

# Seminar

## Civil society working on conflict - Potentials for advancing the EU's role as a global actor for peace

The seminar's focus was threefold:

- Firstly it examined several case studies in which international actors used their non-partisan status to support peace initiatives embarked upon by civil society actors within a conflict zone.
- Secondly, it explored the ways in which European civil society could better contribute to overcoming violent conflict and rebuilding societies after war.
- Thirdly, the seminar discussed the question of the level of support required from European institutions in order for civil society peacebuilding initiatives to realise their full potential.

Christian Pfeifer, peace consultant with forumZFD, based in Novi Pazar (Serbia), told the seminar that his organisation's overall goal in the Western Balkans is to foster an environment where physical and verbal attacks are discouraged, whether they be motivated by political or ethno-religious causes. As an external player his organisation tries to activate constructive forces that have the potential to advance public interests and not those of one particular community. In his project in Novi Pazar, in the Bosniac majority region of Sandzak, Mr Pfeifer and his colleagues have identified youth organisations and the private enterprise sector as key actors in the promotion of social change. They argue that external peace consultants do not arrive with ready-made solutions, but help to empower and connect the relevant players at the level of civil society so that local stakeholders themselves start addressing their communities' conflict issues in a constructive manner.

Annika Karlsson emphasised the work that her organisation, the Swedish Kvinna till Kvinna foundation, is doing to facilitate dialogue amongst women's initiatives in the South Caucasus. By supporting local women's groups, Kvinna til Kvinna aspires to correct the misconceptions that prevent the region's communities from recognizing each others' hardships. As an international Ms Karlsson can travel more easily than locals, has access to different sides of the conflict divide and can help to connect people. In that sense she sees her role as a facilitator, enabling women to overcome biased perceptions towards their neighbours, thus challenging the underlying hatred and mistrust that continues to disrupt cross-community relations in the region. One of her presentation's key messages was that the specific experience of women in conflict, whether as victims, actors, knowledge-bearers or problem-solvers, needs to be given appropriate space and consideration when devising peacebuilding initiatives.

A third aspect of nonviolent third-party intervention was demonstrated by the short documentary *Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeping: Building a Nonviolent Peaceforce*. This film portrayed the work of Nonviolent Peaceforce in the conflict-affected areas

of Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Guatemala. It also showed how unarmed civilian presence is progressively being recognised as an effective instrument for protecting civilians, both by beneficiaries and stakeholders, including local authorities and armed groups.

Many points were raised in the subsequent discussion, the key conclusions of which can be summarised as follows:

- The local context and realities at the community level are critically important regions in affected by violent conflict. Political approaches that focus only on a government level will neglect some of the conflict's crucial contextual nuance and thus may be less effective and not lead to sustainable solutions. In this respect there is a clear role for civil society to support peacebuilding at the grassroots and middle-range levels of society. International civil society can play an important support function.
- The presence of international civilians gives a conflict and, by extension, the issues that need to be addressed, a higher profile. For those affected by conflict this international presence also gives a sense of "not being left alone and forgotten by the international community". It reinforces their sense of a shared humanity.
- External intervention needs local trust and acceptance in order to be effective. Trust and relationship building takes time, as do peacebuilding and conflict transformation processes. The EU's current focus on short term crisis management and crisis response are ill-suited to take this into account.
- Holding the EU and member state governments to account in relation to their actions in conflict situations is one of the roles of civil society and NGOs, both at EU level and also in member states. Institutions need to be challenged to live up to their commitments. At the same time, civil society has a lot of expertise and insights to offer to help improve official policy approaches.
- The independence of civil society organisations is critical, particularly within settings influenced by international military presence. To have the trust of local populations it is important not to be perceived as attached to or influenced by one of the conflicting parties, or to be directly associated with a state actor's specific interests or agenda.
- The European Civil Peace Corps (ECPC) proposal of the 1990s was developed in an early phase of the EU foreign policy development. Given the EU's institutional evolution over the last ten years, the Civil Peace Service approach might now be a more appropriate model for involving civil society in peace activism. By focusing on civil society such a mechanism could complement other official EU instruments.