Political Institutions: Fostering Inclusion

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Introduction

The thorough concept note for today's discussion notes not only that political institutions are 'at the core of the state', but that it is "critical …that [they] are inclusive". My intention today is to discuss the fundamental importance of inclusion to effective political institutions, to provide some examples of how in practice civil society has been able to contribute to the formation and functioning of political institutions, and to make some specific suggestions of how this can be taken forward both by the Commission and others.

Background

Paragraph 42 of the Advisory Group of Experts (AGE) Report says the following:

"..peace needs to emerge organically from within society, addressing the multiple concerns and aspirations of different sectors, and seeking common ground so that all feel invested in strategies, policies and mechanisms that offer the way forward".

In this sense, then, the building or rebuilding of political institutions inherently involves inclusion. Indeed, political institutions can be described as the organizational manifestations of the process by which societies negotiate the choices that, in their totality, make up the political economy of the country.

The AGE report then goes on to introduce the concept of

"…'*inclusive national ownership*' in peacebuilding, whereby the national responsibility to drive and direct efforts is broadly shared by the national government across all key social strata and divides, across a spectrum of political opinions and domestic actors, including minorities. This implies participation by community groups, women's platforms and representatives, youth, labour organizations, political parties, the private sector and domestic civil society, including under-represented groups"

This is a set of ideas that has been growing in importance for some time. As the AGE report notes, the group of conflict-affected and post-conflict countries who have come together to form the "g7+" initiative, have advocated for five key sectors of priority peacebuilding intervention, the first of which is 'legitimate politics: foster inclusive political settlements and conflict resolution'. There is a significant convergence between that analysis and that of the World Bank's 2011 World Development Report.

Furthermore, states have now made significant new undertakings with respect to inclusion as part of the Sustainable Development Goals, pledging to "empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all" (10.2), "develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions" (16.6), and "ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels"

(16.7) (the latter two targets being part of Goal 16 whose title mentions inclusion twice: "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels").

So there seems to be broad consensus that inclusion is not only a good thing, but an essential underpinning of sustainable peace, a sine qua non of effective governance, and a core element of rebuilding political institutions.

The role of civil society in political institutions

For an example of the importance of civil society in the building of political institutions we need look no further than the winners of this year's Nobel Peace Prize, the Tunisia National Dialogue Quartet. In the words of the Nobel committee,

"The Quartet was formed in the summer of 2013 when the democratization process was in danger of collapsing as a result of political assassinations and widespread social unrest. It established an alternative, peaceful political process at a time when the country was on the brink of civil war. It was thus instrumental in enabling Tunisia, in the space of a few years, to establish a constitutional system of government guaranteeing fundamental rights for the entire population, irrespective of gender, political conviction or religious belief."

Such a role for civil society actors has been seen before – for example, the Concerned Citizens for Peace group that was so instrumental in responding to the election related violence in Kenya in 2007/08 – but let us consider what is required, what has to be in place, for such civil society groups to come into existence in the first place. Look at the different communities represented in the Quartet – business, organized labor, human rights advocates and a lawyer's organization. For such groups to be in a position to step into the political void requires a body politic where a voice for business independent of the government was possible, where trade unions were tolerated, where human rights organizations were able to operate and where lawyers could speak out. And for such groups to be effective they also need to have access to public information, to the mechanism of an independent press and to social networks. That is, the political resilience that is represented by the intervention of these civil society groups at moments of political crisis requires that there already be in place *the building blocks of a shared society.* One of the major challenges for the international community going forward, for the UN and specifically for the Peacebuilding Architecture, is how to foster these building blocks, how to build national ownership beyond the government, and how to strengthen the institutions of civil society in parallel with the institutions of the state.

Civil society of course has a role that extends well beyond moments of political crisis and establishing political consensus. There are many good examples, in West Africa and East Africa, for example, of civil society organizations working together with regional and national governance in order to put in place institutional frameworks for peace. One could mention here the close partnership in West Africa between WANEP (the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding) and ECOWAS on early warning mechanisms and countering election related violence, or in Kenya, where civil society groups have been keenly involved in the development and progress of the National Policy on Peacebuilding and Conflict Management which was adopted by the National Assembly in August, through mechanisms such as the National Steering Committee.

Civil society groups, including religious organizations, also have a key role in reconciliation and trauma healing, both at a national level, in national reconciliation processes, and at a local level, rebuilding communities through patient and painstaking work to heal and bridge social divides, family by family and village by village. Over time, this work from the bottom up is just as important, and in many cases more transformative, than often ephemeral and incomplete national processes.

The way forward

As the concept note states, political institutions, formal and informal, are "instruments through which difficult issues are debated and decided upon in an inclusive manner so that they contribute to reconciliation, social cohesion, and to reinforcing national identity". That is, political institutions are mechanisms within a broader process of inclusive political dialogue, which itself relies on the fostering of the building blocks of a shared society, including a strong civil society and a plurality of voices including those of women and youth.

What then is the role of the international community, and in particular the UN?

1. *Encourage broadening ownership and participation.* The AGE report's concept of 'inclusive national ownership' provides a good starting place: "at the operational level this means supporting processes that help governments to 'broaden ownership' to as wide an array of domestic stakeholders as possible, so that the latter can engage with those governments and participate maximally in all stages of peacebuilding, from the inception of policies through actions and projects, priority-setting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of results." In a number of cases the efforts of the Peacebuilding Commission, through its country configurations and their Chairs, have been effective in keeping open some measure of political space for civil society to engage, even at times of transition and social stress. These efforts should be reinforced, and become more systematic. Support for broad national ownership and participation should become the norm, and specific strategies should be agreed where political inclusion deficits are identified.

2. *Support the growth of informal as well as formal institutions.* Robust political processes require the engagement of a plurality of voices, including organizations that can effectively represent different interests, such as those of workers, of business, of women, of youth, of minorities and religious constituencies. As the AGE report notes, it is vitally important in conflict affected societies that diverse voices find appropriate expression.

3. *Take into account the underlying drivers of political processes.* On occasion, the international community engages with political institutional processes as if they were simply technical exercises. Yet an election without political dialogue, or a Truth and Reconciliation process without engagement with the underlying issues, will be meaningless and in some cases may lead to an increase in exclusion and violent conflict. Furthermore, the decisions of key actors will be driven by a variety of economic and political considerations, and these need to be analyzed and taken into account in any planned assistance project.

4. *Support an inclusive approach to the implementation of Goal16.* Every country is now considering the implementation of the new Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 16: "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies". In order to approach the aspirational vision of the 2030

Agenda "to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence" , the planning, implementation and review of national and regional priorities will require the active engagement of civil society at all levels, and this will require UN support.

5. *Model inclusion in UN processes.* The UN system, at headquarters and in country, can go much further in modelling best practices in civil society inclusion. For example, the recent report from GPPAC and QUNO on civil society engagement and the PBA makes several strong recommendations on how the PBA could improve its working methods, including in respect of transparency, strategic partnerships, convening power and mutual accountability, many of which are reflected in the peacebuilding report. There are also interesting models from other policy centers that can be considered, like the Civil Society Dialogue Network that is supported by the EU in Brussels.

Conclusion

As I began, so shall I finish with a quote from the Advisory Group of Experts:

."… the UN's approach to sustaining peace, in all phases, must be underpinned by a deep commitment to broadening inclusion and ownership on the part of all stakeholders across the societies where it works. Neither peace agreements nor the implementation processes that follow them will likely prosper unless they look beyond the narrow interests of belligerents to a framework that can engage a society's broad and emergent vision of itself'. (127)

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