

# 2 GOVERNMENTS AND CSOS: COMPLEXITY OF ENGAGEMENT

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## 2.1 Foreign and domestic: complex relationships & levels of analysis

There is widespread international agreement that primary responsibility for conflict prevention rests with national governments and other local actors. Local ownership of peacebuilding is likely to result in more legitimate processes and sustainable outcomes. The primary role of outsiders is to create spaces and support inclusive processes that enable those directly involved to make decisions about the specific arrangements for addressing the causes of conflict.

When discussing cooperation between governments and CSOs working on peacebuilding, it is important to clarify whether this is principally in the domestic sphere of addressing conflict(s) within the country / sub-region versus principally in the international sphere of addressing conflicts abroad.

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### Domestic

The relationship between national civil society formations with the government in responding to conflict in their midst is dynamically complex. Furthermore, it is important to distinguish between 'government' *per se* and the wider array of state structures. As the government of the day is likely to be a party to conflict to a greater or lesser extent, it may be questionable whether other state institutions (such as the parliament, the judiciary, or local authorities) are perceived as a credible and capable actor in responding to conflict. Nevertheless, all the domestic actors are 'stakeholders' to the conflict. They therefore share a degree in responsibility for fostering the basis of their future (with governments having a primary obligation). Their cooperation may focus on resolving a specific conflict, on addressing underlying contradictions that give rise to ongoing tensions, or on transforming relationships marred by persistent conflict and building a culture of peace. Their efforts to address conflict are likely to have structural, legal, institutional, social and resource implications. As such, the potential field of cooperation is multidimensional across a broad spectrum of issues and range from close strategic partnerships to adversarial pressure to simple competition for control and influence.

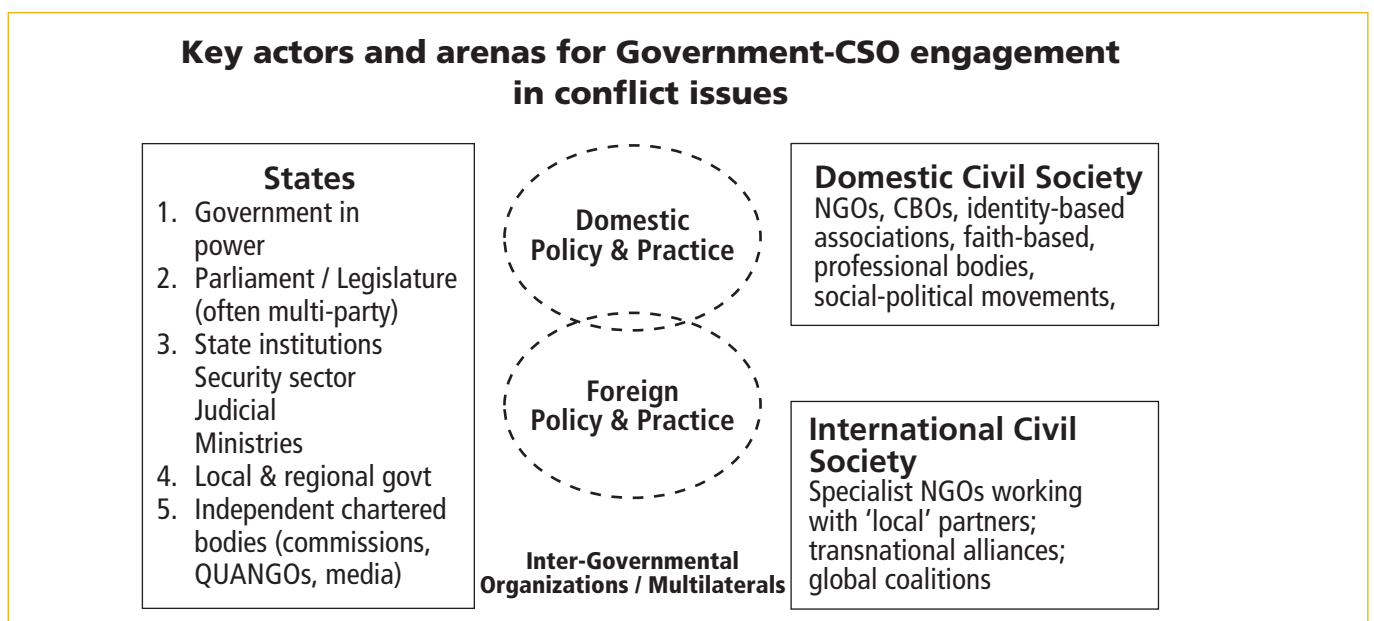


Figure 2: Key actors and arenas for Government-CSO engagement in conflict issues

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### **International**

The relationship between CSOs and governments concerning policies and practices in response principally to conflicts ‘elsewhere’ can be slightly more abstract and is likely to be more formal, conducted through existing communication channels and procedures. A government’s approach to foreign policy and international action is typically subject to competing interests and priorities. Policies on trade and the economy may take priority over policies on prevention and peacebuilding – even to the point where, for example, the arms trade directly contributes to the escalation of armed conflict. Furthermore, the government may not always act on its principles. While it may be concerned about the situation in country *x*, it may refrain from getting actively involved because it would upset an important ally.

These distinctions between ‘foreign’ and ‘domestic’ are made more complicated by the fact that domestic CSOs often have links with international CSOs, who in turn have links with a range of governments with an interest in a conflict-affected country. Furthermore, IGOs often play a significant role in responding to armed conflict. Their mandate and operations are influenced both by the response of the government of the Member State(s) in which the conflict takes place, as well as by the interests of other Member States and the rules and principles of the IGO’s charter. All of these actors may, in turn, be influenced by civil society activists and others, such as the private sector. This complexity creates both opportunities and constraints for responding to conflict. Those in government or civil society who are committed to sustainable peacebuilding have to undertake a careful analysis of the multiple factors at stake and map the available channels for effective influence.

**Challenge** *Given the complexity of actors, interests and issues operating in the global system, how can peacebuilders best champion and implement coherent policies? How can governmental and civil society actors cooperate to move prevention and peacebuilding up the agenda of political concern?*

**Challenge** *Both government officials and CSOs working*

*on public policy issues tend to be focused on a specific topic as education or on economic and development issues, and so on. This can create obstacles to analyzing and implementing holistic and comprehensive peacebuilding. What are the mechanisms and processes to facilitate multi-sectoral cooperation capable of addressing the complexity of conflict?*

What is clear is that cooperation among well-meaning parties at all levels – within civil society, at the governmental and regional level, and at the global level – is required. That position was underlined in the UN Secretary-General’s Progress Report on the Prevention of Armed Conflict of September 7, 2006: in which the Secretary General “urge[d] Member States to consider innovative means to intensify the dialogue with civil society, for example, by inviting civil society representatives to provide regular briefings to pertinent bodies.”<sup>10</sup>

### **2.2 CSOs and governments: cooperation, co-optation, and confrontation**

In general, there are a number of barriers to cooperation. Partnership between government and CSOs is often characterized by mistrust.<sup>11</sup> In many conflict situations, large parts of the population mistrusts government, and civil society peace activists avoid making direct connections to governmental actors.<sup>10</sup> Mutual misperceptions and lack of understanding of the other’s institutional imperatives. Government officials may question the quality, legitimacy and accountability of specific NGOs – or of civil society organizations more generally. They may not see their relevance or believe that they can create more trouble than they resolve.

They may also resent the often hostile tone that some civil society actors may adopt in their critique of the government and perceive them as having essentially political motives in seeking to undermine the government’s authority.

<sup>10</sup> Progress Report on the Prevention of Armed Conflict, Report of the Secretary-General to the United Nations General Assembly, p 29, paragraph 107. 7 September 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Report of the GPPAC National Civil Society Consultation in Sierra Leone, West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, p. 5. 2006.

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Civil society actors may, in turn, be deeply suspicious of the motives and commitment of ‘officials’. They may have considerable ideological or political differences and believe the contradictions are insurmountable without becoming too compromised. In some cases, all these concerns are well-founded. Furthermore there are situations when it may be inappropriate or worse to engage, perhaps especially when the state is controlled by an oppressive regime and will only engage with CSOs if they are fully co-opted and subject to government control. Alternately, CSOs may object to a government’s foreign policy as a whole. Disagreement with a government’s stance in one country or conflict (such as the ‘war against terrorism’) may make them cautious of cooperating too closely with the same government on a different situation, for fear of becoming / being perceived as a tool of the government. Conversely, in some countries the boundaries between the state and civil society is extremely blurred, as when many parts of civil society have institutional access to the state, routinely play a role in policy development, and receive the bulk of their funding from their government. This may lead some to lose their ‘critical edge’ and become more like outsourcing agencies to deliver government services.

The potentials and possibilities for engagement between governments and CSOs are embedded in the wider political, social and legal context of the country. Constructive engagement between CSOs and governments are far more likely in well-established democracy with a strong rule-of-law establishment than in authoritarian dictatorships, where truly independent civic groups may be seen as more of a threat than an asset. Yet in any context there are likely to be diverse ways of relating ranging from extremely close to extremely confrontational. The engagement of government with CSOs differs between governments from the North and the South. Northern governments tend to be more open towards input from civil society organizations. The type of interaction varies, ranging from informal meetings with CSOs to structured mechanisms for a regular dialogue. Southern governments seem to be less open to cooperation with CSOs but of course there are developing countries in

which this is not the case. But in discussing the different mechanisms for cooperation the various level of interaction with CSOs undertaken by Northern and Southern governments should be taken into account.

The distinctive identities and roles played by CSOs and governments can make engagement complex. Some of this complexity is inherent in the distinctive identities and roles of NGOs as independent actors. This can generate a creative tension between strategies based on cooperative engagement with governmental decision makers versus strategies that deploy confrontation to generate political pressure for change.

CSOs need to deliberate and analyze the values and political positioning that characterizes their relationships with governments, so as to engage more effectively, ethically and strategically in responding to conflict. There is a range of potential approaches.<sup>12</sup>

- **Complicit** – as citizens and as organizational groups embedded in a country’s civil society, we are party to the decisions that our governments make in our name.
- **Contractual** – when CSOs implement government policies and programs through their work, often by receiving funding from governments.
- **Contributing** – through participation in policy dialogue and recommendations for appropriate responses to specific situations or issues.
- **Complementarity** – working in parallel as separate/autonomous entities within the same system of issues and relationships.
- **Contesting / Confronting** – when CSOs challenge government actions, priorities, and behaviours.

Yet in times when it is an advantage for governments and CSOs to work together, their engagement can be assisted by developing both formal-institutional mechanisms and personal-relationship experience to facilitate effective cooperation – as will be discussed in Section 5. Strong collaborative working relationships are more likely when all parties have developed a shared

<sup>12</sup> This ‘5-Cs’ framework was developed by the participants in the GPPAC London ‘Brainstorming’ Meeting in December 2003, with key inputs from Andy Carl and Simon Fisher.

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frame of reference and a common set of desired objectives, as well as mutual perceptions of reliability and trust. There is a spectrum of modalities for engagement, as illustrated in the following figure. They can be understood as ranging along an axis of degrees of autonomy and separation.

**Challenge** *How can governments and CSOs cooperate without undermining the distinctive strengths of each (e.g. independence and flexibility of CSOs; formal legal*

*political accountability and representativeness of governments).*

The following three chapters explore some of the potential areas for cooperation between governments and CSOs in the arena of prevention and peacebuilding so as to provide a starting point for discussion. It does not attempt to be an exhaustive catalogue of all the potential arenas for cooperation or issues that arise in developing partnerships in these areas.

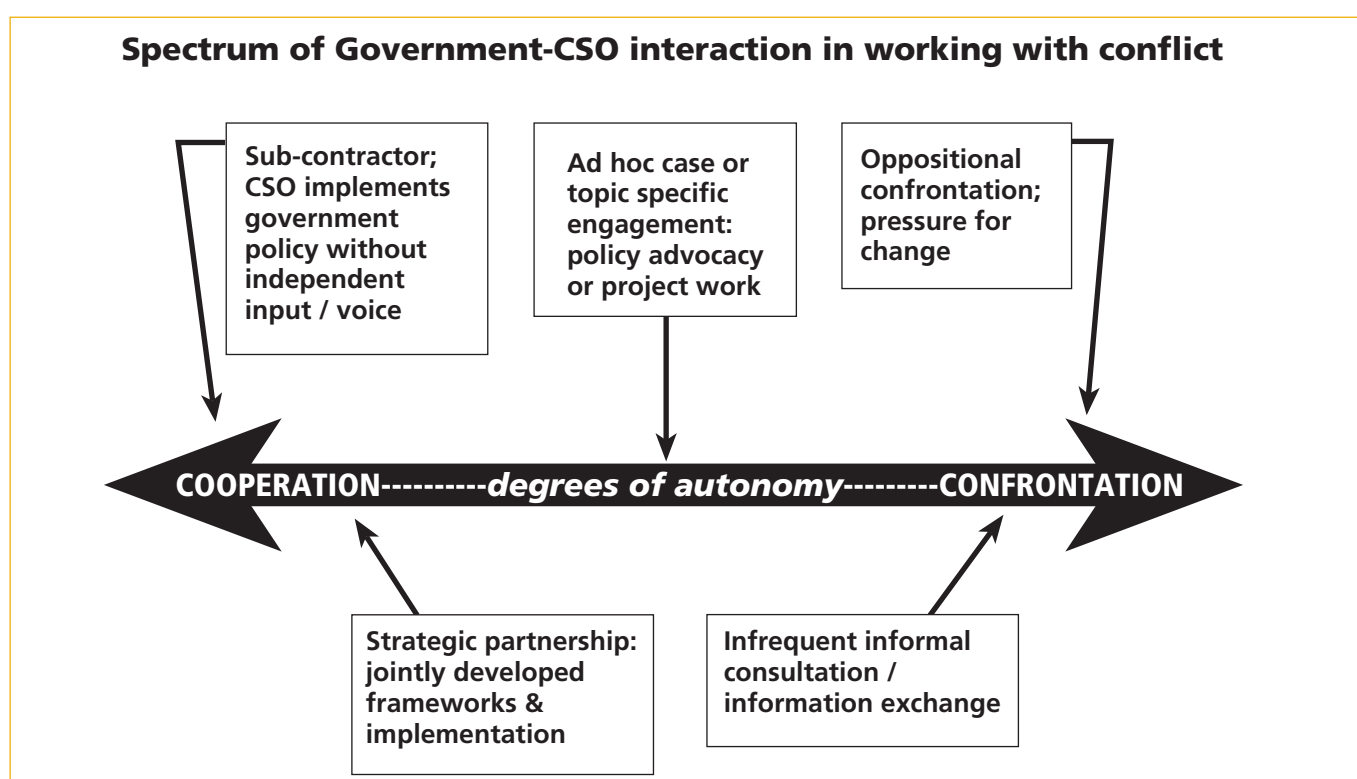


Figure 3: Spectrum of Government-CSO interaction in working with conflict