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Building Peace in Sri Lanka: A Role for Civil Society?

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Abstract

This article deals with civil society in the ethnically polarized violent conflict of Sri Lanka. It spells out the possible role of civil society in peace building, while at the same time problematizing the civil society concept and pointing to the problems faced by civil society in Sri Lanka in taking on this role. Civil society actors in Sri Lanka strive to contribute to peace processes (1) addressing *ethnic divides and public opinion* with education and awareness-raising programmes, as well as cross-ethnic dialogue, (2) addressing *politics* with popular mobilization, advocacy work and informal diplomacy, and (3) addressing *economic issues* through reconstruction and development. However, civil society in Sri Lanka has been weakened by political patronage and the protracted war. Like Sri Lankan society, it is to a large extent ethnically divided, and popular mobilization has through history been nationalist and violent rather than pro-peace.

Although civic peace organizations work hard to take on a peace building role, their activities are often project oriented and top-down, rather than mass based and bottom-up. Moreover, critical assessments of the impact of small scale activities and analysis of the linkage between them and the larger conflict context (in which the work of similar organizations as well as external forces have to be taken into account) need to be further developed, by civil society actors as well as researchers.

Introduction

The importance of civil society involvement in conflict resolution and peace building in violent conflicts has during the last decade been increasingly stressed. Civil society is anticipated to provide popular support for peace and to promote dialogue and reconciliation between polarized groups (DAC, 1997: 37; Lederach, 1997; Rupesinghe, 1995; 1998). At the same time, the number of non-governmental actors in the areas of peace building has multiplied. However, there is not always a clear link between the often rather vague theoretical utterances about the virtues of civil society peace builders, and the isolated but concrete 'peace activities' of the organizations and groups that in everyday speech are named civil society. The amorphous civil society concept is rarely defined or problematized, rendering the contributions of this civil society difficult to specify and measure.

The South Asian island of Sri Lanka, since long plagued by ethnic polarization and violence, has during 2002 entered into a promising peace process, interrupting decades of warfare. Since 1983 the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have waged a war of (Tamil) separation against the Sri Lankan (Sinhalese dominated) government. A growing number of non-state actors operate in the subsequent context of destruction, displacement, fear, breakdown of trust between ethnic groups, and controversy over state legitimacy; tending to the wounds in the conflict zones, reporting and monitoring human rights abuses, mobilizing people to support peace and organizing programmes for cross-ethnic trust building. But civil society peace building is in Sri Lanka contested and lined with difficulties, and the very idea of a civil society can, in this non-Western, post-colonial and war torn context, not be taken for granted.

This article aims to use the case of Sri Lanka to more clearly spell out the possible role of civil society in peace building in an ethnically polarized violent conflict, while at the same time problematizing the civil society concept and pointing to the problems faced by civil society in Sri Lanka in taking on this role. The analysis is based on qualitative interviews with peace activists, participants in peace activities and key actors within Sri Lankan society, as well as on literature studiesⁱ.

Civil Society as Peace Maker: Theoretical Views

[N]on-state actors have a limited but important contribution to make in the transformation of internal conflict situations (Rupesinghe, 1998: 22).

Literature on conflict resolution and peace building in contemporary conflicts is often primarily interested in how the international community or international actors (be it states, international governmental or non-governmental organizations, often Western or West dominated) can intervene to prevent, divert or resolve violent conflicts. From this interventionist perspective, local civil society representatives are often circumscribed to 'partners' or recipients of development/peace building aid, and their role is often not much elaborated onⁱⁱ. However, the role of local civil society actors has, along with the increase in the number of such actors, been increasingly recognized. Non-state actors are often believed to be more efficient and suitable to work for peace than state actors, as they are less visible, less expensive and more flexible (Ross & Rothman, 1999: 1), less constrained by narrow mandates, able to talk to several parties without losing their credibility and to deal directly with the grassroots population (Van Tongeren, 1998).

The civil society concept, deriving from political theory, but recently also brought into development policy and discourse, is used to describe the fact that people meet, communicate and organize in ways that are not established or controlled by the state, nor by kinship and family ties, and with purposes that are neither driven by the power logics of the state, nor by market interests. In the civil society arena people organize voluntarily to defend common interests or work for social and political change. Colloquially, however, 'civil society' has come to narrowly connote formal, non-governmental voluntary organizations which are generally presumed to 'do good'. This article subscribes to the former, analytical, definition of civil society, and thus sees non-governmental organizations as actors which are often to be found in the civil society sphere, but which also at times are driven by market logics and maintain more or less explicit links with the state. It is also important to note that the civil society sphere is not only occupied by groups working for 'civic values' (see White, 1994; Van Roy, 1998).

The importance given to civil society actors in peace building generally derives from their being representative of or in touch with 'the people'. Parties to armed conflicts (whether guerrilla movements or states) often claim to represent 'the people' and do (to different degrees) depend on the masses to stay in power, recruit combatants and sustain their legitimacy. Civilian protest or non-cooperation can become decisive for the continuation of both war and peace efforts and it is repeatedly stressed that peace cannot be agreed on or sustained only at a top level. Multi-track diplomacy makes a peace process more likely to succeed, and popular involvement render the final 'peace' more likely to be sustainable (Miall, Ramsbotham & Woodhouse, 1999; Lederach, 1997). Civil society has a potential role of (a) preventing violent conflict, (b) working in war zones, (c) supporting negotiations and settlements, and (d) endorsing reconstruction and reconciliation.

(a) An active civil society is seen to create social capital, i.e. trust, cooperation over ethnic, religious and other divisions, inclusiveness and open debate (see Putnam, 1992), which in turn is conducive to peace and harmony between sections of society. Comparisons of violence-stricken and more peaceful cities in India imply that interaction over ethnic and religious boundaries and inclusiveness in way of organizing and associating can serve to prevent violence (Varshney, 2002). The voluntary getting together of people to improve their own living conditions also addresses the underlying causes of frustrations and conflict, such as political and economic marginalization. Civil society actors can be crucial in this type of long term 'provention' of conflicts by attending to basic needs (Burton, 1990), as well as in early warning (see Rotberg, 1996) and preventive diplomacy.

(b) During ongoing armed conflicts, intervening non-state actors involved in humanitarian assistance can serve to lay the foundations of peaceful relations and trust between parties (or at least strive to 'do no harm', see Anderson, 1999), by promoting cooperation, contributing to normalized living conditions, providing security to civilians and monitoring human rights. However, in zones where violence and terror dominates, the space to act for local organizations is often severely constrained.

(c) The role of civil society in promoting peace negotiations and settlements is often given as that of forming a peace constituency. Mor has pointed out that the degree to which public opinion can influence peace initiatives fluctuates with the ambitions of the leaders, and the leaders' sensitivity to public opinion (Mor, 1997). Civil society actors can work to a) influence the ambitions of the leaders, b) influence public opinion, and c) express the opinion of the public to the leaders. When a peace process is under way, civil society can also

contribute to increase its legitimacy. Involvement of grass roots is important so that their grievances are addressed in the process (Rupesinghe, 1998: 127).

(d) In a post-violence context, civil society's role to build trust and dialogue between different groups of people who have been socialized to see the 'other' as enemy is especially crucial. A consolidated democracy and good governance is important for the rebuilding of a peaceful society, a process in which civil society actors are important both as pressure groups and in their own right (Cousens & Kumar, 2001).

The Sri Lankan Context

Sri Lanka could be seen as a text book example of an ethnic conflict, where economic, political and cultural deprivation and grievances of a minority have provoked a violent rebellion against a state which have gradually come to be seen as representative of only the majority ethnic groupⁱⁱⁱ. Independence from British rule in 1948 was followed by a Sinhalese/Buddhist nationalist revival, aiming to restore local language, culture and religion which had been suppressed during colonial rule. This resurrection came to be turned not only against the foreign rulers, but also against the minority population, which had enjoyed privileged positions during the British. The post-independence nationalist politics included the disenfranchizing of the Indian Tamils (about five percent of the population) in 1948, legislation making Sinhala the only official language (severely restricting employment opportunities for the Tamil speaking minorities) in 1956, a university admission reform which made it more difficult for students from Tamil areas to gain university entrance (1971) and the colonization of Tamil dominated areas with landless Sinhalese settlers. These policies all contributed to the making of Sri Lanka into a Sinhalese nation-state, in which the minorities came to feel like second class citizens. Tamils mobilized protests, first by non-violent means,

but from the 1970s and onwards more and more in the form of militant groups, and the call for a separate state, rather than for equal rights within the state of Sri Lanka, grew stronger. Pogroms against Tamil civilians, most severely in 1983, have reinforced the separatist struggle, which gradually came to be dominated by the LTTE. Emergency laws and attempts to suppress the Tamil struggle have augmented the difficulties and discrimination faced by the Tamils, while LTTE attacks on civilians have spurred the spiral of mistrust and fear. (see Keethaponcalan, 2000; de Silva, 1998; Hoole, 2001).

Conflicts between the main political parties in the South add to the complexity of conflict, as opposition parties have often 'played the nationalist card' to defeat a government attempting to 'solve' the ethnic problem. Protests from Sinhalese nationalists and Buddhist clergy have likewise made negotiations and political solutions difficult. In the late 1980s India's attempts to mediate ended up augmenting violence, as India got involved in armed struggle with the LTTE. Also negotiations in 1994-95 failed (see Uyangoda, 2000). Since February 2002 the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government have agreed to a ceasefire and a promising Norwegian-facilitated peace process is under way.

Defining Civil Society in Sri Lanka

The high politicization of Sri Lankan society leaves a relatively small space for civil society activity. Early democratization forced upper class politicians into an alliance with rural lower middle class, which gave way to political patronage (Stokke, 1998). The expansion of the state sector and the creation of a welfare state in the 1950s and 60s made the state the dominant source of almost everything that the citizens desired – with politicians and state bureaucrats in control of its distribution. This also contributed to deeply rooted perceptions among ordinary people of themselves as passive receivers of what politicians deliver. When

foreign aid and NGOs were brought in from the 1970s and onwards, they came to reinforce these same expectations (Hettige, 2000: 10f).

However, voluntary and professional associations formed in response to needs of society were in place already in pre-colonial times, while missionary involvement in the social sphere during colonial rule enhanced civil society activity (Saravanamuttu, 1998). Today, funeral and village societies are still a way to collectively organize to take care of local concerns.

However, most civil society activity in Sri Lankan villages is introduced or dominated by international or local NGOs with a rather top-down approach. Meyer compares the Sri Lankan weak civil society activity with the strong village-based social movements in the South Indian state of Kerala, which like Sri Lanka is characterized by high literacy rates and other good social indicators. He concludes that in Sri Lanka ‘people have developed a passive “receiving-mentality” rather than the awareness to actively demand the fulfillment of certain needs from the respective authorities’, i.e. political patronage substitutes a demanding civil society (Mayer, 2000: 167).

The years of war have further contributed to the weakening of civil society. The ethnic polarization resulting from political and violent conflict also impinge on civil society, which is ethnically divided. Many NGOs and civic groups are close to mono-ethnic, and contacts between the south of the country and the war affected north-east are relatively restricted. This Sinhalese-Tamil division also marks the university system and mass media. Fear and violence in war zones discourage the taking up of leadership roles in civic organizations (Goodhand, Lewer & Hulme, 1999: 21), and unnecessary cross-ethnic contact is often seen upon with suspicion (int. C44). The fact that displaced people move, reside and receive assistance in

mono-ethnic settlements further accentuates the ethnic polarization (Forut, 2001: 16; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 1999).

‘In Sri Lanka we don’t have *civil* society – only *uncivil* society’ is a common remark among intellectuals in Sri Lanka (see Bastian, 1999). This refers to the fact that voluntary popular mobilization throughout history has often been along racist lines, starting with anti-Christian agitations during British colonialism and culminating in anti-Tamil campaigns in the 1980s. Still today a number of Sinhalese and Buddhist organizations are carrying out rallies and involve in debates opposing peace negotiations and political concessions to the minorities.

Most non-governmental organizations concerned with peace, human rights and democratic reform were formed in the 1970s in response to ethnic riots and government repression. After the 1983 anti-Tamil violence international attention generated an influx of foreign relief funds, much of which was handled by NGOs. Although civil society actors have been working for peace for decades, a peace movement gained momentum first in 1994-95. In connection with International Human Rights Day in December 1994, thousands of peace and human rights activists, representatives of more than 40 NGOs and other groups, organized a peace rally in Colombo. A procession was accompanied by street drama, music, and speeches on the peace and human rights theme, and appeals were adopted and sent to the government and the LTTE (Wickramasinghe, 2001: 36). Many such rallies have since then been held in different parts of the island. Likewise, in February 1995, an inauguration meeting for the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka was held, gathering hundreds of delegates representing different civil society organizations, with the purpose to assemble civic groups sympathetic to peace under one umbrella. Subsequently, National Peace Council has come to function as one NGO doing conflict resolution training and advocacy work and over the years several similar

attempts to assemble civil society groups for peace under one umbrella have been made.

During 1995, members of the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality and many other peace groups traveled extensively across the island, educating people about the roots of ethnic conflict and the need for political reform. Also this form of peace work has continued over the years.

In 1994-95, it was the election campaign and victory of a political alliance, which promised negotiations and an end to the ethnic conflict, which spurred optimism, increased civil society campaigning for peace and simultaneously gave rise to an increased interest among donors to support 'peace work'. The breakdown of the negotiations and the government's turn to a war-for-peace strategy was, however, met by silence by most peace groups, many of which had explicitly supported the government in its peace efforts, and like the President thought that violence now was the only remaining alternative. Only by the end of the 1990's, civil society peace activities regained some of their strength. The 2002 ceasefire and peace process have granted new optimism, although civil society organizations largely have a low-key, supportive role as the government pushes the process forward.

A Limping Peace Movement

In Sri Lanka there is no massive mobilization for peace or against the war and most peace activities draw relatively small numbers of participants. For instance, peace rallies organized by the network People's Peace Front, backed by around 60 organizations, in December 2000, draw between 500-1,000 participants in various parts of the island^{iv}. This is to compare with party political rallies during the same period of time, attracting tens of thousands of participants. Workshops and seminars held by civic organizations are often sporadic, and by no means reach out to a majority of the population. The government campaign for peace talks

and constitutional reform in 1995, with its access to state media, had a far more efficient outreach. The lack of mass involvement in civil society peace work can be explained by the fact that most people at a grassroots level are preoccupied with their day to day survival, which they normally do not see as dependent on the war situation (although in fact one major source of income for poor rural families is remittances from the armed forces). A feeling of grass root powerlessness prevails and most people exercise their right to vote on election days, but in-between leave politics to the politicians.

The passivity of grassroots people gets another dimension in the war zones, where coming out for peace can have dangerous consequences. One activist from Jaffna explains: ‘LTTE prepare people to go for war, we can’t do anything about that. We give our opinion about peace. But we don’t say “Stop the war”’ (int. C6). The fact that Tamils who engage politically are viewed with suspicion by both the government (in which eyes they are potential terrorists) and the LTTE (which claim the sovereign right to express the will of ‘the Tamil people’) has made the peace organizations Sinhalese dominated. The very peace definition is also an issue here. While Sinhalese want an end to the violence, Tamils want justice – not ‘peace’ with continued oppression. This contradiction was expressed by one interviewee: ‘Peace for the Tamils is that the army should get out [of the North and East]. Peace in the South might be LTTE surrendering’ (int. B31). In most peace campaigns, ‘peace’ remains vaguely defined, and the concept runs the risk of being inflated, a development spurred by increased donor interest in supporting ‘peace work’.

It is also important to note that civil society organizations in Sri Lanka do not necessarily have democratic structures allowing for grassroots participation in decision making, accountability and transparency. On the contrary, as a reflection of society in general, many

NGOs are administered in an authoritarian way and centre around one influential and charismatic leader. The hefty reliance on foreign assistance makes 'the peace movement' in Sri Lanka a web of project focused organizations, rather than a spontaneous people's movement.

Peace Constituencies and Public Pressure

I think the only thing we can do is to get as many people as possible, [...] to challenge the government during the election time. [...] I am saying, "Don't come asking for our votes unless you show us your plan for peace!" (int. B21).

The above quote points at one of the most common perceptions peace activists have of their agency. The civil society role of promoting a peace constituency, i.e. popular attitudes conducive to peace as well as popular mobilization to put pressure on politicians to end the war, is seen as a foremost one.

Since independence and until the mid-1990s, public opinion and popular mobilization have mostly served to boost ethnic conflict. Political parties in opposition and Sinhala nationalist activists have used anti-Tamil sentiments to threaten the power of the governing party, forcing it to abandon political agreements, as was the case with the pacts between the prime minister and the leader of the main Tamil party in both 1958 and 1968. Horrendous mob violence have in many cases been politically motivated and controlled (see Tambiah, 1986). But while it in the past has been relatively easy to win popular support for nationalist views and opposition to peace agreements, this has changed during the 1990s. During the elections in 1994 the People's Alliance won a land slide victory on promises of peace negotiations and a political

solution to the conflict. The peace process that followed had massive popular support. In 2001, it was the opposition UNP party which campaigned for peace negotiations, while the PA resorted to nationalist propaganda, accusing UNP for cooperation with the LTTE 'terrorists'. This time too, people put their votes on the peace promise, laying the ground for the 2002 peace process^v.

Elections, whether national, presidential or local, have occurred yearly, over the last five years in Sri Lanka, and urging people to cast their votes on politicians who are likely to work for an end to the war is one major goal for peace activism, as well as a way to put pressure on the politicians to take stands on the issue.

To what extent civil society peace work, in the form of workshops, conflict resolution training and enlightenment on the history of the violent conflict, really does change public opinions is a difficult question. Participants in peace or conflict resolution workshops often claim quite drastic changes in their own attitude, with newly gained understandings of the roots of conflict and awareness of the need for peace (e.g. int. C49; C52). Whether these are real changes in opinion, which persist also in contexts outside the peace activity, or mere polite answers to evaluation forms given out by the organisers (to whom the participants are grateful), needs to be studied further. The relatively limited outreach of civil society peace education, the slow nature of attitude change and the importance of external events suggests that civil society peace education impact on public opinion at large is so far relatively modest.

As discussed earlier, mobilizing people to demonstrate against the war has proved rather difficult, and in many cases villagers have been given transportation and lunches by the organisers to be able to and interested in coming. However, although the number of people

mobilized for peace events is rather modest, if held in Colombo they often receive relatively a lot of attention and space in media, as was the case of the peace demonstration at Human Rights Day, December 2000. Peace campaigns are also defined by Sinhalese nationalist groups as dangerous and threatening and worth criticizing or disturbing, a fact which tells something about the perceived power of those popular protests (during the above mentioned rally, a banner with peace messages was burnt by a group of men critical to the demonstration). Peace rallies, although not sizable or 'spontaneous' enough to reflect a strong popular outcry, are visible to Sri Lankan power holders, as well as to the international community, both those stationed in Colombo and those following Internet based news media. Moreover, one must not underestimate the value of an active network of individual peace activists, NGOs and other groups with an interest in peace – a network which reaches out to districts and villages in the country and which has a potential to play an important role in massive popular mobilization, once the situation is ripe for that.

Understanding and Meeting the 'Other'

The breakdown of trust between Sinhalese and Tamils is recognized by Sri Lankan peace activists as a main problem. The population has through the years become polarized into relatively clearly defined ethnic groups, who speak different languages, go to different schools, know little about each other's religions, receive different (but often equally biased) media reports, and learn a history that glorify 'the self' at the expense of 'the other'. Prejudices against the ethnic 'other' have been the result, as well as a conflict triggering factor. There is similarly a deep divide between the understanding of the conflict as 'terrorism' and as 'a liberation struggle of a suppressed nation' and in schools the modern history of the ethnic conflict is seldom taught or discussed. Although most parts of Sri Lanka are ethnically mixed, ethnic cleansing (forced or 'chosen') have taken place during the course

of the war; in 1990, the Muslim population of 120,000 was forced to leave LTTE controlled areas and since then most of the Northern province is purely Tamil. In the Eastern province ethnic groups are geographically separated and interaction between them is often sparse and tense. Memories of riots and violence against civilians further underpin mistrust between ethnic groups in the whole island.

The peace organizations have two ways of addressing these problems: a) through education and b) by letting people meet the ethnic 'other'. Important in the peace education field is the retelling of history. In school, children are normally taught about a Sinhalese-Tamil conflict since time immemorial and Tamils are portrayed as 'filthy' invaders, fought by heroic Sinhalese kings. An understanding of how history is politically manipulated, about recent roots of conflict and mistakes made by all involved parties, helps to combat fears and ungrounded rationales for the demonization of 'the other'. Conflict resolution training is given to inspire a comprehension of how the violent conflict can be solved at a national level, but also to provide tools for conflict handling at community level. Peace education targets grass roots, teachers, journalists, NGO personnel, religious or other civic leaders and politicians at various levels, in different parts of the country.

In November 2001, the Jaffna based Centre for Performing Arts invited Sinhalese artists to Jaffna, staging a performance of Sinhalese and Tamil artists, and providing a space for both groups to meet and for the Sinhalese to see the hardships of the war torn areas. Many other activities, in the form of youth camps, school projects and exchanges, have taken place in Sri Lanka, aiming to get people with different ethnic and geographical background together to talk and learn about each other. A visiting Sinhalese man, singing a traditional peace song in Tamil is a strong symbol, for Jaffna residents who earlier have only met armed Sinhalese. When the Community Education Centre took Sinhalese women to Tamil refugee camps,

carrying with them gifts for the children, they gained an understanding of the plight of Tamils affected by war – something which is not well known by the Sinhalese general public. At the same time, the Tamil refugees got to see that not all Sinhalese are ‘enemies’. Dialogue and newly formed relations can bridge some of the prejudices and ignorance that divide the Sri Lankan society, or even prevent violence. Inhabitants of a boarder village in eastern Sri Lanka, where the same NGO had mobilized peace groups, abstained from taking to violence after an LTTE attack on civilians in September 1999, something which some years ago would have been an expected reaction (int. B13). In the Southern province training for local politicians carried out by the National Peace Council has resulted in fewer party political conflicts in the area, as the workshops provided the former bitter enemies with a space to talk and find common interests (int. C49; C52). Peace activism also contributes to bridging some of the gaps within the peace movement itself, as people are linked together in their quest for peace and have to mediate between the ‘Sinhalese’ and ‘Tamil’ peace definition and conflict analysis. More difficult is, however, to link up and initiate a dialogue with the extreme nationalists on both the Sinhalese and Tamil side.

Impact assessments when it comes to the prevention of violence are bound to be hypothetical, and external factors, such as the actual security situation and fears people face daily, and the propaganda machine of both conflicting parties are likely to be more significant than various civil society peace initiatives. Here, the pressure from donors to ‘show results’ (number of participants in workshops, pamphlets distributed etc.) does not grant much evidence of long term changes.

Large Scale Conflict and Small-Scale Activities

One strongly cherished idea among civil society peace groups is that of the power of the small example, and the linkage between the local or personal level and that of the large scale violent conflict. Peace in mind will bring peace within the family, which in turn will bring peace to the village, the country and ultimately the world. If people are harmonic and united locally, this will serve as an example showing that peace indeed is possible, also at a higher level. One interviewee gives this comment when relating a marriage between a Sinhalese soldier and a Tamil woman:

When we see [...] these types of things, we are surprised, we feel that we don't have any problems between us. Because of that we feel [that] without spending more time on this disastrous war, we can settle this matter peacefully (int. C8).

The question of linkage between small scale harmony and large scale peace processes is referred to by Kelman as a *transfer process* (see Ross, 2000: 1005; Ross & Rothman, 1999: 5). However, *how* the transfer process takes place seems to remain a supposition that changes in individual and small group beliefs and behaviours can eventually affect the decisions that political and military leaders make.

In the case of Sri Lanka, conflicts and violence at a local level are in many ways interlinked with the larger scale violent conflict. Military or guerrilla administration limits the possibilities for grass roots to act, and the fears and security problems generated by the large scale conflict trickle down to a local level and cause severed community relations. Local conflicts, which initially have nothing to do with the ongoing war, also run the risk of being interpreted as 'ethnic'. Criminality and violence in the non-war areas of the country is also linked to the war, as army deserters and their weapons play a major role.

An improved situation in the civil war in most (but not all) cases has positive effects on local community relations. There is far less evidence that good local level relations influence the higher levels of conflict. However, local conflicts and violence can serve to trigger higher level violence and good local relations can be crucial for preventing an aggravation of conflicts at higher levels. Moreover, human rights violations, killings or a general feeling of mistrust between the ethnic groups locally often serve as a motivating force behind the violent struggle.

One way for civil society to deal with the risk for local conflicts (whether triggered by or triggering factors for the larger scale war) is through local peace committees consisting of religious leaders and other prominent representatives from the different communities, who in case of conflict escalation have the authority to calm people down and defy false rumours with correct information, thus preventing outbreaks of violence. During the tensions following the Bindunuewa massacre in October 2000, a priest managed to calm down frustrated members of his congregation in central Sri Lanka, but otherwise there are few examples of the workings of such peace committees. Again we run into the problem of how to study *prevented* violence. Nevertheless, the peace committees formed in the north-east under the ceasefire agreement of February 2002, consisting of Scandinavian monitors and representatives chosen by the government and LTTE (some of whom are drawn from civil society), play an important role upholding the legitimacy of the ceasefire agreement and monitoring violations.

The idea of trust building at the battlefield has been actively promoted by the network of parents of soldiers missing in action led by Visaka Dharmadasa. Respectful treatment of the dead, identification of bodies and respect for the Geneva Conventions could, according to them, contribute to making warfare more humane, and from that build trust between the parties, showing at the very battlefield that the other side actually can be trusted:

At least one thing, to hand over the bodies properly. Then they will agree for another thing, to a second one, dress the [identification] disc and respect. Third; we won't kill anyone captured. [...] If they can agree... because all these are mutually beneficial to each other, they are not losing anything. They don't have to change the constitution for this. You don't have to go for election for this. But [it] benefits both sides. So we want to build from there the trust (int. C12).

Even during the ongoing war, the belligerent parties in the war zone do talk to each other, and sometimes agree on matters. One example is the yearly ceasefires held for the benefit of vaccinating children in the war ridden areas. Another is the locally negotiated agreement between the army and the LTTE, moderated by the ICRC, in August 1999 on the opening of a road for transportation of humanitarian aid (*The Sri Lanka Monitor*, 1999).

Some NGO workers also put a lot of effort into improving the relations between the civilians and the Sri Lankan army or the LTTE. By taking civilians, who every day have to cross a certain checkpoint, to the army representatives and explaining to the commanders the importance of them being able to pass peacefully, the NGO workers can contribute to a substantial improvement of everyday life of civilians, and to a better exchange of information between ordinary people and the military. Likewise, NGO representatives can explain to guerrilla leaders about the needs of civilians. These actions have a direct impact on the everyday life in the war zones. Of course it is much more difficult to answer how they contribute to peace on a larger scale. But civilians who experiences the other side as less threatening are more willing to support peace negotiations or agreements, and an increased face-to-face interaction and understanding of the plight of the civilians on the part of the armed forces and militants might work to motivate them for peace.

Advocacy Work

The civil society peace groups in Sri Lanka who make concrete political demands for peace typically press for a) negotiations between the government and the LTTE, b) constitutional reform which will give some form of self-government to provinces in Sri Lanka, and/or cater for the inclusion of the minorities in political processes at the centre, or c) other democratic reforms, such as the abolition of the executive presidency, the formation of independent commissions for elections, police and judiciary, and the tackling of corruption – things which are perceived as important steps to handle the root causes of the conflict. In the light of the historical experiences of the opposition party sabotaging peace settlements, many (at least Sinhalese) peace activists maintain that there must be a consensus between the two main political parties.

Media statements and articles in the newspapers and the participation in debates or seminars are strategies to get the messages out. Other ways are lobbying on a person-to-person level, collecting signatures or writing letters to power holders. Civil society actors also carry out opinion polls and research about the war, which is conveyed to politicians and sometimes used by them as arguments against the war effort (int. D2). Rallies and demonstrations, as discussed earlier, serve to put pressure on politicians and to show that there is a popular support for peace initiatives. Providing space for politicians from different parties to meet and discuss is yet one strategy, which has been tried at local and national level. In the latter case, research visits to countries with positive experiences of negotiations and peace settlements have provided insights to be used in the Sri Lankan case. However, it is difficult to see concrete outcomes of the politician programmes, in the form of issues brought up, patterns of voting, or laws passed in parliament. However, human rights groups have been successful in

influencing laws, for instance in the case of the language bill of 1987 (int. D12). Independent think-tanks and civil organizations have also actively worked to scrutinize and comment on laws, and to suggest legislative improvements, and options for a new constitution. These groups have provided space for discussion and expertise on these issues, and some of their ideas have through close contacts with politicians also entered the political system (int. C13; D12).

Lobbying the international community is one important task, as it is seen to have the power to pressure both the government and the LTTE to sit down at the negotiation table and to make concessions in a peace process. From the perspective of the international community, statements and shows of strength from a Sri Lankan peace movement are important to legitimize and back possible international involvement.

When addressing politics, there is always a risk that civil society organizations get entangled in party politics. Most political reforms or proposals carry the stamp of either political party. Civil society actors thus run the risk of being identified with the government when supporting government led peace strivings (as during the peace processes 1994-95 and 2002), and with the opposition when criticizing the government (as was the case before the transfers of power and peace processes in 1994 and 2001).

To address and lobby the LTTE is much more difficult than lobbying government politicians. However, civil society representatives have written to and visited LTTE leaders and unofficial communication between LTTE and government representatives have been maintained by religious leaders in times of war. The international community and Tamil groups in diaspora are also channels through which messages to the LTTE can be brought forth.

The Profitable War

After close to two decades of war between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil guerrilla movement, the war machine has come to have its own dynamics and driving forces. The LTTE war organization is fuelled from all over the world and linked up with a global network of guerrilla groups, arms and drug dealers (Gunaratna, 1999). In Sri Lanka, a war economy has developed, making continued military confrontations profitable for a wide range of people; from elite politicians, businessmen, military and arms dealers, to war zone merchandisers, local army officers or guerrillas controlling road blocks, and poor families whose only chance for survival is sending their young men to the army (see Kelegama, 1999; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 1999). Also the use of the war in power politics and legitimization of military leaders contributes to the difficulties of peace making.

Civil society peace activists define the fact that many people profit from the war as one of the biggest obstacles to peace, but also as the issue which is most difficult to take action against. Most peace programmes do not address these thorny issues, and those which do so mainly aim to enlighten power holders and ordinary people about the great economic losses generated by warfare. An explicit focus on the benefits of war is more precarious. A peace meditation or cultural event advocating a vaguely defined 'peace' can be accepted and attended even by warmongers, while strong criticism of concrete decisions and acts concerning the warfare are more prone to generate opposition, including violent antagonism^{vi}.

In the quest to make the war less profitable for those who run it, civil organizations often address the international community. Most Sri Lankan NGOs involved in peace work have international contacts and networks, which can be used for communication and lobbying.

Foreign governments and international governmental organizations have the potential to scrutinize and criticize the human rights abuses by the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, they could stop selling arms to them, and use other types of sanctions to pressure them to respect human rights and enter into a negotiation process. Foreign countries could put pressure on the Sri Lankan government by withdrawing or putting conditions on development aid and other financial assistance. In the case of the LTTE, the banning of the organization in several countries (e.g. India, USA and the UK) limits its room to maneuver, fundraising abilities and legitimacy. However, these measures are not only used as tools to achieve peace. In fact, both parties in the war work for the delegitimization and international condemnation of the other side, and non-governmental actors carrying out similar campaigns risk being branded LTTE or government supporters depending on what they most visibly and successfully focus at.

Another aspect of making war unprofitable is dealing with impunity. Throughout recent history in Sri Lanka, human rights abuses, massacres and other crimes related to the war have been left behind without any research into what really happened and without judgment and punishment. Serious human rights violations are taking place under the so called Prevention of Terrorism Act (see Law and Society Trust, 2000). On the LTTE side, there is no safeguard against human rights abuses, many of which target Tamils which have been branded traitors by the LTTE. Here, civil society actors tend to address the immediate problems – the symptoms, rather than the causes – for instance by reporting human rights violations and by giving legal aid to those in custody. Addressing governance issues and reform of the Sri Lankan state is a demanding long term commitment, taken on by some civil organizations. Tackling the issue of democratization of the LTTE is even more risky, and needs to be done with pressure from the international community as well as from the Tamil diaspora^{vii}.

At a local level, issues of the profits of war, and the dependency of poor families on war remittances are rarely attended to. NGOs and other civic organizations which address youth unemployment, poverty and related issues, seldom connect these problems with the war. In the war zones, though, reconstruction work and the rebuilding of a normalized society, and the generation of alternative incomes is an important step towards peace – unless ruined by new warfare. Showing concrete improvements during the ongoing peace process is essential to curb frustrations and sustain support for the process. The donor community in Sri Lanka has increasingly come to focus on the possibilities of a positive peace building impact in relief and development projects, emphasizing both in policy and in practice the need to consider ethnic and political divides and grievances in aid programming (see Zunzer, 2002).

Promoting Alternative Discourses

One aspect of peace activism which runs the risk of not being recognized is that of discursive change. The peace movement, through its media statements, peace manifestations, and tireless work building bridges over ethnic cleavages, communicates a discourse on peace and conflict resolution, i.e. a way of talking and thinking about peace and war, which has contrasted with much of the war reporting, propaganda, and ideas in society at large. When the country was put on a 'war-footing', both sides struggled hard to recruit fighters, media was heavily censored and Sinhalese extreme nationalism a powerful force, the messages peace groups sent out, both literally, and symbolically through collective action, showed that it was possible to talk about negotiations, political settlements and reconciliation. The constant repetition of these messages worked to counteract the discourse saying that war is the only possible alternative, and create a space for peaceful dialogue and action. As expressed in 1999 by one member of the women's movement: 'They [the peace activists] are the only people who

speaking. The NGOs and some selected people. [...] I think everybody else is silent on the issue' (int. B26).

It is of course difficult to evaluate to what extent civil society peace groups have contributed to making some views (e.g. the need for negotiations between the government and the LTTE, a political solution to the conflict and third party facilitation) more mainstream. Since the introduction of the current peace process in December 2001 the peace discourse has dominated, although the opposing discourse which describes the LTTE as terrorists who must be militarily defeated still obtains much space in the debate, not the least in print media and in rallies organized by opposition parties and nationalist groups.

Peace groups protesting the war are of course not the only reason behind a discursive change. The power game between political parties, Norwegian involvement, the global post-September 11 context, improvements experienced during times of ceasefire as well as state and guerrilla propaganda are probably more important. With reference to Israel, Kelman concludes that civil society during twenty years contributed to peace by altering the frames of reference of both political elites and mass public, showing that there was someone on the other side to talk to, and suggesting what an agreement could look like (Ross and Rothman, 1999: 13). Bar-On shows that the peace movement in Israel also influenced the use of words about the conflict, something which in its turn shapes the way people think about the conflict, e.g. referring to territories annexed by Israel as 'occupied' rather than 'liberated' (Bar-On 1996: 323). In Sri Lanka, peace activists maintain that words such as 'facilitation', instead of the more controversial 'mediation', and the idea of the need for a PA-UNP consensus regarding the peace process, have entered the political discourse following seminars and courses held for top politicians (int. C59). Peace organizations have also shown that peace is possible by taking politicians to Northern Ireland, Bangladesh, the Philippines and South Africa to study the successful peace processes and agreements there. The envisioning of a post-war society and of solutions to the

conflicts and demobilization of the militarized society are important components of a peace discourse, clearly manifested in the pictures of a peaceful and prosperous post-war Sri Lanka used by peace NGOs in media campaigns, posters and post-cards.

Conclusions

Civil society actors have a potential to contribute to peace processes (1) addressing *ethnic divides and public opinion* with education and awareness-raising programmes, as well as cross-ethnic dialogue, (2) addressing *politics* with popular mobilization, advocacy work and informal diplomacy, and (3) addressing *economic issues* through reconstruction and development. These different functions are interlinked, as something which is an aim for one activity (e.g. popular mobilization as an outcome of awareness- raising) is also a means (to put pressure on politicians). This role is summarized in Table I. Trust building is, as we have seen, central for the civil society peace building role, both among grass roots and top level leaders. Spreading information and encouraging dialogue are essential for the trust building efforts, for pro-peace popular attitudes as well as for the lobbying of national leaders and international actors. The more subtle virtues of civil society, as fostering an inclusive, democratic society and as forwarding discursive change, are however more difficult to pinpoint.

Table I in here.

The civil society role outlined above is, however, more potential than carefully verified, and small isolated activities of hundreds of organizations and groups have to be evaluated and

placed into this larger context to be meaningful. General assumptions about civil society as ‘good’ and ‘peace bringing’ are not useful unless a concrete function is specified and minor achievements critically evaluated. But assessing impact of peace activities is problematic, as observed by Ross & Rothman:

while the rhetoric of project designs and appeals to funders generally encourages broad claims about how a project will make a difference in the wider society, the connection between a projects daily activities and this rhetoric are not well articulated (Ross & Rothman, 1999: 240).

This is certainly a dilemma for peace activities in Sri Lanka, where the strong focus on performance of the particular organization also tend to disregard the work of other similar groups, as well as the role of inevitable external forces.

A civil society contribution to peace is *necessary, but not enough*, it can be concluded.

Popular support and a legitimacy for peace processes and agreements ‘from below’ is needed for them not to be upset. However, taking on this role poses a number of challenges to the civil society sphere in Sri Lanka – and to the very definition of civil society:

Firstly, many activities are initiated in a top-down manner, reaching the rural periphery from an urban centre (not the other way around), implying a need to question the common and imprudent assumption that ‘civil society’ is the same as ‘the people’ or ‘from below’. Peace work in Sri Lanka is done in (rather fragmented) projects and NGOs, rather than in the form of a dynamic mass based social movement.

Secondly, the assumption that civil society is democratically organized, and thus in itself contributes to the building of a society in which conflicts are handled non-violently and democratically, must be scrutinized. Authoritarian structures and democratic deficits characterize many civil society groups in Sri Lanka.

Thirdly, civil society activity does not necessarily imply cross-ethnic associational forms, nor the promotion of democratic and peaceful values. Those civil society actors in Sri Lanka which do embrace such values have to struggle hard to truly bridge ethnic cleavages and join people in a divided country in the quest for a jointly defined 'peace'.

Finally, impact assessment and linkage between small scale activities and large scale developments is made more difficult by the inability in many peace groups to differentiate between *activity* and *impact*. Activities are easily defined and 'counted', while knowing anything about impact requires a broader and more long term analysis.

Overcoming these problems is a challenge to civil society actors in Sri Lanka – but necessary in order to understand, take on and evaluate their potentially important role in peace building.

Table I. Role of Civil Society in Peace Building in Sri Lanka

Civil Society Activity	Target Group	(Intended) Impact
Awareness-raising and peace education	Local communities, sometimes through key persons such as teachers, community leaders, religious leaders etc	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased dialogue and better conflict resolution mechanisms locally → better trust for conflict resolution at higher levels, prevention of the spreading of conflict - Building of a peace constituency, which will support peace initiatives, vote for peace at elections and abstain from supporting or mobilizing for violence. - Mobilization of people in manifestations for peace
Organization of peace marches, rallies and other manifestations for peace	Grass roots, NGOs and other networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased awareness for peace among the general public - Increased pressure on political leaders to work for de-escalation, peace negotiations and political reform
Bringing together persons from different ethnic groups	Local communities, professional groups, religious leaders, Sri Lankan diaspora etc	Decreased prejudices between ethnic groups, better understanding of the view of the other side, increased support for peace initiatives
Advocacy work	Politicians and international community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased pressure on political leaders to work for de-escalation, peace negotiations and political reform - Motivation for international actors to put pressure on the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE to act for peace
Research and information	General public, politicians and international community through media, seminars and global civil society networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased knowledge about the background, costs and possible solutions to the conflict → building of a peace constituency and encouraging politicians to work for peace - Increased awareness of the conflict and human rights abuses in Sri Lanka among international actors
Informal diplomacy	Key actors from the Sri Lankan government and LTTE or persons close to them	Upholding of a dialogue between actors on different sides, conveying of messages and views of the other side, discussion of future solutions
Reconstruction of war torn areas, mobilizing people to satisfy their own basic needs	Local communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improved life situation for ordinary people → decreased risks of discontent and conflicts - Decreased dependency on the war economy

Notes

ⁱ Field work in Sri Lanka has been conducted in September-October 1999, October 2000-February 2001, and May-June 2001. Eighty qualitative interviews with peace activists and participants in peace activities have been carried out, as well as 25 interviews with politicians, religious leaders, media representatives and other key actors. The interviews were open-ended and aimed to bring out different descriptions and definitions of 'civil society' in Sri Lanka, as well as to encourage the interviewees to spell out their views of the role, impact and problems of civil society peace activities. These depictions have been analysed in relation to literature on conflict resolution and to the specifics of the violent conflict(s) in Sri Lanka.

ⁱⁱ For exceptions see Rupesinghe (1998); Ross & Rothman (1999). There is also a substantial collection of writings by donors which deal with NGOs and peace building, although these tend to take the form of manuals or quick evaluations, which lack deeper analysis.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Sinhalese, most of whom are Buddhists, make up about three fourth of the population, while the Tamils (Hindus and Christians) make up one fifth, divided between Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils, with different history and geographical location in Sri Lanka. There is also a Muslim minority of 7 %, which is considered a separate ethnic group.

^{iv} However, peace meditations organized by the Sarvodaya movement have attracted larger numbers (organizers claiming hundreds of thousands in August 1999 and March 2002), but have tended to be more religious than explicitly political.

^v An opinion poll carried out in late 1999 showed that among the Tamils 84% wanted a negotiated settlement. Of the Sinhalese, only 48% wanted negotiations, while 37% supported a military solution. A majority of all ethnic groups wanted increased self-governance for the provinces (National Peace Council, 1999). In a poll from May 2002, 85 % of the Sri Lankan Tamils and 35% of the Sinhalese approved of Norway's assistance in the ongoing peace process. Six percent of the Sinhalese and 73% of the Sri Lankan Tamils believed that LTTE was committed to peace, while about 50% of Sinhalese and Tamils trusted that the government's motivation for talks was commitment for peace (*Peace Confidence Index*, 2002).

^{vi} A number of peace activists interviewed in this study have been subject to threats related to their work.

^{vii} The estimations of what popular support LTTE would gain in democratic elections vary widely, but what is clear is that the guerrilla organization is not created to share and negotiate power democratically. The growth of

LTTE political work, also in areas outside its control, during the 2002 ceasefire is therefore an interesting development.

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