

Peace and Resilience: Engaging Effectively at the Local Level

The concept of resilience has in recent years become increasingly important in the discourse on peace, featuring prominently in the recent EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy. One of the defining characteristics that has emerged in the conversation on resilience is the attempt to look for existing sources of strength and capacity at the local level within conflict-affected societies and seek to build on these as a vehicle for lasting transformation. In doing so, the focus on resilience captures an important insight: conflict-affected communities should be looked at through the lens of strength and potentiality, not fragility. This shift in focus has practical implications. While insights and resources from international actors are essential, a strength-based framework will recognize that peace is not transposed from outside, but must be driven by constructive sources within. To effectively promote resilience, then, international practitioners will need to think further about how to engage with local actors, including at the grassroots level, in ways that allow and encourage local capacities to emerge.

One way in which local capacity can be cultivated is by adopting a posture which does not assume a fixed conception of the destiny of a particular community nor advocates for preconceived solutions. In this respect, it is important that engagement with local populations does not turn into a symbolic listening exercise; on the contrary, local actors, from the earliest stages, should be seen as the drivers of the peace-building process. This is not to assume that struggling communities have all the resources they need to overcome conflict. Nor is it to trivialize the challenge of bringing together antagonistic and disillusioned actors in order to transform hostility and apathy into commitment to long-term collaboration. The point, rather, is that the particular posture adopted is instrumental in creating a climate in which local skills, knowledge and capacities can develop and find full expression. A truly participatory form of engagement allows peace-building processes to draw on the understanding of those who have insights into their immediate social reality, appreciate cultural dynamics and concerns, are able to identify and navigate existing local networks, and can discern needs and opportunities.

For such local participation in the peace process to be sustained in the long-term and hence be truly transformative, care must be exercised to not pit, however subtly, one group against another in struggles for political power, or treat the peace-building process as a transactional bargaining endeavour. Such approaches would fail to address the underlying conditions that caused the conflict in the first place. For, ultimately, the sustainability of peace-building endeavours depends on the different segments of society recognizing that they are interdependent rather than incompatible, and that diversity is an opportunity, not a threat.

One of the ways in which the EU can effectively engage at the local level, while drawing on its own experience and giving due consideration to the above points, is by strengthening, and where appropriate initiating, spaces in which a rich conversation about what it means to build a peaceful and resilient society can unfold. Such spaces will need to go beyond bringing together state-level actors and focus also on gathering actors at the grassroots. Experience must also be gathered in creating spaces that allow grassroots actors to interact with their institutions at various levels in order to build a climate of trust and collaboration. Such spaces might initially begin as an informal conversation among a few grassroots actors, including women and youth. These conversations could begin by jointly analysing reality in order to better understand the challenges and opportunities that the community currently faces — itself an exercise which not only lays a foundation for the identification of solutions, but importantly also builds mutual understanding. In some places, ongoing commitment to such spaces will be needed to allow them to evolve into more formal structures, with a growing number of participants, where experiences are reflected on and solutions are identified jointly. Naturally, the creation of such spaces raises a number of important questions, such as: How can all relevant actors and groups be identified and included? In particular, how can women and youth be empowered to participate in decision-making spaces from which they may traditionally have been excluded? What is to be done in situations where the fabric of social cohesion has been so damaged that it is difficult to convene diverse members of the community? No matter the particularities and complexities of a conflict, these spaces can be created at all points in the conflict cycle, both in periods of acute conflict, and as a tool for pre-emptive conflict prevention and post-conflict reconciliation.

At the heart of effective engagement with the local level is operating in a mode of learning in which ongoing reflection on experience allows the continual refinement of approach and strategy. Best practices and insights are systematically captured and documented. Consensus grows on the immediate steps forward. In sum, peace-building initiatives become more responsive to circumstances on the ground.