... Afghanistan's main daily newspaper, 8am, published a blank page in its Herat edition, self-censoring an article on the provincial council head, fearing armed retaliation on its regional bureau and staffers'.[93]

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Afghan CSOs benefited from a massive influx of international aid, growing exponentially and expanding their activities and reach. But for some, their priorities have evolved to reflect the geographic and thematic priorities of their international partners (often security priorities of donor governments). Interviewees also emphasized how some international partners drive risk-averse approaches to programming that are ill-suited to conflict settings.

Democratic Republic of Congo

Eastern DRC[94] is enduring one of the world's longest-running and most complex conflict-driven humanitarian crises.[95] The case study research focused on two of the most severely conflict-affected provinces, North and South Kivu (which border Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi). The protracted violence in these provinces is the product of numerous, entrenched and interrelated dynamics: the predatory and patrimonial model of governance that has shaped the state in DRC since colonial times; the proliferation of competing armed groups that have taken root in the absence of formal functioning security services; the ongoing power struggles that drive instability across the Great

Lakes region and regularly spill over borders; the war economy that has evolved around lucrative natural resources, incentivizing continued instability; and inter-community tensions over land, which are often exacerbated by extreme poverty and politicized ethnic identities, including those of refugees that fled genocide in Rwanda and settled in DRC.

Violence and crisis in DRC have caused an estimated 5.4 million deaths since 1998 and communities are regularly displaced due to persistently high levels of violence. Women and girls are frequently targeted with sexual violence; children are forcibly recruited into armed groups; and poor people's livelihoods and survival strategies are regularly undermined by displacement and pillaging by armed groups.[96] Despite this context, numerous humanitarian and development INGOs and CSOs have adopted a form of 'conflict tolerance', only adapting their day-to-day activities, rather than changing their broader strategic approach at country or organizational levels. In contrast, INGOs and CSOs involved in peace building and stabilization are more attuned and responsive to the implications of shifting dynamics for both their strategic direction and operations. This blind-spot is significant, considering that the success of humanitarian and development initiatives depends on addressing conflict dynamics (SDG 16).

Civil society in eastern DRC is highly politicized. Boundaries between civil society and political society are blurred because of intense political competition and because formal mechanisms for political representation are weak. CSOs are targeted by political actors seeking to advance their interests, while CSOs move between civic space and political space to further their own agendas, or are drawn into political space inadvertently or out of necessity. For example, following the influx of refugees from Rwanda, civil society in South Kivu mobilized against the presence of Rwandan-backed armed groups. In some cases, this involved nationalist and anti-Rwandan discourse, which appeared to support local citizen militias (the Mai Mai), and had the effect of hardening divisions and tensions between Congolese communities. International actors engaged in humanitarian, development and stabilization efforts need to work closely with their local partners to defuse this politicization and ensure that activities contribute to peace building rather than simply escalating localized conflict dynamics.

Myanmar

Kachin state, in the north of Myanmar,[97] is experiencing increasingly violent conflict and an escalating humanitarian emergency, but CSO access to conflict-affected communities is constrained by insecurity and state-imposed restrictions. After 17 years of relative peace under a bilateral ceasefire, violent conflict restarted in 2011 concurrently with Myanmar's shift from military dictatorship to democratization. Prior to this, the Kachin conflict had been ongoing for more than 30 years (1961–94).

The conflict is largely between the Kachin Independence Organisation/Army (KIO/A) and the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's army) over ethnic Kachin rights and control over the state's territory and resources. However, other (para)military actors are also involved: militias,

border guard forces and other ethnic armed groups. Political alliances have developed between different Kachin tribal groups, and between Kachin and non-Kachin ethnic groups, amid new calls for different ethnic territorial rights within Kachin state, and allegations that the Tatmadaw are arming some ethnic militias. Yet, much international attention is focused on the conflict in Rakhine state in the west of Myanmar. As a result, CSOs interviewed for this research fear Kachin has become Myanmar's 'forgotten conflict'.

The ongoing conflict in Kachin shapes civic space. As the process of democratization has brought more civic freedoms, some CSOs in Kachin have moved from service delivery to activism and advocacy (e.g. on human rights) using a range of tactics that include press conferences, public demonstrations and letter writing. But there have also been some less positive developments, with threats to freedom of expression online in the form of recent arrests for defamation, and CSOs reportedly find it difficult to get access to political representatives.

CSOs in Kachin have largely organized around ethnic and religious community identities, and the conflict has hardened divisions between communities. Yet despite the deteriorating situation, international actors could do more to help CSOs connect with each other and build alliances. Joint platforms on issues such as coordinating humanitarian responses, addressing large-scale development projects and engaging with national government on the Kachin conflict have created opportunities for dialogue, collaboration and trust-building. Successful support to these initiatives, however, relies on international actors having a nuanced understanding of the conflict dynamics and proceeding cautiously; heavy-handed efforts to facilitate community-level dialogue can reinforce rather than alleviate conflicts and divisions.

NOTES

[1] The number of people who have been forcibly displaced from their homes reached 65.6m in 2016, the highest level since records began, according to a new report from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). London: Economist (2017:6) https://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2017/06/daily-chart-13)

[2] The localization agenda puts local and national actors and organizations at the forefront of humanitarian and development initiatives in their home countries. The Charter for Change is an initiative promoted by national and international NGOs to change how the humanitarian system works to enable a more locally led response. To find out more, see https://charter4change.org/

[3] The research also included interviews with thematic experts with experience in a range of conflict settings and a literature review. Sixty-eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, of whom over 40 were from CSOs. The rest were with staff of international NGOs, think tanks, donor governments and intergovernmental organizations. Most CSO staff interviewed were current Oxfam partners, typically registered CSOs working on humanitarian, development and advocacy issues.

[4] For the purposes of this report, the term 'CSOs' refers to local and national civil society organizations, non-government organizations and community-based organizations. For more on how civil society is defined, see Annex 1.

[5] Keystone Performance Survey. (2014). *Development Partnerships Survey 2014: Partner Feedback Report:* Oxfam. London: Keystone Accountability. www.KeystoneAccountability.org

[6] The Keystone Performance Survey (2014: 9) concludes that Oxfam 'adds value to its partners, but could achieve significant gains through investing in improving certain aspects of its relationship with them'.

[7] V. Dudouet. (November 2007). *Surviving the Peace: Challenges of War-to-Peace Transitions for Civil Society Organizations*. Berghof Report Number 16. Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management. Retrieved 20 July 2017, from http://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Papers/Reports/br16e.pdf

[8] G. White. (2004). *Civil Society, Democratisation and Development: Clearing the Analytical Ground*. In P. Burnell and P. Calvert. *Civil Society in Democratization*. London: Frank Cass.

[9] T. Paffenholz. (ed.). (2010). *Civil Society and Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment*. London and Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

[10] World Bank. (2011). *World Development Report 2011: Conflict Security and Development* (p.4, Figure F1.3). Washington DC: The World Bank.

[11] R. D. Putnam. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York, Simon & Schuster. Cited in V. Dudouet. (2007). *Surviving the Peace: Challenges of War-to-Peace Transitions for Civil Society Organizations*.

[12] CIVICUS (2016). *State of Civil Society Report 2016*. p.205–6. Pretoria: CIVICUS.

[13] R. Nusrat. (2017). Afghanistan Case Study Report. Unpublished. Oxfam/International Alert.

[14] CIVICUS. (2016). *State of Civil Society Report 2016*. Pretoria: CIVICUS

[15] R. Nusrat. (2017). Afghanistan Case Study Report.

[16] C. Ellis. (2017). DRC Case Study Report. Unpublished. Oxfam/International Alert.

[17] E. Drew. (2016). Myanmar Case Study Report. Unpublished. Oxfam/International Alert.

[18] J. Enarsson. (July 2013). *A Push and a Shift: Light Strategic Gender Review;* H. Myrttinen and M. Daigle. (February 2017). *When Merely Existing is a Risk: Sexual and Gender Minorities in Conflict, Displacement and Peacebuilding.* London: International Alert. Retrieved 20 July 2017, from http://www.international-alert.org/publications/when-merely-existing-is-a-risk

[19] CIVICUS. (2016). *State of Civil Society Report* 2016.

[20] Freedom from Torture. (June 2014). *Rape as Torture in the DRC: Sexual Violence Beyond the Conflict Zone.* London: Freedom from Torture. Retrieved 20 July 2017, from https://www.freedomfromtorture.org/sites/default/files/final_web_-_a4.pdf

[21] OECD. (2016). *States of Fragility 2016: Understanding Violence.* Paris: OECD.

[22] Research by US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2002) cited in A. Badkhen (13 August 2012). *Afghanistan: PTSDland.* Washington DC: Pulitzer Center. Retrieved 26 August 2017 http://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/afghanistan-ptsdland

[23] E. Drew. (2016). Myanmar Case Study Report.

[24] V. Boege, A. Brown, K. Clements and A. Nolan. (October 2008). *On Hybrid Political Orders and Emerging States: State Formation in the Context of 'Fragility.* Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management. Retrieved 20 July 2017, from http://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Handbook/Articles/boege_etal_handbook.pdf

[25] R. Bruce Hall and T.J. Biersteker. (eds.). (2002). *The Emergence of Private Authority in Global Governance.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[26] E. Drew. (2016). Myanmar Case Study Report.

[27] K. Dupuy, J. Ron and A. Prakash. (August 2016). *Hands Off My Regime! Governments' Restrictions on Foreign Aid to Non-Governmental Organizations in Poor and Middle-Income Countries.* World Development, 84, 299–311.

[28] CIVICUS. (2016). *State of Civil Society Report 2016.*

[29] E. Drew. (2016). Myanmar Case Study Report.

[30] C. Ellis. (2017). DRC Case Study Report.

[31] C. Ellis. (2017). DRC Case Study Report.

[32] J. Enarsson. (July 2013). *A Push and a Shift: Light Strategic Gender Review of Within and Without the State.* Unpublished report. Oxfam.

[33] G. White (2004). *Civil Society, Democratisation and Development: Clearing the analytical ground.* In P. Burnell and P. Calvert. Civil Society in Democratisation. p.10. London: Franck Cass.

[34] R. Nusrat. (2017). Afghanistan Case Study Report.

[35] E. Drew. (2016). Myanmar Case Study Report.

[36] C. Ellis. (2017). DRC Case Study Report.

[37] R. Nusrat. (2017). Afghanistan Case Study Report.

[38] J. Enarsson. (July 2013). *A Push and a Shift: Light Strategic Gender Review;* P. Chaney. (2016). *Civil Society and Gender Mainstreaming: Empirical Evidence and Theory-Building from Twelve Post-Conflict Countries 2005–15.* World Development, 83, 280–294.

[39] R. Nusrat. (2017). Afghanistan Case Study Report.

[40] P. Chaney, P. (2016). *Civil Society and Gender Mainstreaming*

[41] C. Ellis. (2017). DRC Case Study Report.

[42] J. Enarsson. (July 2013). *A Push and a Shift: Light Strategic Gender Review.*

[43] CAFOD. 2014. *Advocating in and on conflict situations: a quick guide to effective conflict advocacy.* London: Cafod. Retrieved 26 August 2017. https://cafod.org.uk/content/download/14827/117581/file/conflict%20advocacy%20media%20guide.pdf

[44] C. Ellis. (2017). DRC Case Study Report.

[45] E. Drew. (2016). Myanmar Case Study Report.

[46] E. Drew. (2016). Myanmar Case Study Report.

[47] E. Drew. (2016). Myanmar Case Study Report.

[48] E. Drew. (2016). Myanmar Case Study Report.

[49] E. Drew. (2016). Myanmar Case Study Report. See also R.D. Putnam. (2000). Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.

[50] Saferworld (February 2011). *The Securitisation of Aid? Reclaiming Security to Reach Poor People's Needs.* London: Saferworld Briefing. Retrieved 26 August 2017. https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/505-the-securitisation-of-aid

[51] Oxford Dictionary of English app; P. Vernon and D. Baksh (September 2010). *Working with the Grain to Change the Grain: Moving Beyond the Millennium Development Goals.* London: International Alert. Retrieved 21 July 2017, from http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/publications/MDG.pdf

[52] R. Nusrat. (2017). Afghanistan Case Study Report.

[53] C. Ellis. (2017). DRC Case Study Report.

[54] Thematic expert interviews

[55] All three case study reports: E. Drew. (2016). Myanmar Case Study Report; C. Ellis. (2017). DRC Case Study Report; R. Nusrat. (2017). Afghanistan Case Study Report.

[56] Thematic expert interviews

[57] C. Ellis. (2017). DRC Case Study Report.

[58] E. Drew. (2016). Myanmar Case Study Report.

[59] Thematic expert interviews and C. Ellis. (2017). DRC Case Study Report.

[60] E. Drew. (2016). Myanmar Case Study Report.

[61] E. Drew. (2016). Myanmar Case Study Report.

[62] C. Ellis. (2017). DRC Case Study Report.

[63] Thematic expert interviews

[64] E. Drew. (2016). Myanmar Case Study Report.

[65] R. Nusrat. (2017). Afghanistan Case Study Report.

[66] E. Schenkenberg. (November 2016). *The Challenges of Localised Humanitarian Aid in Armed Conflict*. London: Médecins Sans Frontières Emergency Gap Series 03. Retrieved 21 July 2017, from http://www.alnap.org/resource/23839.

[67] R. Nusrat. (2017). Afghanistan Case Study Report; E. Drew. (2016). Myanmar Case Study Report.

[68] R. Nusrat. (2017). Afghanistan Case Study Report; E. Drew. (2016). Myanmar Case Study Report.

[69] M. Stephen. (2016). *Measuring Advocacy Impacts: Lessons from Piloting a Hybrid Methodology*. Retrieved 21 July 2017, from DM&E for Peace blog: http://dmeforpeace.org/learn/measuring-advocacy-impacts-lessons-piloting-hybrid-methodology

[70] From Maina Kiai. 17 January 2017. *From funding projects to funding struggles: Reimagining the role of donors.* Open Democracy. Retrieved 26 August 2017. https://www.opendemocracy.net/openglobalrights/maina-kiai/from-funding-projects-to-funding-struggles-reimagining-role-of-donors.

[71] World Bank. (2013). IDA 17: *IDA's Support to Fragile and Conflict-Affected States*. IDA (International Development Association) Resource Mobilization Department Concessional Finance and Global Partnerships. Washington DC: World Bank.

[72] E. Drew. (2016). Myanmar Case Study Report.

[73] C. Ellis. (2017). DRC Case Study Report.

[74] R. Nusrat. (2017). Afghanistan Case Study Report.

[75] C. Ellis. (2017). DRC Case Study Report.

[76] E. Drew. (2016). Myanmar Case Study Report.

[77] B. Pouligny. (2005). *Civil Society and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: Ambiguities of International Programmes Aimed at Building 'New' Societies. Security Dialogue* 36(4), 495–510; J. Igoe. (2003). *Scaling up Civil Society: Donor Money, NGOs and the Pastoralist Land Rights Movement in Tanzania. Development and Change,* 34(5), 863–85. J. Pearce. (1998). *From Civil War to 'Civil Society: Has the End of the Cold War Brought Peace to Central America? International Affairs,* 74(3), 587–615.

[78] C. Ellis. (2017). DRC Case Study Report.

[79] C. Moser and F.C. Clark. (eds.). (2001). *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors: Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence.* London: Zed Books.

[80] S. Hickey. (2013). *Thinking about the Politics of Inclusive Development: Towards a Relational Approach.* ESID Working Paper No. 1. Manchester: University of Manchester, Effective States and Inclusive Development (ESID) Research Centre. Retrieved 21 July 217, from http://www.effective-states.org/wp-content/uploads/working_papers/final-pdfs/esid_wp_01_hickey.pdf

[81] C. Moser and F.C. Clark. (eds.). (2001) V*ictims, Perpetrators or Actors: Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence.*

[82] Africa Peace Forum (APFO), Centre for Conflict Resolution (CECORE), Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies (CHA), Forum on Early Warning and Early Response (FEWER), International Alert and

Saferworld. (2014). *Conflict-sensitive Approaches to Development, Humanitarian Assistance and Peacebuilding: A Resource Pack*. London: APFO, CECORE, CHA, FEWER, International Alert and Saferworld. Retrieved 21 July 2017, http://local.conflictsensitivity.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Conflict-Sensitive-Approaches-to-Development-Humanitarian-Assistance-and-Peacebuilding-Resource-Pack.pdf]

[83] J. El Bushra and E. Piza-Lopez. (1993). *Development in Conflict: The Gender Dimension*. Oxford: Oxfam/ACCORD.

[84] International Alert, Center for Conflict Resolution, Africa Peace Forum, Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies, Forum on Early Warning and Early Response, and Saferworld (2004). *Conflict-sensitive Approaches to Development, Humanitarian Assistance and Peacebuilding*. A resource pack.

[85] Definition of the London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society, cited in V. Dudouet. (2007). *Surviving the Peace: Challenges of War-to-Peace Transitions for Civil Society Organizations. Also cited in B. Pouligny (2005). Civil Society and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: Ambiguities of International Programmes Aimed at Building 'New' Societies.*

[86] V. Dudouet. (2007). *Surviving the Peace.*

[87] Adapted from V. Dudouet. (2007). Surviving the Peace. See also C. Spurk. (2010). Understanding Civil Society, in T. Paffenholz. (ed.). (2010). *Civil Society and Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment.* London and Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

[88] C. Spurk. (2010). Understanding Civil Society, in T> Paffenholz (ed.). (2010). Civil Society and Peacebuilding.

[89] V. Dudouet. (2007). *Surviving the Peace.*

[90] C. Orjuela. (2003). *Building Peace in Sri Lanka – A Role for Civil Society? Journal of Peace Research,* 40(2),195–212.

[91] The details included in this overview are taken from R. Nusrat (2017) Afghanistan Case Study Report, unless another reference has been cited.

[92] CIVICUS Monitor Tracking Civic Space. *Afghanistan Overview*. Retrieved 21 July 2017, from https://monitor.civicus.org/newsfeed/2016/04/14/overview/

[93] Afghanistan Journalists Federation letter to Brussels Summit, October 2016. Retrieved 26 August 2017. http://www.baag.org.uk/sites/www.baag.org.uk/files/resources/attachments/Afghan%20Journalists%20Federation%20BCA%20Position%20paper.pdf

[94] The details included in this overview are taken from C. Ellis (2017) DRC Case Study Report, unless another reference has been cited.

[95] 'United Nations OCHA in the DRC'. Retrieved 26 August 2017, http://www.unocha.org/country/democratic-republic-congo/about-ocha-drc/about-ocha-drc

[96] 'Democratic Republic of Congo'. International Rescue Committee. Retrieved 21 July 2017, from https://www.rescue.org/country/democratic-republic-congo; 'Democratic Republic of the Congo: Conflict Profile'. Insights on Conflict. Retrieved 21 July 2017, from https://www.insightonconflict.org/conflicts/dr-congo/conflict-profile/

[97] The details included in this overview are taken from E. Drew (2016) Myanmar Case Study Report, unless another reference has been cited.

© Oxfam International October 2017

This paper was written by Monica Stephen.

This publication is copyright but the text may be used free of charge for the purposes of advocacy, campaigning, education, and research, provided that the source is acknowledged in full. The copyright holder requests that all such use be registered with them for impact assessment purposes. For copying in any other circumstances, or for re-use in other publications, or for translation or adaptation, permission must be secured and a fee may be charged.

Email policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk

The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under ISBN 978-1-78748-075-9 in October 2017. DOI: 10.21201/2017.0759.

Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

Oxfam

Oxfam is an international confederation of 20 organizations networked together in more than 90 countries, as part of a global movement for change, to build a future free from the injustice of poverty. Please write to any of the agencies for further information, or visit www.oxfam.org