



The Role of the Civil Society in the Prevention of Armed Conflict: An Action Agenda for South Asia



Recommendations made by the regional conference organized by the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS) under the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) Programme

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Preamble

South Asia hosts more than a quarter of the world's population and is one of the most densely populated regions. It is the cradle of one of the oldest civilizations with enormous diversity, deep-rooted cleavages and stratification on the basis of gender, caste, class, race, ethnicity and religion. In over five thousand years of its history it has been the scene of innumerable armed conflicts, social turmoil, and widespread violence against its people. It has also faced two hundred years of colonial rule that compounded its political and social divisions by imposing on them new cleavages of its own creation and decisions. In modern times the forces of globalization have contributed significantly to social, political, economic and cultural tumult. Events following September 11, 2001 and the "war against terror" have added a new dimension of unprecedented consequences resulting in further polarization of societies. It has aggravated latent cleavages such as communalism, fundamentalism, and gender violence and marginalized further disadvantaged groups such as minorities, indigenous people and women. Consequently South Asia today is one of the most conflict ridden and violence prone regions of the world. The South Asian people are not just facing patriarchal dominance, majoritarian and hostile State systems but also social and political systems that have increased structural violence leading to widespread and multilayered conflicts.

With a view to identifying the role of Civil Society, in the context of growing inability of the governments of the region to deal with above challenges in which they are often accused of being complicit partners, some 50 activists and other participants from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka got together in Kathmandu from 11 to 13 September 2004. The occasion was a regional conference entitled *The Role of Civil Society in Armed Conflicts in South Asia*, convened by the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS), in collaboration with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and UNDP. It is part of a larger international programme initiated by the *Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC)*, with the European Centre for Conflict Prevention (ECCP) serving as its secretariat. In this conference the participants representing organizations that spearheaded many pro-peace and anti war movements in South Asia challenged the concept that armed conflicts are the only indicators of widespread and pervasive violence in society. They opined that if peace is the goal then there has to be a process of introspective interrogation of all kinds of violence and present inequities in South Asian societies. For achieving minimal justice lessons are to be drawn from the experiences of communities that have suffered violence. The participants strongly urged the United Nations to operate not only as an organization of different States but also of people and nations.

The conference proposed that civil society organizations of South Asia should urge for a paradigm shift in international relations from national and state security to human security, people-centered developments over neo-liberal economic reforms and globalizations, dialogic mode of negotiation for conflict resolution over state sponsored terror and confidence building over spread of fear. They urged South Asians to move away from concepts of a new world order and work towards a just world order.

Objectives

The conference discussed a variety of discourses that offered people-centered alternatives that promoted peace, justice, equity and engendered human security in contrast to dominant mainstream paradigms.

Neo-Liberal globalization vs. People-centered development

Neo-liberal globalization does not address the specificities and requirements of civil societies in the region and instead aggravates inequalities, poverty and other deprivations including access to water, food, sanitation, health and education. MNCs and big domestic capital are strengthened at the cost of environment, most strata of society with women, children and marginalized communities suffering most. This resultant social dislocation accentuates violence and conflicts within and between states. An alternative people-centered development approach would be country, locality, community (including castes, religious and ethnic groups) specific and would be directed at poverty eradication, ensured entitlements to all basic requirements and an accountability at all levels of economic decision-making and government bodies. It would aim at creating and strengthening social solidarities which in turn would contribute to creating a culture of peace locally and nationally and later through people-to-people interaction regionally.

National Security/Human Security

The dominant discourse of national security is statist, militarist, majoritarian and masculinist. The interests of state power are paramount and the use of force including armed force is freely resorted to with the aim of curbing internal dissent or counter external challenges. In a nuclear world and region an alternative discourse that alone can address the problem of a possible calamity facing people of all nations is human security. In this regard societal concerns are paramount, and dissent is accommodated to the maximum possible extent. All use of force is regulated by law and the military is subject to human rights institutions and instruments. Human security would be based on the engendered people-centered development model which is just, equalities and peace loving.

New World Order/Just world Order

The US led new world order and later its post 9-11 global war against terror are ideological justifications for the creation of a unipolar world headed by a global hegemon backed by its partners, including in South Asia. The unilateral theories of pre-emptive strike and regime change have led to attacks on Asian countries like Afghanistan and Iraq and further conflicts are likely. An alternative peace-centric notion of a world order emphasizes the supremacy of international law and the imperative of the peaceful resolution of conflicts. A major source of conflict is deeply rooted in social, economic and cultural disparities, especially iniquitous distribution of physical resources at the disposal of states. International actors especially the U. N. system, state actors and non-state actors must be committed to a sustainable and

equitable distribution of resources for peace to be sustainable. As the Israel-Palestine conflict shows there can be no peace without justice. As part of the process of renewing and strengthening the UN it is instructive to remember that it is a comity of nations. The people of these nations represented by CSOs should be involved in the consultative mechanisms of the UN in all relevant areas and levels. It is imperative that these inputs also inform decision-making in the Security Council.

Conflict Prevention: 2 Approaches

Mainstream approaches to conflict prevention are largely based of dominant paradigms and are state-centric. A human security approach would empower civil society actors to map, forecast and prevent/resolve conflict through the intervention of local people familiar with the issues and groups involved. Instead of a militarist, there would be a dialogue process. Victims of conflicts, particularly women, would be empowered to intervene in the dialogue including in the restoration of their rights and compensation for their losses.

International Relations/ Transnational Civil Society

International relations is traditionally seen as inter-state relations. Nevertheless, the people of these states are better represented by civil society than statist structures. Transnational linkages and expenses sharing between CSOs would simultaneously democratic international relations as well as national states as well as civil societies themselves.

Terror/Dialogue

Militarist approaches to terrorism as arbitrarily defined by states not only demonize communities, e.g. Islam/Muslims, but are extended to other dissenters and often innocent civilians subject to punitive or unwarranted action including interrogation/arrest. Instead of conflict, violence and the culture of fear, accommodative, multi-cultural attitude of dialogue is both more democratic and effective. The way to prevent terror and militancy is through dialogue involving civil society actors and conceding demands for autonomy, justice, equity, rights etc.

Key Actors

Women

- Women can be at the forefront of picking up the pieces from violent conflicts and therefore at the forefront of peace building; when engaging in challenging violence, they often contribute a new dynamic to the context
- Experiences of bringing together women who have been affected by violence from across conflict divides can be very instructive for developing common ground of understanding
- Need to be equal partners in all aspects of peacemaking and peace building – can contribute experiences and perspectives that would otherwise be missing
- Experience suggests that women's peace movements tend to be very durable

Educators

- Importance of peace education

- Highlighting the need for educational reform in the long term to address cultural violence and implicit messages that reinforce hierarchies of dominance/exclusions and implications of inferiority

Academics and intellectuals

- Living up to the challenge in providing analysis and moral leadership to respond constructively to conflict and promote social justice

Media and journalists

- Shape and reflect the perceptions of context and discourse for responding to it
- Powerful medium for propaganda and stimulating conducive environment for violence
- Linked to state apparatus as channel for reinforcing status quo establishment
- Sometimes promotes national chauvinism – including in its most rabid forms
- Need for media literacy education for the public at large
- Importance of photography and documentary reporting for raising awareness and sensitizing the public about what is going on – these capacities need to be supported and strengthened
- Need for a gender lens in their reporting and analysis; usefulness of gender training for journalists and editorial staff
- Journalists – can be a conduit for making contacts across conflict divides.
- Important role that can be played by journalists' associations

Displaced people due to conflicts

- A totalising experience that affects all other aspects of life
- Challenge when host population becomes unwelcoming; responsibility of the state in meeting needs
- Challenge of maintaining national conscience on the problem

Children and youth

- They are the future – and have tremendous capacity for change and energy to contribute to activism
- Violence-affected young people need special programmes of support to develop skills and knowledge, trauma counselling, and
- Can become powerful peace workers with encouragement and support

Religious and faith-based organisations

While they may have the potential to be powerful voices for peace, most experiences discussed in the conference seem to portray them as being either forces for radicalisation of extremist politics, with ideological frameworks that seem to strengthen/legitimise violence or as in some/many cases, religiously-derived intolerance is a tool for suppressing women and other communities.

Diasporas

There are large South Asian diaspora communities in many parts of the world. These could be a resource for advocacy coalitions and other resources.

Issues

As indicated above, the various segments and actors of civil society build up, mobilize, and are clustered around issues of justice and peace in the context of all pervasive violence in our societies. These are listed below:

1. Exclusive forms of nationalism, majoritarianism, communalization, and discrimination against ethnic, religious and national minorities and indigenous people;
2. Globalization impeding access to health, education, human rights, sustainable livelihoods and leading to impoverishment and social inequalities, including caste discrimination;
3. Human security and the new forms of justice;
4. Victim hood, vulnerabilities, structural violence and extreme violence;
5. Justice as the benchmark of prevention and resolution of conflicts – gender justice, environmental justice, and legal reforms and other form of justice;
6. Representation of women and all victim groups at all levels involved in preventing and resolving armed conflict;
7. Militarism, nuclearisation and weaponisation of states and societies;
8. Conflict-induced and development induced mass displacements, issues of divided peoples and families, humanitarian disasters and human misery as cost of armed conflict and war;
9. Forced disappearances, extra-judicial killing, extra-ordinary legislations that suppress human rights, and confer impunity on officers of the state;
10. Suppression of legitimate dissent and demands in the name of suppressing terrorism;
11. Denial of collective rights, leading to conflicts and extreme violence;
12. Unipolar world, hegemonism and interference by big powers, global and regional hegemony, and lack of respect for sovereignty of peoples and nations;
13. Media and information as a tool of conflict and peace;
14. Globalization and access to health, education, livelihood and the sustainability of socio-economic rights
15. Land rights and other resource rights of the people;
16. Religions fundamentalism and intolerance;
17. The “mindset” which determines the behavior in general and violent behavior in particular; violent behavior as the product of a particular mental set ossified over a period of time;
18. The need to study such behavior in South Asia, and the requirement to investigate stressful conduct in the overall conflict situation in the region, so that particular mechanism can be developed to modify behavior through cognitive appraisal rather than automotiv thinking;
19. Peace education;
20. Accountability, and developing norms of responsibility at all levels – from the United Nations, to the region, country and local.

Above all, the conference discussed the term “Civil society” itself at great length to ascertain its own nature, representative character, role and capacity and came to the conclusion that while it is difficult to reach a consensus on the definition of the term at this stage, it is clear that the term is not co-terminus with the NGOs as the former is more extensive, covers more ground and should be therefore kept separate. In this context, it was widely appreciated that

civil societies can play significant role in building trust and strengthening networks in a way that this “social capital” can become a bulwark of peace and development of the society.

Recommendations

Keeping in mind (a) the history of civil society activism in South Asia for resolving conflicts and peace, (b) the principles that guide these actions and (c) the various segments and interests involved in these activities and the issues that animate civil society in this region, this conference proposes as general principle of a programme of action that

1. The peace constituencies of South Asia will take all necessary actions to urge upon the two nuclear armed states of this region to adopt policies of restraint, gradual de-nuclearisation, capping of all further nuclear weapons programme, and work jointly and to give leadership to eliminate all weapons of mass destruction from this world;
2. The civil societies of this region have to work towards eschewing violence as a method of resolving conflicts, both inter-state and intra-state, because the continuum of violence is at the heart of acute and persistent armed conflict;
3. In order to eliminate the recourse to violence as a mode of settling conflicts, the civil society has to bring pressure to bear on states and mobilize public opinion on the need to make international human rights and international humanitarian laws applicable to conflict situation in all states and national legislations that often violate human rights and justice in the name of national security, homeland security and suppression and prevention of terrorism;
4. In urging the adoption of human rights standards, one of the key principles of justice that animate civil society is justice for women; the conference therefore urges that throughout the region equal representation of gender at all levels and in all bodies, in particular legislative, administrative, and judicial bodies, be ensured;
5. Similarly in the work of preventing conflicts and resolving them, women’s voices concerns efforts, and representation have to duly recognized and ensured at all levels and in all forms;
6. The civil society will draw upon its historical experiences and resources of reconciliation mechanism, social capital building, truth findings, investigation, public commissions, crime tribunals, eminent citizen groupings and other dialogue forms to develop its autonomy in its function of peace;
7. In work of peace, media literacy and creative use of media will be a significant tool, and to this end, civil society will have a media programme integral to its peace action plan; similarly gathering, accessing and distributing correct information and combating mis- and dis- information one part of this work;
8. In developing peace activism, the civil society will have to develop coalitions, networks and resource sharing strategies and will have to take the victim viewpoint as distinct and opposed from the dominant state-centric view, through it will utilize all partnership opportunities and avenues;
9. In opposing arms race, arms proliferation, structural violence, extra-ordinary legislation, and in developing richer nation of justice as the basis of armed conflict prevention, the civil society realizes that networks and alliances are key instruments and the voice of this alliances have to be heard at every level – municipal, national-parliamentary, regional inter–state (SAARC), to the UN;
10. Combating the debilitating consequences of neo-liberal reforms on economics of South Asia is an important part of peace agenda, and as in other things, gender just viewpoint will enable the civil society to build up appropriate network and alliances;

11. Dialogues, interaction strategies, capacity building and sharing, combining mass mobilization with appropriate technical means, and representation civil societies' voice at all levels - and the key role in the work;
12. The civil society has to examine how much of the grant, aid and funding reaching the peace constituencies from abroad, particularly the West, enhances or hampers civil society's capacity in working for peace. In the light of the foregoing observations, the conference specifically underscores the need for civil society organizations to operate with high level of transparency by respecting international norms to enhance their credibility as a viable actor at all levels.
13. In the light of these principles, the conference specifically proposes that:
 - a. The civil society will mobilize all efforts to institute early warning and early action systems in places/zones of conflict in negotiating conflicts and incident violence, so that damage is lessened, reconciliation chances increase, and popular forces of peace are mobilized in time in defence of peace;
 - b. Such early warning and action system and mechanisms will be local, develop regional connection, develop appropriate database, directories and indication as tools of work for peace;
14. It is incumbent on civil society to struggle for adoption of specific measures for minority protection, autonomy and various power sharing measures at country and local levels till they are instituted in place;
15. Various appropriate measures for security sector transformation needed so that peace can be sustained;
16. The civil society of this region will work to form a Forum for Gender Justice;
17. Likewise, steps should be taken to form a South Asian War Crimes Tribunal with appropriate mechanisms;
18. International networks of solidarity are to be developed as a matter of priority;
19. The civil society calls on the United Nations to create an official form of civil society at the UN to monitor government policies and action in the areas of gender justice, environmental justice, social and cultural justice, and economic justice and to provide recommendation to the security council on these; it further calls on the UN to promote such organ so that popular voices are heard by the UN before the security council meets each time to adopt policies for coping with armed conflicts.
20. It calls for support to build its technical capabilities in conflict prevention, transformation and peace building skills.

In suggesting all these measures, the conference emphasized three main aspects or standards

- Justice as the ethical and political standard of action
- Participation nature of all conflicts prevention and transformation programmes
- Dialogue as the supreme procedure