Achieving Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions at the Regional Level

The Partnership Between Regional Intergovernmental Organizations and Civil Society

Introduction

This Policy Brief aims to provide a practical channel to present the main findings and recommendations that were distilled from the discussions that took place at the 2019 Regional Inter-governmental Organization Conference, organized in the framework of the Inter-Regional Dialogue on Democracy[1]. The Brief also expands on key aspects related to the Covid-19 pandemic that reaffirm the importance of partnerships between regional organizations and civil society.

Aimed at key decision-makers and key stakeholders, including government agencies, regional organizations and civil society organizations (CSOs), the purpose of the Policy Brief is to contribute to the ongoing conversation around the achievement of peace, justice, and strong institutions worldwide. The aspiration is that the recommendations and information included in this analysis will complement ongoing efforts, motivate collective action, inspire decision-making and promote multisectoral engagement to achieve common goals based on successful experiences and best practices such as those outlined in this brief.

Background

The root causes of conflict and violence, such as injustice, inequalities and decline in the quality of democracies, rarely emerge and remain within the national borders of a single country: they increasingly spill over into surrounding regions, compelling a regional response. This spillover effect is particularly visible in the context of migration and health crises, which expose injustices and inequalities and have an impact on the capacity of national governments to sustain peace and development. Global policy

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1. The conference was organized by the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) and the Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies (CoD), in partnership with the Organization of American States (OAS).

frameworks[2] therefore increasingly call for action at the regional level—related to peacebuilding, development, conflict prevention, good governance or strengthening democracy. This signals an emerging opportunity to carve out unique mandates for peace, justice and inclusion at the regional level.

Regional action on peace, justice and inclusion should cut across social, economic and political agendas and be sustained through partnerships with those most impacted by conflict and inequalities, including local communities, grassroots organizations, and Indigenous groups. The strengthening of good governance and democratic institutions at the regional level should take place in tandem with efforts to build meaningful partnerships between regional organizations and local communities (Schmidt and Mincieli 2018). Given the current threats to peace and development, including the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the impact of climate change, the partnership between regional organizations and civil society can enable a new and impactful multilateral regional architecture. Together with governments, global partners and other key democracy actors in the field, regional organizations can build and sustain strong and just institutions, going beyond political limitations to contribute to communities' lasting peace.

As identified during the September 2019 Regional Inter-governmental Organization Conference and in subsequent consultations, when regional organizations, local communities and civil society work in partnership, they have the opportunity to advance good governance and democracy and, in turn, to create more peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

A meaningful and intentional partnership between regional organizations and civil society will result in the following:

1. *Enhanced institutional capacity on the part of regional organizations to promote and provide better democracy assistance.* Given that some of the main threats to democracy today can also reside within democratic systems, there is a need for regional organizations to increase the assistance provided to their member states aimed at strengthening democratic institutions, including through partnerships with civil society. For example, the partnership between governments and civil society in the Asia–Pacific region helped to respond to the threats of Covid-19 in the most remote areas and ensured that the focus of the Boe Declaration on Regional Security and its Action Plan (GPPAC 2020a) included elements of strong democratic institutions at the national level.

2. *Stronger prevention and peacebuilding mandates for regional organizations.* While regional organizations are in a strong position to promote conflict prevention and peacebuilding, some still lack appropriate mandates and access to relevant data to do so. These organizations need to explore avenues for mobilizing and enhancing their capacities to support peaceful, just and inclusive societies (GPPAC 2020a). One avenue to do so is to work with regional civil society networks to establish early-warning and early-response systems under the auspices of regional actors—for example, the Economic Community of West African States in partnership with the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding in West Africa (West Africa Network for Peacebuilding 2021) and the Southern African Development Community through the Southern Africa Partnerships for the Prevention of Armed Conflicts in Southern Africa (Southern African Development Community 2021). Such partnerships will enable regional organizations to draw upon the expertise of civil society to meaningfully develop their structural, strategic, and operational conflict prevention and peacebuilding mandates.

3. *Increased coordination between democracy stakeholders at the regional level.* Given the dynamic geopolitical and geostrategic regional environment, there is a need for regional organizations and civil society to form partnerships to achieve shared goals efficiently. The development of the Pacific Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) enabled sustained attention on the WPS agenda in the Asia–Pacific region and broader partnerships with civil society on humanitarian response during the Covid-19 pandemic (GPPAC 2020a). Engaging civil society in regional initiatives would ensure complementarity and avoid duplication of efforts. Additionally, where local communities' work is

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2. The Sustainable Development Goals and the sustaining-peace and democracy-support agendas highlight an important role for regional organizations in the promotion of peaceful societies, the provision of justice for all and the building of accountable and inclusive institutions.

recognized and supported, it increases the feasibility of institutionalizing actions at the regional level. Given that both regional organizations and civil society can carry out work that goes beyond the limitations of the electoral cycle and the agendas of political parties, there is scope for regional organizations to draw upon the capacities of civil society to lay the groundwork for sustainable progress.

4. *Increased engagement with civil society to promote human rights and ensure accountability at the regional level.* The promotion of human rights plays an integral role in strengthening democracy and, in turn, upholding peace, ensuring justice for all and creating inclusive societies. This is recognized by the CoD, which engages with CSOs as dialogue partners and key contributors in democracy promotion around the globe, and by the OAS, which works with states to help strengthen the laws and institutions that provide human rights protection. International IDEA also works to create spaces for dialogue and exchanges of best practices, enabling civil society to have a voice at multistakeholder discussions, while also building the capacities of civil society and grassroots organizations in the field through knowledge products and training. Additionally, International IDEA partners with civil society and aims to incorporate their voices and best practices in knowledge products for regional and national actors. Partnerships with CSOs that hold governments to account provide an opportunity to ensure greater monitoring and accountability for human rights violations through existing regional systems.

Partnership between regional organizations and civil society during the Covid-19 pandemic

The challenges facing the international community are characterized by cross-border risks and insecurity, and further complicated by new pathways to unrest, such as climate change and global pandemics. Furthermore, the capacities of existing national institutions to effectively respond to these challenges are limited by increased pressures on democracy and multilateralism, as evidenced by increasing cases of state isolationism and rejection of cooperation, as well as cases of reduced state capacities, endemic corruption,

lack of accountability and conflicts, among other things. These challenges present an opportunity for greater collaboration between regional and CSOs as a means of drawing upon one another's strengths and enhancing regional institutional capacity to ensure peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

During the 2021 Conference on Sustainable Development Goal 16 (International Development Law Organization 2021), organized by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the International Development Law Organization and the Government of Italy, it was highlighted that humanity was facing immense challenges stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic: from providing equitable access to vaccines to securing peace, addressing debt issues, combatting climate change and tackling entrenched and growing inequalities.

Actions aimed especially at leaving no one behind and building back stronger after the pandemic must be concerted and must include both global and multilateral regional structures that can establish a framework and oversight mechanisms for the implementation of strategic actions. The importance of monitoring and following up on the state of democracy and human rights allows for the timely identification of threats, issues and specific circumstances that need to be addressed adequately and effectively before they have a broader impact on the quality of democracy.

For instance, International IDEA's Global Monitor of Covid-19's Impact on Democracy and Human Rights project (International IDEA 2020) was launched in July 2020 with support from the European Union and the European Parliament. The online Monitor is a comprehensive tool for assessing the democracy and human rights implications of measures adopted by governments to curb the Covid-19 pandemic. This digital platform is updated every two weeks and includes the 162 countries covered by the Global State of Democracy Indices, aggregating up-to-date information to offer individual country profiles, with links and data on events and trends across regions. The Global Monitor contributes to the debate on the pandemic's impact on democracy globally, can function as a tool for holding policymakers accountable and can provide valuable input for policies and strategies aimed at building back better after the pandemic.

In many cases, regional organizations have included civil society in their response to the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, as members of the Pacific Humanitarian Protection Cluster, local peacebuilders worked with the Pacific Islands Forum to ensure that response and recovery measures in the Forum's member states used data disaggregated by gender, age, disability and location (rural/urban) to reach the most marginalized and to support long-term solutions that sustain inclusive peace (GPPAC 2020b).

Similar partnerships grew out of existing systems of early warning and early response in Africa. As such, ongoing and institutionalized partnerships between regional organizations and civil society have proven themselves effective in providing a regional response to emerging crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Key recommendations

Both regional organizations and civil society have comparative advantages in advancing peaceful, just and inclusive societies at the regional level. On the one hand, regional organizations have the benefit of offering space and access to national and other relevant actors. On the other hand, civil society provides analysis critical to understanding the root causes of conflict, which is often missing in regional and state-centric assessments. However, these capacities need to be strengthened and supported for the benefit of sustaining peace and development at the regional level.

Through partnerships, regional organizations and civil society can move past the limitations they face individually with regard to visibility, access and structures, addressing the underlying issues that lead to conflict, injustice and exclusion. Furthermore, the experiences of civil society provide regional organizations with the opportunity to support national governments in addressing structural issues as well as issues of governance in an inclusive and participatory manner.

Based on the findings outlined in this Policy Brief and the results of the 2019 Regional Inter-governmental Organisation Conference, several policy recommendations for key decision-makers and stakeholders at the regional level, including government agencies, regional organizations and CSOs, have been identified. These recommendations fall into the following four groups:

1. **Enhancing regional institutional capacity to promote democracy and good governance by:**
   - documenting and facilitating regional and cross-regional exchanges of lessons learned and best practices to strengthen support for democracy, development and multilateralism: this can be done through presentations, virtual resources and regular updates via effective communication mechanisms;
   - partnering and identifying synergies with other actors, including civil society, to develop coordinated medium- and long-term strategies to promote good governance;
   - providing spaces to communicate civil society's best practices at the regional level to allow others to learn from them, avoid duplication of efforts and increase their visibility: these spaces may include virtual and/or in-person conferences, virtual resources, campaigns and knowledge products;
   - in collaboration with national agencies and funding partners, increasing investment in financial and technical resources for the promotion of free and fair electoral processes as a means of both promoting democratic norms and peaceful post-election transitions; and
   - supporting temporary and transitional arrangements in peace processes as a means of gaining access to the peacebuilding sphere and laying the groundwork for lasting peace.

2. **Establishing stronger regional prevention and peacebuilding mandates that provide guidance and an action-oriented framework in times of crises by:**
   - enhancing the capacity of regional and CSOs to design and implement regional peacebuilding initiatives by including them in national work plans that would institutionalize policies and priorities;
   - ensuring that peacebuilding initiatives are developed through a multistakeholder approach in which national and subregional efforts, including those led by civil society, are meaningfully integrated into the design, implementation and evaluation of regional peacebuilding initiatives;
   - integrating rigorous assessments of all peacebuilding-related initiatives to monitor their quality and impact and to adapt funding priorities accordingly to maximize their impact;
   - ensuring that civil society actors can inform policies through locally led research and analysis that effectively highlight key issues and the assistance required to carry out actions; and
   - encouraging donors to engage in new forms of collaboration with CSOs in the most remote areas, including with those organizations that are not directly engaged in a particular partnership but are impacted (positively or negatively) by the work done at the regional or global levels.

3. **Creating spaces for regional coordination and policy coherence by:**
   - developing and strengthening existing channels, structures and resources established by regional organizations to support partnerships and enable coordination with civil society to facilitate systematic and regular dialogue;
   - establishing regional working groups composed of regional organizations, member states, CSOs, financial institutions and donors to share analyses and coordinate joint actions;
   - drawing upon the networks and expertise of civil society to identify the most vulnerable groups in order to make targeted and meaningful resilience-building interventions;
   - developing conflict early-warning systems based on the information obtained through local community monitors who can feed into national and regional actions: this can be the product of documenting success stories, which can be scaled up or adapted to fit similar challenges in other places;
   - developing and implementing regional policies in a manner that promotes the accountability of national governments in their long-term implementation; and
   - promoting the principles of democratic governance and multilateralism and developing national capacities to conduct peaceful elections and ensure the protection of civic space.

4. **Promoting human rights and ensuring accountability at the regional level by:**
   - multistakeholder partnership that includes governments, regional organizations and civil society, strengthening the laws and institutions that promote and protect human rights at the regional level;
   - establishing mechanisms to ensure the monitoring of human rights records in member states in a manner that is neutral and inclusive of civil society expertise;
   - providing financial and technical support, as well as space for civil society engagement in existing regional human rights institutions;
   - establishing regional mechanisms for individuals to seek redress when domestic institutions fail to uphold the law, or when they are violators of the law; and
   - operationalizing human rights norms through their implementation into institutional policies and initiatives at the regional level.

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