

CHALLENGES OF BEING PEACEBUILDERS: HANGED BETWEEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND THIRD-PARTY MEDIATORS

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Background:

The debate¹ about differences and similarities between human rights defenders and peacebuilders remain for decades².

Despite both groups are serving the same goal - ending violence and ensuring the prevention of relapse - each set of practitioners are using different methods and have different roles before, during and after conflict.

Human rights defenders, at least, are protected since 1998 when the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders³ was adopted. As for the peace practitioners, they are forced to apply for Chatham House Rules at the meetings, to hide their presence and avoid further punishment and pressure from their societies' political establishment, with no accountability where violence occurs⁴. There are a number of principles⁵ that are framing practice of peace practitioners are: participation, inclusion, empowerment, and equality. These principles, the peace practitioners have to follow, are hardly helpful for themselves: they are excluded, invisible and unprotected. The core principles do not create safe environment and any guarantee of their protection.

The Context in South Caucasus:

In South Caucasus, where human rights advocacy is often politicized and seen as anti-state activism, peacebuilding work is seen as a synonymous to human rights advocacy. The main issues local peacebuilders face when trying to build inclusive spaces for dialogue in the South Caucasus include *shrinking political space, political polarisation and divisions among the human rights defenders and peace activists*. We know cases in our region when peace practitioners were imprisoned or detained for their peace activities⁶. As a result the sphere of peace building as a whole and peace practitioners as group is marginalized, where engagement of youth and male participants is hardened.

¹ "Learning from One Another to Move Forward Together – A Dialogue between Human Rights Advocates, Peacebuilders and OSCE Representatives Working in/ on Conflict-affected Areas in the OSCE Region". The event took place at the Peace Castle Schläining, Austria, from 29 October to 2 November 2018. The purpose of the event was to bring together civil society actors from the OSCE region (in particular human rights advocates and peacebuilders) as well as OSCE representatives (in particular the OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre). Civic Solidarity Platform.

² Lutz, E., Babbitt, E., Hannum, H. (2003). Human Rights and Conflict Resolution from the Practitioners' Perspectives, the Fletcher Forum of World Affairs, Vol. 27.3.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242478000_Human_Rights_and_Conflict_Resolution_from_the_Practitioners'_Perspectives

³ General Assembly Resolution A/RES/53/144 adopting the Declaration on human rights defenders, 1998.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/srhdefenders/pages/declaration.aspx>

⁴ Parliament called on the Azerbaijani authorities to immediately end their crackdown on civil society

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/172/three-eastern-partnership-neighbours-in-the-south-caucasus>

⁵ Lutz, E., Babbitt, E., Hannum, H. (2003). Human Rights and Conflict Resolution from the Practitioners' Perspectives, the Fletcher Forum of World Affairs, Vol. 27.3.

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⁶ Assessment of Akhlagori activist Tamar Mearakishvili repression and persecution case <https://emc.org.ge/en/products/emc-akhlagoreli-aktivistis-tamar-mearaqishvilis-tsinaagmdeg-devnisa-da-shevitsroebis-sakmes-afasebs>

There is a lack of capacity and commitment to develop nationally-driven peace processes and infrastructures, such as the one in Colombia, Ghana, and South Africa. Instead of initiating a peace process through existing governmental and societal processes, only international peace mediation is applied in the region. But, as a consequence, the peace process is not considered an integral, societal one, which all stakeholders can contribute to and own equally. The absence of formal recognition and legitimation of peace mediation also diminishes national and regional resources for conflict prevention and sustaining peace, as well as the recognition of the local peacebuilders' mediation initiatives. As a result the peace process is not considered as an integral, societal one, where all groups and stakeholders are contributing equally and where the ownership is set for all actors equally. At this moment, there are CS-based mobilization to draft law amendments to introduce the peace mediation and consequence legal procedures for introducing the profession/position of Peace Mediator – thus letting peace builders and peace activists (mainly women in our regional reality) to be hired/engaged in different level institutions/bodies where applicable.

Recommendation to the UN:

One of the challenges that perpetuates this vision is the absence of peacebuilders and peacebuilding work from peace efforts that are largely managed by Member States alone. Inclusive dialogues do not take place in the South Caucasus and local peacebuilders, where present, are not seen as partners to the process and are relegated to Track 2, where the activities of national non-state actors are 'tolerated' but never legitimized.

In order for the work of peacebuilders to be understood and legitimized, an important step on part of the United Nations could be to build capacity of Member States to understand local peacebuilding work by providing support and visibility to local peacebuilding work. Peacebuilding in the region would be more sustainable if the United Nations' actors, funds and programmes engage better with local populations and enable local action to address the root causes of conflict and instability. Using its influence and leverage, the United Nations can make a greater contribution to sustaining peace in the region by enabling confidence building based on local ownership and by supporting the inclusive processes of development of regional norms, policies and initiatives across various pillars, including peace and security, development and human rights.