CONDUCIVE SPACE FOR PEACE

Lessons Learned from the Conducive Space for Peace Incubator
– June 2017 to January 2019

CONDUCIVE SPACE · FOR PEACE

HUMANITY UNITED

ReosPartners

OXFAM IBIS

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED SINCE 2016

1. INTRODUCTION

This analytical note summarises the lessons learned by the team behind the Conducive Space for Peace (CSP) initiative during its 'incubator phase', from June 2017 to January 2019.

CSP was founded in 2016. From mid-2017, CSP was implemented as a strategic collaboration between Oxfam IBIS, Humanity United, and Reos Partners. In 2019, it was re-established as an independent organisation, based in Denmark, but with an international scope and agenda.

CSP explores how to effectively promote sustainable peace and bring about institutional change in the international system of peacebuilding support. Our focus is on developing and supporting new and innovative ways of collaboration among stakeholders in peacebuilding at country level. Local agency and power in peacebuilding must be shifted from policy changes and rhetoric to new ways of working.

The mission of CSP is to transform the international system of support to peacebuilding in a manner that puts local agency and power in peacebuilding first, and changes the institutional structures, the norms and attitudes, and the practices and processes of collaboration between international and local actors working to promote sustainable peace at country level.

Since 2016, the team behind CSP has

1) *conducted broad consultations with key stakeholders at country level, including several countries in West Africa, and at UN and INGO headquarter level,*

2) *convened collaborative learning and action workshops in Senegal, Geneva and Copenhagen with UN Peace and Development Advisers, multi-stakeholder teams from Syria, South Sudan, Mali, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and leaders from the peacebuilding community, and*

3) *facilitated strategic thinking and learning on how to transform the international system of support to peacebuilding.*

The following synthesis is a summarised version of the lessons learned during the CSP incubator on the challenges we are trying to address, the scope for systems change, and the approaches that are likely to be conducive for change. The synthesis is based on 43 learning documents generated throughout the incubator. Below you will find a summary of lessons learned, a compilation of proposed implications of the learnings, and finally a section of reflections that have been sparked by the learning process.

2. SUMMARY OF LEARNING

2.1. GREATER MOMENTUM FOR CHANGE

There is greater momentum for change now than in 2016, and the importance of a change agenda that is focused on systemic transformation and holds local agency and power at the centre is well recognised among peacebuilding organisations, local partners, UN staff, reform agents, and others. However, there are few organisations other than CSP and Humanity United within the peacebuilding field which pursue this change agenda directly. Some specific change efforts currently undertaken by like-minded organisations are mainly generating best practices within single-mechanism or single-country engagement, and these are often recognised (by themselves) as not leading to broader systemic change.

Some of the reasons why this is a difficult change agenda include the following:

Most organisations that may raise this agenda are themselves part of the system and are dependent on funding from this system in order to do the work they are doing.

The fact that there is an issue of violation of dignity by the international system in relation to local actors at the core of the systemic challenges is a taboo within the system itself and makes it difficult to talk about.

The right-wing nationalist movements in Western European countries and in the US are increasingly challenging international co-operation and the multilateral institutions – the CSP agenda risks feeding into this movement and instead of strengthening the system, it can contribute to breaking it.

And finally, the systemic challenges have a very complex nature, and it is challenging for anyone working in peacebuilding and beyond to grasp to full complexity of the systems dynamics and identify leverage points to address the challenges systemically.

2.2. A NEW GEOPOLITICAL ERA

We are entering into a new geopolitical era, which will have significant implications for global conflict patterns, as well as global collaboration on peacebuilding. Current agreements that underlie the international system of support to peacebuilding and development are being questioned and renegotiated.

Understanding the different scenarios for geopolitical change and their implications for local ownership and collaboration on peacebuilding at country level will be important for any change strategy. We know that transformation of the system is forthcoming, and our agenda will be to influence the change process so it will lead to a paradigm shift in global collaboration on peacebuilding that puts local agency and power first.

The 'closing space' scenario of national governments inducing increasing restrictions on civil society to play a role in peacebuilding and human rights, has a real impact on the avenues one can take today to enhance local ownership in peacebuilding as opposed to 10 years ago. The space for horizontal work within civil society and local communities is being increasingly disconnected from the national peacebuilding agenda, and since vertical relations are challenged, the important role of civil society in addressing structural causes of conflict diminishes.

2.3. CHALLENGES FOR INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

The challenges for international support to peacebuilding in countries affected by violent conflict play out through funding mechanisms, programming procedures and collaboration structures embedded in deep-rooted power imbalances. They are rooted in complex systemic dynamics, from the level of national donor constituencies, to accountability systems and bureaucratic procedures, human resource management, and concrete diplomatic or technical engagement at country level, as well as short-term priorities often defined by political cycles of donors and not grounded in or guided by the local context. Change processes must build on complex understandings that may be subject to change as the foundations and legitimacy of democracy in the West are increasingly challenged.

Adding to the complexity is the inter-relationship between norms, structures and processes: even significant structural and procedural changes will only be meaningful if accompanied by new mental models.

The localisation agenda in the humanitarian sector is gaining ground, and the humani-tarian-development-peace nexus discussions create a more conducive space for cross-fertilisation between these different but related and some-times complementary fields.

2.4. TYPES OF EFFORTS

There are three overall types of efforts that try to facilitate the type of change that CSP focuses on: One type focuses on empowering civil society to take leadership in peacebuilding and engage effectively with the international system to get the support they need; another type focuses on transforming the international system in order to support local peacebuilding more effectively; and a third type focuses on the space for collaboration between international and local actors in peacebuilding.

CSP believes it can contribute to filling a particular gap on the second type of engagement, but also on promoting the systemic change potential of the two other types, and of promoting comple-mentarity in leveraging the potential for change of all types of systemic change efforts.

Existing change processes, including within the UN system can be an entry point for pursuing the CSP agenda. However, it can also be an obstacle as many people within the international system are stretched extensively to deliver on the day-to-day tasks in a context of diminishing funds and have limited (human) resources for engaging in additional (layers of) change agendas, however important they may be.

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR LONGER-TERM CSP ENGAGEMENT

3.1. WHO TO WORK WITH?

Facilitating the kind of change that CSP envisions requires a multi-track process, engagement with multiple sets of actors and networks, complementary entry points, and strategic sequencing.

In order to facilitate systemic change, CSP must work with people in positions inside the 'international system'. This means working alongside and accompanying 'insiders' – decision-makers, peacebuilding experts, reform people, 'internal co-conspirators'. CSP must engage with them in different ways depending on their role as change makers, and their position, power, interest and willingness to share knowledge and invest political capital.

CSP will facilitate change both through country-level engagement and through engagement at HQ level – and will link the two levels in strategically clever ways.

3.2. STRATEGIC ACTION FOR CHANGE

Local actors are at the centre of our agenda for change, but they are not necessarily the primary stakeholder group spear-heading the change agenda. We wish the international system to change in order to create a different space for local actors. We need to think more about how to engage local actors in the change process, but it must be in a way that makes sense for them. The incubator learnings have provided some critical insights.

CSP will apply a 'critical yeast' approach to strategic action for change. This means that the effort will not necessarily be about mobilising a movement with a high number of people who seek change – it means mobilising the right people in the right way and supporting their action for change and the strategic linkages between different actors and sets of actors (and institutions).

CSP will work as a connector/catalyst and in the IN-BETWEEN space, connecting the dots in strategi-cally clever ways that provide more value for each of the dots as well as the broader change process; with the dots being both change agents (individual and institutional), networks/platforms and different types of change efforts.

CSP will facilitate spaces for engagement and critical dialogue on change, accompany change makers and change processes, and provide a consistent voice on the type of change we envision.

3.3. WAYS OF WORKING

CSP will have a strong focus on processes and ways of engaging, recognising that results/change often are embedded in the process and that in order to change the way of working, our initiative must embody this way of working.

CSP will help develop appropriate (technical) solutions to supporting communication, sharing, networking in order to build momentum for change, enhance sharing of best practices for facilitating change, and mobilising for joint action.

CSP will work in an evidence-based manner, facilitating the development of new evidence when this is needed to create momentum for change or as a basis for reflecting on concrete action for change. Often the task will not be to develop new evidence, but to synthesise existing evidence and present it to the right people, in the right way, and at the right time.

3.4. COMMITMENT TO STAY ENGAGED

CSP will be less concerned with improving the already strong policy framework and rhetoric on sustainable peace and local ownership – and will be more focused on moving from policy to practice.

CSP will be propositional and action-oriented but will do so with great patience and a commitment to stay engaged as change takes time.

Since our main focus is on working for systemic transformation (addressing the challenges of the system in supporting local agency and power in PB), our legitimacy as a partner and convener in the change process will rely on CSP being recognised as a strong advocate for local ownership (and believer in the agency and power of local actors as the core of peace-building), a proponent of international collaboration, and a supporter of effective international institutions in the process.

All our communication should be seen as part of our influencing strategy, encouraging the people we need to engage in the change process to work with us for change. If our narrative is mainly about flaws of the system, this is likely to create a situation that may in the short term create positive reactions from people who already recognise the challenges (and thus feel less alone with this realisation) but in the medium to longer-term may create resistance both from decision-makers inside the system and feed critics outside the system with ammunition to 'break' the system. Thus, we will need to develop a strong communication strategy at the outset of the initiative.

It will be important for the organisation and broader institutional set-up pursuing this change agenda to embody the global balance and type of collaboration that we are trying to promote. This has implications for the composition of staff, the location of staff/network members/partners, and the approach to internal and external collaboration.

4. THE POLARITIES EMBEDDED IN OUR ENGAGEMENT

4.1. DIFFERENT WAYS OF CHANGING THE SYSTEM

There are several polarities embedded in the work of CSP. We want to facilitate systemic transformation of the international system of support to peacebuilding, and whether we do it by engaging with the system and facilitating changes from within, or we engage with external actors to support their efforts to change the system from the outside, or develop an alternative to the existing system, we will encounter these polarities.

If we consider a continuum of different ways of changing the international system, we may use terms such as adjust, adapt, reform, transform, reconstruct, disrupt or break. All of these terms imply different approaches to change. While we may engage in all of these approaches, except (deliberately) breaking the system, as part of the overall strategy for change, we will centre around notions of adapting, reforming, transforming, and disrupting when working with the system, and transforming, disrupting, and reconstructing when working with external actors to pursue change of the international system (and constructing alternative approaches). All approaches require developing a momentum for change by realising that change is needed and that new ways of working are possible.

4.2. CHANGES FROM WITHIN

We can support change from within the system, in which case we are likely to be most successful in a non-confrontational and non-disruptive approach linking change initiatives into existing structures and reform processes, identifying the spaces for change and building on that when accompanying change agents and convincing decision-makers to embark on radical change efforts.

On the other hand, if we remain non-disruptive and non-confrontational, we are not likely to create sufficient motivation and momentum for

change – because systems are rigid and tend to perpetuate a power balance and hierarchical inertia. Disruption, even if pursued as internal and through internal channels, is likely to be seen as an externally led effort that is inherently against the international multilateral system or seen as a misguided effort that fuels external forces currently building up against the international order and multilateralism.

Supporting change from within the system holds the risk of being slow. It also challenges CSP's way of 'walking the talk' and doing things differently – as ways of working that are 'understandable' in terms of process and discourse are likely to have most effect. It is our firm belief that if we are not able to 'walk the talk' and create different spaces for collaboration and have a different kind of dialogue about the challenges and the ways forward, we will not be able to facilitate systemic transformation in line with the values and understandings embedded in CSP.

Participants in two workshops held by CSP, one in Senegal with participation of among others country-based UN Peace and Development Advisers and one in Geneva with five multi-level country teams, recognised the importance of a different kind of dialogue process to create space for the necessary exploration, sharing and impetus for change. Other previous experiences show that 'insider' participants in highly process-oriented and exploratory 'retreats' may be resistant to constructive participation, may choose not to participate in subsequent 'events', and/or may have difficulties translating the learnings to their every-day reality.

We must recognise that CSP swims against the tide when it comes to sustaining their enthusiasm and ability to engage in such initiatives in the face of organisational and bureaucratic realities of time constraints, lack of flexibility, rigid decision-making procedures, etc.

4.3. CHANGE FROM THE OUTSIDE

We can also support change processes from the outside of the system of international support, and this implies holding other (but inter-linked) polarities. Change initiatives that focus on disrupting the system from the outside such as developing evidence for the systemic challenges and publicising this broadly, for example the time peacebuilders spend on report writing as opposed to actual peacebuilding work, or evidence on the 'violation of dignity' taking place within the system and its consequences. Such activities would be in line with the inherent values and aims of CSP, however, it may risk either creating a disruption that will break the system or may have no impact at all due to embedded power inequalities and rigidity of the system.

Also, the fact that the international multilateral system is currently under pressure from right wing critics among donor country politicians and constituencies results in less openness to talk about failures and more aversion to change, beyond what is already set in motion by internal decision makers.

If our narrative is mainly about flaws of the system, this is likely to create a situation that may in the short term create positive reactions from people who already recognise the challenges (and thus feel less alone with this realisation), but in the medium to longer-term may create resistance both from decision-makers inside the system and feed critics outside the system with ammunition to 'break' the system.

4.4. WHO IS INSIDE AND WHO IS OUTSIDE?

At the core of our understanding of our role in the systemic change process that we pursue is who is inside and who is outside the system. even more importantly: are we, the CSP team, in essence 'insiders' or 'outsiders' to the system and the change process we intend to create? Is the 'we', who have set out to change the system, part of the international system, or does the 'we' connotate both an inside and an outside of the international system?

Can we both consider ourselves part of the inside and the outside and as an 'in-between', a critical yeast in its most distilled version? If we will indeed understand ourselves as the 'in-between' and critical yeast for systemic change on collaboration on peacebuilding, what implications does this have for how we stand – and strategize – in this space?

These are questions that we keep in mind throughout our engagement and continue to learn and develop our understanding on.

CSP engagement holds an inherent polarity in its use of language; recognising on the one hand the need to speak and 'walk' the 'language' and cultural practices of the system to facilitate change and on the other hand recognising a need to change the 'vocabulary' and process of engagement in order to change the terms of the dialogue and facilitate the kind of understanding that will elicit change. How we choose to hold this polarity, has broad implications for how we organise ourselves and design our approach, and it has very concrete and hands-on implications for how we conduct a workshop and host a meeting.

5. QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

5.1. NORMATIVE VS/AND STRUCTURAL CHANGE

To what degree do we focus our efforts on promoting normative changes versus structural/procedural/technical changes – and if/when pursuing both paths, how do we ensure strategic complementarity? What is the role of concrete changes in practices by insiders in facilitating both normative and structural changes – and how can CSP build on this possible change potential? How do we consider the notions of power inequality and violation of dignity as elements that can be used to facilitate normative change - referring here to violation of dignity on the one hand of local actors (violated by the international system/actors) and on the other hand of international actors within the system being compromised by the way the system/procedures force them to act in contradiction to their values and convictions?

5.2. APPROACHES TO CHANGE

What do we know or think will make the 'international system' receptive to change? To what degree will disruption be conducive for change, for example in the form of mobilising external 'voices' to develop a more 'dignified' form of engagement/collaboration? To what degree do we need to accompany and work together with internal change agents in order to facilitate change? What 'services' could CSP provide to multilaterals/bilaterals/INGOs to help the system change itself?

5.3. CONVENING/COALITION BUILDING

What do we see as the role of the international PB INGOs, including those forming part of the +Peace Coalition, in facilitating the change proposed by CSP? What is the potential limitation of their role as allies in so far as they are also stakeholders within the existing system? What is the role of local actors? How can the different stakeholder groups best be mobilised for facilitating change by a catalytic actor like CSP? What could CSP's role be in leading and supporting convening on these issues?

5.4. INSTITUTIONAL SET-UP AND ORGANISATIONAL DESIGN

What will it require of the institutional set-up to be 'fit for purpose' for this change agenda and for the organisational structure of CSP to be a legitimate catalyst? And how does the structure reflect the specific conditions present at the moment in which it has been created?