
FROM PEACE OPTIMISM TO UNDECLARED WAR

THE NARROWING SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY PEACE WORK IN SRI LANKA

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A diverse crowd of people gathered for a peace demonstration at Colombo's Lipton Circle on a Monday in late May 2006, displaying placards that condemned the last month's killings of innocent civilians. A week later, an art exhibition combining photos with peace quotes made classy Colombo viewers reflect over the ongoing war, while a multi-ethnic mobile theatre put up its tent to perform in Puttalam. Youth from different areas and ethnic groups got a chance to meet in youth camps, at the same time as peace committees formed in the volatile East struggled to continue being a forum for conflict resolution.

These are some examples of peace endeavours of civil society organizations and actors in Sri Lanka, with financial support of international donors. While similar activities have been carried out for over a decade in Sri Lanka, the context in which they take place has changed radically over the last five years. The peace optimism in the wake of the signing of the Ceasefire Agreement and the commencement of the peace process between the Sri Lankan government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2002 provided increased space, enthusiasm and financial support for civil society peace work, while the stalled peace talks, drastically escalating violence and harsh criticism of peace NGOs in 2006, have caused that space to shrink.

International donors have over the last years put in large amounts of funds, hoping that civil society could engineer popular support for the peace process, disseminate information about the official peace dealings, build bridges across ethnic divides and consensus for the necessary political restructuring, as well as pressure leaders not to diverge from the peace path. The gradual deterioration of the peace process painfully highlights the limitations of what donor-funded civil-society-led peace work can do. There is a sense of disappointment among international donors and civil society representatives alike that the abundance of peace programmes has not helped to keep peace on track.

This article analyses how the general context in which civil society peace work takes place has changed since the start of the peace process, how donors and civil society actors have

responded to these changes, and spells out some challenges ahead for peace-minded donors and civil society actors.

Ceasefire and peace euphoria in 2002

The environment for civil society peace work changed significantly with the shift of government in December 2001, from the People's Alliance's devastating 'war-for-peace' to the United National Party's Norwegian-facilitated peace process and ceasefire agreement with the LTTE. Until then, peace advocacy groups had mobilized some opposition to the war efforts in a context where the country was 'on a war footing' and the space to criticize the government's military strategy (and for donors to fund vociferous critics of the government) was severely limited. Civil society efforts to facilitate cross-ethnic dialogue or canvas support for power sharing had however been welcomed by the PA government, which itself, parallel to the war effort, pursued devolution of power and awareness raising among the grassroots through its Sudu Neelum movement (to which some civil society peace activists had been co-opted).

With the commencement of the official peace process, civil society peace workers found themselves 'fighting a winning battle.' The end of open warfare and the opening of roads (most importantly the A9) facilitated mobility between the formerly isolated North-East and the South of the island, enabled study visits and joint activities and made grassroots activities for peace easier. Key actors, who were earlier the target of peace advocacy, had taken over the initiative in talking and acting for peace, leaving civic groups at the rear. The bipolar (government-LTTE), top-heavy design of the peace process left no space for official civil society involvement. While it became easier for civil society groups to get access to leading figures from both parties, civil society representation at the negotiation table was not seriously on the agenda. Sub-committees established under the peace negotiation teams and groups formed to support the monitoring of the ceasefire had participants from the civil society sphere. Leading NGOs were briefed by the Norwegian facilitators and the government's chief negotiators took part in conferences and meetings with civil society

(represented mainly by the Colombo-based elite). 'Civil society' (embodied by the director of the Centre for Policy Alternatives) was invited to give a presentation at the Tokyo donor conference in June 2003, and civil society representatives travelled to Thailand and Switzerland in connection with peace talks there. Nevertheless, civil society actors participated in the peace process mainly 'on the outside'.

Civil society actors took on (or were given) the role of mobilising support among the masses for the peace process. In the words of Vasuki Nesiah, civil society became a 'variable that can be strategically plugged-in to legitimate the peace process rather than challenge or re-negotiate its terms' (*Daily Mirror*, 26 November 2002). The eagerness to support the peace process fostered a climate with very little space for criticism of the process, and where those raising disparaging voices were branded as spoilers.

Donor enthusiasm

While Sri Lanka has received relatively large amounts of foreign development assistance since its turn towards open market economy in 1977, donor interest to explicitly support peace took off in the late 1990s. This was part of a global trend in the 'aid industry' to mainstream conflict sensitivity in development and humanitarian programmes and to support specific peace projects. A parallel trend in the donor community has been to fund 'civil society' (a new buzz word from the mid-1990s). Civil society was supported both as efficient subcontractors to deliver services or carry out advocacy work – and for its own sake, as a strong civil society was believed to be conducive for democratisation, economic development and peace. In Sri Lanka a few bilateral donors spearheaded the interest in peace support, making peacebuilding a main motivation for continued engagement in Sri Lanka (as Sri Lanka in 1997 was categorised as a middle-income country and thus not a priority for some donors). It should be noted, however, that Sri Lanka's main donors – Japan, World Bank and Asian Development Bank, which provide about 70% of all aid – have been considerably slower in adopting a conflict sensitivity and peace stand and continue to have economic development as their main interest.

With the peace process – and the UNP's donor-applauded economic reforms – Sri Lanka attracted large donor interest. Donors vowed to contribute to 'make peace visible' for the population and by that presumably consolidate support for

peace efforts. New donors entered (particularly to reconstruct the war-torn North-East), prematurely armed with a post-conflict tool kit and driven by the desire to be part of the success story of peacemaking in Sri Lanka.

While donors had begun to support civil society peace work during the previous peace process in the mid-1990s, such support intensified after the signing of the ceasefire agreement (however with some time lag). The distribution of (relatively) small grants to a variety of peace organizations and projects has increasingly been seen by donors as an administrative hassle. Limited managerial resources contributed to a concentration of donor funds in a small number of Colombo-based NGOs and think tanks, and only small amounts trickle out to less high-profile (non-English speaking and -cocktail party going) civil society groups in other parts of the country. To get around this problem, donors created a number of small grant funds which significantly have changed the structures through which civil society groups can access funding. Along with FLICT, there is CHA's (Consortium for Humanitarian Agencies) National Program for Peace and Development by Civil Society, the UNDP's Small Grants Fund in Support of Peace and the programme for Promoting the Benefits of Peace run by USAID, all started after the commencement of the peace process. The funds have to some extent challenged the gatekeeper role of Colombo NGOs and enabled weak organisations, not yet trained in the intricacies of proposal and report writing, to receive funding. All four funds have a mandate to support civil society actors (more or less broadly defined) in building a more peaceful and prosperous Sri Lanka, but they have somewhat different foci and modes of operation. While the diversity of funding opportunities has been positive and representatives of the funds emphasise complementarity, there have also been concerns about overlap and to some extent competition for good projects and partners to support. During the phase of formation, interaction and cooperation among the funds was more frequent than it currently is, although a database started by FLICT is envisioned to be an important tool for coordination.

The availability of new structures and more money for civil society peace work has enabled more work to be done, not least at the grassroots level. Many actors earlier specializing in other areas such as development or media have been attracted to peace work due to funding opportunities. In addition to this, prominent international NGOs, most importantly the Berghof Foundation, have entered the conflict transformation scene in Sri Lanka. The donor enthusiasm over peace work has raised concerns of an over-focus on peace. Critical voices spoke about a 'peace carnival'

and civil society groups with humanitarian and development concerns regret having to join that 'carnival' to be supported. The December 2004 tsunami disaster, and the subsequent wave of international support, however shrank the importance of peace work and diverted donor attention towards reconstruction of the coastlines. The huge uncoordinated influx of funds and international actors contributed to weakening local civil society (not least by the brain drain to international jobs), and to increasing mistrust towards NGOs as well as among NGOs.

Stalled peace talks and undeclared war

The peace euphoria of 2002 and early 2003 soon cooled down (just as some donors were in the process of starting up their work in Sri Lanka). The LTTE withdrawal from peace negotiations in April 2003, the UNP loss in general elections (making evident the failure to gain support among the general public for its economic and peace policies), and the emergence of an LTTE breakaway faction in the East a year later effectively put cogs in the wheels of the peace process. While the tsunami temporarily put stop to an escalation of hostilities, the end of 2005 saw an increase of violence. Since November 2005, more than 1000 persons have been killed, a number which clearly classifies Sri Lanka as a country at war – in spite of the ceasefire agreement formally being in place. There have been various forms of violence – the war between the LTTE and the (most likely government-supported) Karuna faction in the east, attacks on the Sri Lankan Armed Forces and on civilians carried out by LTTE or civilians trained by the LTTE, reprisal attacks on Tamil civilians by government forces, extra-judicial killings by state or state-supported actors, communal violence in Trincomalee (reminiscent of the anti-Tamil pogrom of 1983 and earlier), clashes between the Sea Tigers and the Navy, LTTE suicide bombers in Colombo and retaliatory air bombing carried out by the Sri Lankan government, and, since July, large-scale confrontations between government forces and the LTTE, which have led to government take-over of former LTTE-held territory in the East.

This has created a climate of fear in the North-East, and significantly shrunk the space for civil society activities across the island. Mobility has been curtailed due to security concerns and the closing of roads, the militarization of society has intensified, as has the polarization and separation between ethnic groups following inter-ethnic violence and 'communication war' – biased reporting and lack of facts provide space for rumours and feed into enemy images of

the 'other'. Attacks on NGOs in Muttur in May and the killing of 17 aid workers in August 2006 sent clear signals that even international organisations are not spared. In addition to this, pamphlets requiring women in the East to quit working for NGOs, due to (unproved) rumours of immoral sexual behaviour, seriously threatened women's rights to take part in civil society work.

In the context of escalated violence, most peace organizations in the war-zone can do nothing but run for their lives. While the interethnic links built up through peace programmes could potentially be useful, in most cases they are too weak to survive the violent polarisation. Human rights monitoring, humanitarian assistance and trauma counselling (on a mono-ethnic basis) are likely to be the prime concerns of civil society groups, while explicit peace programmes in the war zone appear increasingly unrealistic.

The donors, who anticipated contributing to Sri Lanka's path towards sustainable peace, have become more and more frustrated with the situation. The conclusion drawn by the donor-initiated Strategic Conflict Assessment (Goodhand & Klem, 2005) that donors cannot buy peace in Sri Lanka, and the stalled reconstruction process in the North-East, have forced donors to rethink their role. A number of (mainly European) donors are withdrawing, scaling down or refocusing (from peace building to economic development) their programmes in Sri Lanka. If full-scale war breaks out, or low-intensity war continues, donors are unlikely to be able to continue their work (other than strictly humanitarian) in the North-East. Continued engagement in Sri Lanka would mean that they further contribute to the disparity between the North-East and the South – an argument for some donors to leave totally. However, while many European countries are losing interest in Sri Lanka, Asian nations are becoming increasingly important. Japan, China and Australia have regional interests in Sri Lanka, but tend to be less aware of and interested in peace and conflict issues than the European donors.

Donors are simultaneously increasingly frustrated with Sri Lankan civil society, and the lack of sustained and massive mobilisation for peace (despite their continuous funding to NGOs). Donors recognise that the peace work they support can no longer be linked to a top-level peace process, but that they need to support work that will contribute to an enabling environment for peace – irrespective of the developments at top-level. Structural issues linked to state reform and governance are likely to gain increasing importance and civil society actors might than be seen as agents that can work

with local government structures to reform the state 'from below'. While donors are likely to continue funding civil society peace work, human rights is coming up as a new priority areas (e.g. by the European Union). Here civil society is envisioned to play an important role, not least in the light of the extremely weakened government Human Rights Commission.

A hostile climate for peace work

The peace euphoria that prevailed during the period of ceasefire was visible in media and the general climate of debate. A look at media today reveals exceptionally hostile attitudes towards NGOs involved in peace work. Peace organisations and their leaders are accused of compromising the sovereignty and integrity of Sri Lanka, and are described as 'peace merchants', 'anti-nationals' and 'puppets of the LTTE'. The abundance of NGO-critical articles in the Sinhala and English press rarely present evidence or facts to substantiate their allegations and criticised NGO representatives are not provided opportunity to present their case. While politicians criticising NGOs are given plenty of media space, the coverage of peace organisations and activities has shrunk. After the suicide bombs in Colombo, the escalated violence in the North-East and the EU banning of the LTTE, demonstrations and statements calling for peaceful conflict resolution (such as the one published by prominent civil society women in late May) are despised as weak, unpatriotic and serving LTTE interests. The JVP plays a lead role in demonising peace NGOs, flanked by other Sinhala nationalist parties and organisations such as the JHU and the National Patriotic Front. The JVP antagonism against peace NGOs has intensified since the party liaised with the government and thus needed to divert attention from failures in delivering on their election promises. JVP gains its votes on a Sinhala nationalist peace process-critical stance, and the attempts by peace organisations to encourage popular support for power sharing and non-military conflict resolution can possibly threaten JVP's vote base. Attacking peace NGOs can thus be understood as a strategy for extremist Sinhala groups. Repeated killings of journalists, the aggressive disturbance of a peace rally in Colombo by Sinhala nationalist Buddhist monks in August and the killing of Kethesh Loganathan (by many peace activists seen as 'civil society's' representative in the Government Peace Secretariat) further underscore the hostile and dangerous environment in which civil society peace actors work.

Government-civil society relations deteriorated with the change of government in 2004. The UNP government

interacted with civil society representatives (mainly the Colombo elite) and encouraged donor-supported peace work and engagement with the LTTE. While the new government does not explicitly discourage civil society peace activities (and donor support for them), it is less willing to officially acknowledge them and to fight the obstructions posed by the peace-critical central bureaucracy. Although not a new phenomena, there is mistrust between the government sector and civil society, and a lack of structures for information sharing and meetings (the National Advisory Council for Peace and Reconciliation established by the president in October 2004 is an example of an official but non-functional attempt to provide meeting spaces). Civil society access to political leaders and government officials fluctuates over time, depending on the general situation as well as on persons. The Parliamentary Select Committee set up to investigate the activities of local and international NGOs is seen by many civil society representatives as yet another attempt to curtail their activities, but by others as a chance to annihilate baseless accusations. Government-civil society relations are also influenced by the fact that many peace organisations are seen as partisan after having actively supported the UNP in its peace efforts. Moreover, it is worth noting that the decreased interest in Sri Lanka by some donors may be influenced by the government's more hostile stance toward donors and less appealing economic policy.

In the LTTE-dominated areas the scepticism towards civil society peace work has prevailed throughout the peace process. While the peace process opened up some space for dialogue, interethnic contacts, the peace NGO emphasis on reconciliation rather than justice is likely to have been interpreted by LTTE representatives as a threat to Tamil unity against a shared enemy (the government, Sinhala chauvinism). NGOs organising exposure visits abroad for LTTE members have been accused of trying to brainwash them to accept federalism. While the JVP blows the importance of peace NGOs out of proportions, LTTE-supporters have commonly considered civil society peace work useless. The LTTE has discouraged peace activities, and with the escalation of violence and mobilisation for 'the final war' the space for peace work has, if possible, become even narrower.

In LTTE-controlled areas, civil society does not function independently from the LTTE. Also in government-controlled areas, the LTTE has extensive influence over civil society. While peace organisations such as the Foundation for Co-existence have successfully engaged in local conflict resolution (including mediating conflicts with the LTTE),

LTTE-critical Tamil organisations are unable to function. The LTTE claim to be the sole representative of the Tamil people leaves no space for internal criticism. Public meetings usually express the LTTE-line, while people critical of the LTTE either keep quiet or end up taking a risky anti-LTTE position (which often falls in line with Sinhala nationalist interests). Freedom of expression and assembly in the North-East is curtailed not only by the LTTE but also by the government's military rule and by threats posed by a number of violent groups.

Constructive engagement with the LTTE, with the purpose of facilitating the transformation of the organisation from a military to a political entity, was part of the rationale of the peace process. Such engagement is made difficult by the escalation of violence (which gives the LTTE justification for its military focus) and by government attempts to delegitimise the LTTE and isolate it from international contacts (the ban by the EU being a significant government achievement in this regard). As the LTTE is more and more isolated and the Scandinavian facilitation and monitoring faces severe problems, civil society actors might have to regain their pre-peace process role of facilitating government-LTTE and international community-LTTE communication.

The (limited) importance of civil society peace work

It is painfully clear from the recent near collapse of the peace process that all the efforts by civil society and donors to promote peace have not been even close to sufficient to prevent a return to war. The correlation between civil society peace work and the track one process is one where the ability and strength of civil society to carry out peace activities to a large extent depend on a successful top-level process – rather than the other way around. Civil society has, at best, a support function.

A main concern of peace activists and donors has been the glaring lack of a mass-based popular movement against war in Sri Lanka. Popular mobilisation in Sri Lanka has tended to be along nationalist lines – and to turn dreadfully violent (the JVP rebellion and the Tamil nationalist struggle being striking examples). The deep divides caused by years of conflict and violence, and the lack of a clear shared enemy make mobilisation for peace difficult. Civil society peace initiatives are largely small-scale, fragmented, donor dependent and not sustained – we are talking about 'projects' rather than 'a movement'. For instance, while civil society

has provided temporary meeting places across ethnic and other divides, it has failed to change the structures of ethnic separation in a society where the education system as well as most parts of civil society are largely mono-ethnic.

However, the disappointing impact of civil society peace work might say more about the inflated expectations on it than on the efficiency of peace organisations. The inability of civil society to save the peace process (for instance by ensuring a re-election of the UNP, by pressuring the parties to uphold the ceasefire agreement and continue talks or by preventing violence) does not mean that civil society peace work is of no use. On the contrary, we can conclude that civil society organisations (with donor support) take on a range of highly relevant tasks, including peace education, advocacy work and dialogue projects, in a difficult environment. Civil society contributes to raising voices for peace (in an increasingly militarised context) and upholds networks and ideas that can be made use of for massive mobilisation when conditions are more conducive. Over the last five years, peace organisations have become more professional. The establishment of courses in peace and conflict resolution at several of the main universities in Sri Lanka has contributed to a broader systematic spread of knowledge and to an institutionalisation of peace work.

In the context of ongoing war, the voices for peace will be even more important, given the dominance of militaristic discourses. Civil society groups that stick to the message that non-violent peace making is possible and that conflict transformation requires changes of power structures will be important in envisioning alternative ways of thinking and laying the ground for future peace attempts. What are the best ways to support and protect such groups, when there is a risk that even peace groups doubt the possibility for peaceful conflict resolution? Another main challenge is how to ensure that links fostered across ethnic and other divides survive in a militarised, polarised and violent environment – and how to use these links to challenge the logic of war, enemy images and ethnic separation. Cross-cutting links and networks can potentially be used to provide humanitarian assistance – finding ways to provide security and basic needs to those engaging in these activities will be a priority and challenge.

The chance of steering Sri Lanka back to the peace track seems bleak at the moment. In the near future, security concerns, curtailed mobility and the dominance of nationalist discourse and enemy images are likely to provide the backdrop for civil society peace work. Nevertheless, donors

and civil society organisations need to identify how they can play a (limited) role laying the ground for new peace attempts and address the underlying causes of the conflict.

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End Notes

¹This text was written for FLICT (Facilitating Local Initiatives for Conflict Transformation) to be used as a basis for reflections and discussion about how FLICT should respond to the changed conflict environment, make priorities for the future and continue its work for sustained conflict transformation in Sri Lanka. The article is based on interviews with representatives of civil society organisations and donors carried out in Colombo May-June 2006, as well as on earlier research by the author. ■

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