Pedestals for Marginalized Voices: Peaceful Negotiation through Civil Society

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**Introduction**

Peaceful political transformation requires the voices from all affected stakeholders; the mainstream and marginalized, the majority and minority. In many stable democracies this voice is amplified through non-governmental organizations which act as pedestals on which the voiceless can stand.

Employing the theoretical framework of Kurt Lewin’s field theory in geographically different contexts, this paper explores the various factors that create conflict while considering strategies to influence social change and peaceful political transformation through civil society. While context is critical to sustainable strategies for peace, this paper focuses on the countries of South Sudan, Bolivia, and Thailand. The research sought to understand and illustrate the different ways in which civil society organizations strategically facilitate an agenda of social inclusion for minority populations?

**Theoretical Framework: Kurt Lewin’s Field Theory**

The relationship between governmental leaders, multinational corporations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), citizens, and other international bodies is very complex and nonlinear. The dynamics can be expressed within the realm of systems theory. One definition of a system approach used by scholars was that posited by Walter Buckley, which states that

> a synthetic approach wherein piecemeal analysis is not possible due to the intricate interrelationship of parts that cannot be treated out of context of the whole.¹

In the context of peace building, the system includes all of the parties or stakeholders involved in the peace process. Building on systems theories, Kurt Lewin (1997) introduced field theory, which he defined as “...a method of analyzing causal relations and building scientific constructs.”² He stated that

Observing conflict through the lens of field theory involves *four* elements. The *first* is the ‘quasi-stationary equilibrium’. An example of this concept is demonstrated in the adaptive behavior of NGOs as they navigate spaces of conflict, specifically those that concern power relationships that are influenced by multiple external factors. The *second* element, *Group Dynamics*, places attention on changing the behavior of the group. The *third* element, *Action Research*, is directly connected to steps one and two. By understanding the forces within the field that affect the dynamics and equilibrium of group behavior, the group then adapts plans of action accordingly. The fourth, the *3-Step Model*, involves analysis and planning to bring about broader social change. These three steps include (a) unfreezing, (b) moving, and (c) refreezing. *Unfreezing* is the process of creating the environment for social change to occur, however, this is not the
desired goal. For example, unfreezing can be acts of terrorism, or other forms of social unrest or environmental disruption for the purpose of bringing about change for an oppressed group. The next step in the model, *moving*, is the change. This is movement towards more acceptable behaviors. Focusing on accountability and transparency, civil society acting on behalf of the people to create, facilitate, and implement activities that foster peace and social inclusion, could be seen as the movement. The final step, *refreezing*, is the process of stabilizing the entity through the acceptance and maintenance of its new environment. The sustained environmental change is the desired goal, which includes establishing and implementing new policies that are informed by and benefit the marginalized population.

**The Role of Civil Society in Policy Development**

The development of a strong civil society representative of multiple voices with the ability to stand on pedestals advocating and participating in policy development is critical for a stable country. Halperin, Siegle, and Weinstein (2004) drew a comparison between poor democracies and poor autocracies. They contended that poor democracies "are almost always stronger, calmer, and more caring than poor autocracies, because they allow power to be shared and encourage openness and accountability." The research found that over time autocracies continued to maintain economic instability, created larger refugee and displaced person populations due to conflict and ethnic bias; and human development occurred either at the same, or at a lesser rate than poor democracies. In fact, the poor democracies on the other hand had higher rates of literacy, lower rates of infant mortality, and more stable governments, with less of a refugee crisis. In addition, these countries were able to respond to natural disasters because of the systemic flexibility of their governments. The involvement in NGOs in a society promotes transparency and development. In addition, NGOs often foster social inclusion and participation which are key components to sustainable peace.

That being said, not all NGOs are alike. There are trusteeship NGOs and representative NGOs. The representative NGOs are similar to the grassroots organizations (GROs) in that they provide direct services to the masses of needy people are indigenous, whereas the trusteeship NGO lacks community connection. Not all NGOs have the capacity to support the empowerment of marginalized groups.

Although, NGOs have been empowered in many ways, in general many NGOs contend they are excluded in critical policy development. According to Seckinelgin (2005) NGOs that were involved in policymaking ended up supporting policies that were directly linked to donor funding. The donors had set the policies, and the NGOs agreed based on their need to maintain financial resources. He also stated that only the international NGOs were invited to policy discussions, not the indigenous GROs. Usually the indigenous NGOs were subcontractors to the international NGOs, only implementing a piece of a program that was ultimately funded by and linked to policy created by the international donors. In addition, NGOs invited to and involved in policy decisions were usually operating within the realm of the established international policy framework.
The following three diagrams illustrate the current relationship that exists within field, as well as what could be. **Figure 1** illustrates the influence on policy by foreign donors and international NGOs. In this scenario, indigenous NGOs are stifled in their ability to influence policy through the limitations of the existing capacity building programs and the power dynamics with the international NGOs. **In Figure 2**, the influence on policy by foreign donors and indigenous NGOs is shown. In this scenario indigenous NGOs have greater influence on policy, however, are still limited by their relationship with international NGOs. **Finally, in Figure 3** the influence on policy by foreign donors and indigenous NGOs is illustrated. In this scenario, indigenous NGOs have greater influence on policy in local and regional contexts, and somewhat in national contexts, illustrated with the dotted arrow. The indigenous NGOs are funded directly from foreign donors and national governments.

![Diagram 1](image)

*Diagram 1. Indigenous NGO Field—1. Influence on policy by foreign donors and international NGOs.*
The international world regarded the nation of Sudan as one country under one rule prior to 2011. A country with an extensive history of enslavement and cultural hegemony, it would be several decades of struggle by the people in the southern part of Sudan before independence
was achieved. For many years, the Sudanese Government prided and promoted itself at being at the “crossroads of the Arab and African world,” as it was a country bordered by Egypt, Libya, Chad, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. Prior to 2011, the country of Sudan contained “within its borders representatives of all major African language families, excluding the Khoisan languages of South Africa.” It is estimated that the number of languages spoken in Sudan is 136, of which 114 are indigenous, while the rest are foreign, including English.

Although there was pride in that national identity for some, there were still oppressive language and cultural policies that made it difficult for people who did not identify as Arab or Muslim to live freely. Political power was concentrated with the Arabs and the country implemented a system process of arabization, a process in which the people of southern Sudan struggled against for decades. At that time, it seemed as the most effective response to the oppressive system was armed resistance.

Over many decades there have been peace negotiations between the government and the people from the southern part of Sudan. Between 1972 and 1975, negotiations with Government of Sudan (GOS), specifically the National Congress Party comprised of the dominant Islamic Arab elites, resulted in signing of the first Peace Agreement between the SPLA/M and the government. In addition, prior and during the struggle for independence there was intra-region, inter-tribe struggle for natural resources, such as land. ‘The north-south war was just one part of a broader web of conflicts involving competing claims by various, shifting groups to land, water, natural resources, political power or cultural identity.’ As with many liberation movements around the world, the national government exploited these tribal divisions. Specifically, the National Islamic Front who seized power in 1989, “escalated policy of instigating massive south on-south killing used tactics such as offering dissident Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) commanders weapons, payments, and imprimatur through promises of direct negotiations.” These actions would fester post-independence. And not unlike many places in Africa, this intra-tribal conflict that continued to be stoked by the government was strategic, because while those in the southern region were focused on fighting each other, this paved the way for the national government to grant oil concessions in rebel territories to foreign companies to build a pipeline. In 1978, oil was discovered in the southern and border regions of the countries, and by 1999 the country was exporting oil from the region.

The violence in the south became more deadly as “modern weapons turned cattle raiding into deadly assaults, targeting even women, children, and the sick and elderly. The southern Sudan NGO, New Council of Churches (NSCC) decided to organize a peace conference, and they coordinated their efforts with another Sudanese entity, the Sudan Ecumenical Forum. This forum was connected to the international organization, World Council of Churches, which subsequently was able garner support for the peace process from several influential governments including many in Europe, along with Canada, and the United States.
However, in concert with these negotiations, there were countries interested in derailing the peace process. They included Iran, Iraq, at times Libya and Egypt, along with China who was primarily focused on economic interests of the oil located in the southern region of the land. Together they played the adversarial role of keeping the focus of the issues for peace distracted by the many attacks and other efforts to derail the peace process.

After many years of struggle and battles, loss of lives, and livelihood, negotiations were resumed. However they only involved representatives from the SPLA/M and the National Congress Party. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) which consists of member states from Eastern Africa supported the peace and reconciliation process in the early to mid-90s. They provided a forum and a Declaration of Principles\textsuperscript{xi} that both the GOS and the SPLA/M could accept, which addressed “critical issues of the state and religion and self-determination.” However, by the 1998 attention shifted as Ethiopia and Eritrea broke out into their own war. As result, a \textit{Troika} made up of the United States, Britain, and Norway, and later Italy, stepped into the peace process and continued through the declaration of the new state of South Sudan. The troika continued to include the African states from the IGAD and their process, however, the process also continued to lack transparency and neglected to address the issues of social inequality and human rights.

Although the intra-southern violence ended the feelings of distrust did not surpass, and many groups of people continued to feel slighted as the SPLA/M moved forward in the peace process with the Government of Sudan. For example, in 1997, the Khartoum Peace Agreement, which established the Wealth Sharing Protocol granted the southern opponents of the SPLA/M regional states that produce 40% of the oil revenue, however in the IGAD negotiations that led to independence they were granted only 2%.\textsuperscript{xii} In the end, the wealth was primarily shared between the Government of Sudan and the SPLA/M, who would become the Government of South Sudan.

The ultimate goal is peace, and if peace means the absence of war, then peace was achieved. The international community rendered significant influence with the enforcement of sanctions against the Government of Sudan, which ultimately led to South Sudan’s independence. However, if peace means justice, for war crimes and other aspects of the long war and the peace process, then peace was not achieved, and possibly may be the reason, in part, for the return and escalation of the South Sudanese civil war, post-independence.

The diagrams below represent two scenarios. Diagram 4 illustrates a field in which international interests and foreign stakeholders influence the decisions of the Government of Sudan and the SPLA/M, while the voices and representation from other tribes and civil society remain marginalized. Diagram 5 represents a more ideal field needed to move the current conflict in South Sudan towards political transformation and sustainable peace.
Diagram 4: Post-South Sudanese Independence

Diagram 5: Pre-South Sudanese Independence
**Bolivia**

Bolivia is a country located in central South America. A country was colonized by the Spaniards with the Spanish as its official language, it is bordered by Peru, Chile, Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil. Most people have some indigenous ancestry and nearly 62 percent of the Bolivian population are native speakers of an indigenous language. Since the early part of the 20th Century, Bolivia has had strong civil society beginning with the unions in the 1930s. Many of these unions represented miners and factory workers. It was these unions that secured the revolution of 1952 and governed the country the first few years after independence. Because of this history, the union form of organization was preferred to that of the political party. The union form of government was perceived to be more equitable, benefitting peasant farmers, known as campesinos who were primarily indigenous, with land redistribution. However, Bolivia has a long history of oppressing the voices of the indigenous population and implementing neo-liberal policies that were counter to many cultural values. By the 1970s the indigenous movement grew, and student began to demand rights. Specifically, they demanded bilingual education and multiculturalism, and emphasized that they were oppressed by class and race, since they were not represented by unions. As the indigenous movement grew through the farmer union, its voice became amplified with that of the other labor unions that to support an anti-imperialist agenda in solidarity with the coca farmer.

Since the policies addressing racism in the country neglected to solve the problem of poverty that was prevalent among the indigenous population, this created an opportunity for cocalero leader, Evo Morales and his organization MAS to take the lead in addressing this concern. Initially formed as the MAS-IPSP, as part of the Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples, and was not be considered a traditional party, but a political instrument of the social movements that form its eclectic base which includes: “campesinos, the landless movement, leftist lawyers, women’s groups, some lowland indigenous leaders...MAS does not have a defined ideological base, but a tactical flexibility, extra-political sources of legitimacy, successful cross-sector alliances, emphasis on ‘works’ over ‘ideas,’ and the use of Andean cultural frames.” According to Garcia and Linera (2004) this movement maintains its power through a moral authority and participant commitment to the cause. Evo Morales, through MAS and its ongoing coalition of trade unions, farmers, and indigenous populations, became the first indigenous President of Bolivia.

In 2005, Morales ran on a campaign slogan of “Somos pueblo, somos MAS” (We are the people, we are MAS [or more]). His platform addressed three primary components: 1) social inclusion by promising that the Bolivian state would be represented of the indigenous population 2) national sovereignty/dignity through the rejection of neoliberal capitalism; and 3) economic restructuring by reversing any neoliberal policies that had hurt the Bolivian economy. President Morales’ platform has been referred to as indigenous nationalism. In 2009, every indigenous language from the country—current and extinct—became an official language.
The diagram below reflects the field of the MAS administration that is responsive to civil society at its core. However, although the once marginalized indigenous population is influential in the field, the Aymara are the most influential and represented. In addition, as a result of power shifting to benefitting the indigenous, there has been a growth in anger among the white-mestizo business class that now view themselves as marginalized with demands of regional autonomy, and youth from this group have perpetrated sporadic attacks on Andean migrants.\textsuperscript{xx}

\textbf{Thailand}

Similar to the Government of Sudan, the Government of Thailand sought a united country, under one language, and for some, one religion as well. Like many countries, the region of Thailand’s Deep South was annexed in the early twentieth century. In an effort to create a unified country, the government of Thailand instituted national policies of forced assimilation, especially regarding areas of cultural identity such as language and religion.

For several decades after the forced annexation, there were political uprisings and struggles for liberation against the Siamese rule. During much of this period there were government-led forced assimilation policies “that adversely affected all facets of Muslim identity and ethnicity, including matters of attire, bureaucratic administration, education, judicial settlements and
During that period the region saw an emergence of Muslim separatist organizations with differing political agendas. Since then the region continued to experience some level of armed struggle. The Thai government did make some attempts at integrating the religion of Islam into the Thai administrative structures through provincial Islamic councils. However, the Malay-Pattani did not see themselves adequately represented through this institution. In 2004, the violence took on a new dimension in how it was deployed through a decentralized process in 2004 in response to the regime at that time which included the burning of schools and bomb attacks resulting an martial law being imposed in the region.

In recent years the government attempted peace talks with individual groups. In 2015, five liberation groups formed MARA Patani as a vehicle for negotiations with the Thai government. Many conflicts can be averted or solved by promoting an inclusive society; one that lifts up the voices of the marginalized and empowers them with the tools to flourish. Oftentimes conflicts foment and erupt as a result of specific populations experiencing social marginalization and political exclusion. Although most people who are socially marginalized do not perpetrate violent acts against humanity; for those who do, being excluded from the political process and/or relegated to the margins of society are cited as factors that influence the decisions of those who take that route.

To be socially marginalized means that a particular group does not have equal access to the same rights and privileges afforded to others in a society. It often means having fewer opportunities for economic advancement, and being socially stratified across other determinants that affect the quality of life, such as educational attainment, housing, police harassment, and lack of employment. In addition, groups of people who tend to be socially marginalized are often also under-represented in the political arena, and in the process of developing policies to improve their socio-economic conditions. Researchers have claimed that in the case of Thailand the Malay-Muslim and Malay-Pattani populations’ conflict is one of “ethno-political legitimacy” and at times political will and lack of inclusivity have hampered the transformation to sustainable peace in Thailand’s Deep South.

In every conflict there are opportunities that can pave the way towards a resolution. As in many countries with internal conflicts, they are often the result of the unequal distribution of national wealth and resources. The consequence of development and economic investment occurring only in certain regions or benefitting specific populations perpetuate conflict. Critical to sustainable solutions is the inclusion of marginalized voices, and strategies and examples are unique to the location as each country or region experiences different challenges, while support systems vary. Many governments struggle with engaging marginalized communities in meaningful ways. For example, in some countries where Muslims are a religious minority, they are under constant surveillance as a community because of violent activities perpetrated by a criminal minority groups within the country or in other parts of the world. The importance of not placing an entire demographic under scrutiny or surveillance cannot be overstated. When this happens, an intense effort
in mutual engagement and trust-building between the government and target population needs to occur. And when this occurs, minority groups still may ask, “Can I trust the government or its representatives of having mutual respect and understanding, as we seek the common goal of reducing conflict and increase peace-building in our country?”

It is imperative that increasing opportunities for social and political inclusion of marginalized populations should be included in any plan for sustainable political transformation. However, decision makers will need to be mindful that this process will take some time as trust will need to be built between the excluded group(s) and the existing power structure. There needs to be a concerted effort to build trust with the national and local security entities and enhance partnership with the government, civil society, and private sector. It is also necessary to avoid often counter-productive approaches such as collective blame, and punishment, and ongoing profiling.

The following are other examples from civil society organizations that reduce social marginalization and increase political inclusion.

According to Rupprecht (2014)

In Patani, for example, the centralized apparatus of Thai bureaucracy has brought about major political grievances for the local Muslims as they feel misunderstood and discriminated against by non-local Thai government officials who do not speak their language and originate from a different religious and cultural background. xxvii

Therefore, opportunities for shared understanding must be facilitated. Interfaith dialogue and action are beneficial promoting sustainable peace when religion may be a factor in the conflict. Celebrating a shared humanity will create allies who will support more inclusive programs and policies.

**Reducing Social Marginalization: Inner-City Muslim Action Network**

The Inner-City Muslim Action Networkxxviii located in the United States facilitates interfaith interaction in a “non-interfaith” environment through the organization’s CommUNITY Cafés and Takin It to the Streets: Urban International Festivals. IMAN’s CommUNITY Cafés are one of the few Muslim-led efforts in the United States that provide a space for people to collectively celebrate and engage in diverse and creative artistic expression.

Rupprecht (2014) further stated,

Efforts to install a more representative bureaucracy have failed because Patani-Malays that entered government service adapted to the bureaucratic culture and were often seen as “traitors” by their own communities.”xxix

**Increasing Political Inclusion: Muslim Public Affairs Council**
An organization that promotes political inclusion of American Muslims in the United States is the Muslim Public Affairs Council whose mission is to “improve public understanding and policies that impact American Muslims by engaging our government, media and communities” established the Congressional Leadership Development Program, a fellowship program that places interns on Capitol Hill in the office of a member of Congress, where they learn to “…have access to mentors, a hands-on learning environment, and tap into a network of industry leaders who shape policy in our nation’s capitol.

Finally, it is important to stress that policy makers and law enforcement must ensure that efforts in peace-building and political transformation do not perpetuate a system of demonization or negative attitudes towards an entire group of people because a few members have committed acts of violence. The most sustainable methods in peaceful, political transformation are indirect, community-based, and community-driven. Grassroots partnerships between law enforcement and local communities are necessary in any initiative to support peace-building from a period of violent conflict. For example, recent changes to increase military authority in the southern region of Thailand could be an opportunity for civil society organizations to increase communication with the government, so that initiatives that seek to halt violence do not increase oppression.

**Sustainable Peaceful Transformation Field**

*All of the factors in the orbit have a direct impact on the goal of sustainable peaceful transformation.*
Areas for Further Research

Areas for ongoing research in the region include:

1. Ongoing assessment of the new security initiative.

2. Research and technical assistance to support further social inclusion of the Malay Pattani in all areas of society.

3. Continue to explore and expand examples of indigenous religious pluralism, such as those documented in the Songkhla Lake region in Thailand.

Endnotes


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