

The (Not So) New Challenge of Responding to Armed Social Violence with Peacebuilding

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Content

1	Introduction	2
2	Remembering our history: know where we stand and stand there	2
3	Working across professional sectors to prevent armed violence	4
3.1	A lot to learn from each other: policy responses to armed social violence and conventional organised violence	4
3.2	Hybrid violences: overcoming oversimplified distinctions and tactics	5
3.3	Peacebuilding through a criminal justice lens: preventing the criminalisation of engagement	6
3.4	Strengthening inter-sectoral collaborations to prevent armed violence	7
4	In conclusion	7
5	References	8

1 Introduction

Reading the excellent article by Bernardo Arévalo de León and Ana Glenda Tager on armed social violence felt like a long walk in the mountains: challenging, invigorating – and definitely worth the effort. The three strands entwined in their rigorous discourse assert that armed social violence (including criminal and inter-communal violence) is a phenomenon distinct from conventional armed violence and different again from individual and terrorist violence – although they choose not to say much about these latter spheres. The second strand in their argument is that our developing field of peacebuilding has relevant experiences to offer to complement traditional criminal justice responses. Then they move to a call for a different strategic, systemic and operational response, one that fundamentally engages with the complex natures of social and conventional armed conflicts.

As an old timer with over twenty years of experience in the relatively new professional field of peacebuilding, I commend the authors for helping to bring to our sector more considered attention of such innovative practice. I agree with their main arguments; however, I question the premise of the relative “newness” of such engagement for the field. Both endogenous and international organisations focusing on preventing, ending and resolving violent conflicts have always been faced with complexities. The multiple and overlapping domains of violent conflict have long posed response and mandate challenges. How to better meet these challenges is indeed the prime operational task ahead.

In the next section of this response paper, I look back and test the assumption that the field did not engage with (or even actively avoided) these other overlapping spheres of violence, including the inter-communal and criminal. Then, in Section 3, I look forward and explore the outstanding challenges of working across our sectoral and professional boundaries. This involves, firstly, bridging security and peacebuilding actions as well as aligning international and domestic approaches into more coherent and deliberate responses to conflict. I will touch on just how overlapping the various types of armed violence – and the responses to them – are, cautioning against oversimplified distinctions and tactics. I will explore, thirdly, how we need to counter the inadvertent criminalisation of engaging with both criminal and conventional armed groups to prevent violence. I conclude with some reflections on how we can rise to the challenge of more inter-sectoral collaboration, learning and exchange in practice.

2 Remembering our history: know where we stand and stand there

Arévalo de León and Tager are quite right in saying that the peacebuilding community has historically sought to focus on responding to organised armed conflicts, paying particular attention to political violence and civil wars. In seeking to maintain that clarity of mission and mandate, sustained internal debates have taken place within every peacebuilding organisation about what should, and should not, fall within our remit – as Daniel Berrigan (1970) famously said: “Know where we stand and stand there.”¹ But it is not entirely correct to say that “it is only recently that the peacebuilding community has started engaging with issues of armed social violence such as organised crime or urban violence” (Arévalo de León/Tager 2016, 17).

¹ This was reportedly all of Daniel Berrigan’s commencement speech at Xavier High School, New York City. See “Pax Christi pays tribute to Berrigan in NY”, National Catholic Reporter, 20 February 2012 (<https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/pax-christi-pays-tribute-berrigan-ny>).

Here are some counter-examples: I began my work in this sector with International Alert (IA) in its first year in 1989. A focus on ending and preventing armed inter-communal violence was right at the heart of the organisation's new mandate. Its conceptual roots lay in defending human rights and preventing mass violence and genocide. "Ethnic violence" was the language we used, and we pursued programmes where the distinctions between armed conventional and social violence were blurred. Civilians were not bystanders but targets of organised violence. It was a very creative time for a growing international NGO in an emerging field.

One of our first pilot projects was working in Europe on the growing problem of racist armed violence (knives were the weapons of choice). We worked with anti-racist, black and migrant groups, promoting coordination of efforts within the EU, and encouraging international learning and exchange with other contexts, including South Africa and Sri Lanka, which were also responding to their own inter-group violence. The idea was that this comparative learning from the Global South would inform and inspire policy-makers and activists seeking to prevent the rise of this kind of organised violence. The project supported the launch of a new European Black and Ethnic Minority Consultative Forum (Smith 1992).

We also worked in contexts such as Sierra Leone where the typologies of criminal, liberation and military violence were all eroded and where the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the government-sponsored "sobels" (combatants who were paid soldiers by day and "rebels" after hours) were looting, abducting, raping and illegally mining – all examples of the multiple dimensions of their violence. Ten years later, the West Africa team at International Alert was engaged in negotiating the release of British hostages captured by the RUF in Sierra Leone. While successful, it was to prove a highly controversial intervention, with allegations that it was pursued in competition with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and may have unnecessarily prolonged the hostages' detention (Sørbo 1997, 58-59). But it was the relations developed in preparing the Lomé Agreement peace talks that enabled this role to be played (and vice versa). As these examples demonstrate, back then the armed social and the armed conventional conflict spheres were already as entwined as were IA's peacebuilding responses.

When we were first setting up Conciliation Resources in 1994, our Chairman made a strong case that the role of hostage negotiators fell outside the competencies of a conflict resolution organisation and that we should leave calls for support in other contexts involving hostages to other professionals. While he was certainly correct about the skills of our team, there was no clear separation of competencies and in fact some of the world's most successful mediators learned their trade in training for hostage negotiations. Organisational mandates in our field have always been developing, and some have morphed significantly over time, but there is still a dominant organisational discourse that "we don't do crime", and "we can't touch terrorism". As Arévalo de León and Tager show, such borders are being breached (from both sides), and perhaps there were never such clear boundaries in the first place.

So I would claim that it is not correct that peacebuilding organisations working internationally have such "fixed operational frameworks" in their focus on armed conflict as to actively exclude responding to armed social violence (Arévalo de León/Tager 2016, 21). One recent example of the diversity of peacebuilding practice from Conciliation Resources is their work with the Centre for Peace Advancement in Nigeria (CEPAN) in the central Nigerian city of Jos with young gang members on drug abuse, militancy and inter-religious tensions through the Youth Platforms for Peace project (see Box 1).

Box 1: CEPAN's work on preventing youth violence in Plateau State, Nigeria

The city of Jos in the central belt of Nigeria has been the site of deep sectarian tensions, both Christian-Muslim and Berom-Fulani. These have been exacerbated by problems with youth gang violence, drug abuse, high levels of unemployment and radicalism. Since 2001, as many as 7,000 people have been killed.

CEPAN, with support from Conciliation Resources, has been running a community-based initiative called Youth Platforms for Peace since 2012. This initiative works with youth leaders, including gang and ex-gang members in "flashpoint communities" at particular risk of violence. CEPAN supports them

in developing their dialogue and advocacy skills, in order to enable them to raise their concerns with local officials, the police and army.

For more information see *Conciliation Resources 2015, 11* and <https://www.insightonconflict.org/conflicts/nigeria/peacebuilding-organisations/cepan/>.

The Centre for Conflict Resolution (CCR) in Cape Town is the NGO which, perhaps, did the most to define our peacebuilding sector and lead the way with an exceptional balance of politics, practice and research. When I had the privilege of first seeing its work in the late 1980s, South Africa was enmeshed in multiple forms of violence, and apartheid looked to be here to stay. Even then, CCR was comfortably and quite naturally working on these different types of violence “inter-sectorally” – including the “taxi wars” between armed local taxi associations and minibus drivers plaguing township communities. These were a clear and organised form of armed social violence which was, at that time, influenced by the inter-party political (and ethnic) conflict. CCR brought its dialogic skills to working with local stakeholders, successfully helping to de-escalate tensions and prevent violence. The organisation is also well-known and ground-breaking for its work in the prison system. Its innovative work for penal reform continues to this day and is a remarkable example of bringing experiences from conflict resolution, including work on dialogue and restorative justice, into the criminal justice system (Baily/Ekiyor 2006).

Arévalo de León and Tager themselves have documented Interpeace’s sustained and ground-breaking work on gang and youth violence in Latin America, and more recently the organisation has been working on a new framework for understanding and supporting resilience within communities surviving armed violence. I think, in the end, there is a strong body of evidence that this domain is not so new for the peacebuilding sector, although the authors make a powerful case that state security and criminal justice actors have yet to *take into account* what our sector can offer those working on armed social violence.

3 Working across professional sectors to prevent armed violence

While there is a longer track record of peacebuilding engagement on armed social violence than the lead authors may argue, I fully support their operational proposition that there needs to be more work across sectors and beyond professional silos. A closer look at these issues reveals areas of opportunity, gaps and pitfalls which we would do well to keep in mind.

3.1 A lot to learn from each other: policy responses to armed social violence and conventional organised violence

Internationally, and contrary to Arévalo de León and Tager’s assertion (Arévalo de León/Tager 2016, 2), armed social violence has not been largely ignored by policy makers. Quite the contrary: organised criminals have received a far greater share of collective attention from intelligence, ministries of defence and criminal justice systems than has the older generation of self-determination and liberation groups and their unresolved and ongoing conventional conflicts. This is not to say that these sectors have not also had significant contact with armed groups in conventional conflicts. (In my experience, it is not diplomats or unofficial mediators but defence attachés, intelligence officials and representatives of the criminal justice system who lead in most national and international-level engagements with armed non-state actors.) So there is a long history of

state policy-makers addressing both social and conventional armed violence. What is still underdeveloped is exchange and learning on effective and innovative methods and models between defence, intelligence and the NGO peacebuilding communities. For many, there is an active choice not to engage across these institutional divides, although this is palpably changing with the current iteration of the “global war on Islamic extremism”. The new willingness of peacebuilding NGOs to cooperate with governments in their policies and programmes aimed at “countering violent extremism” is changing the field.

We are also seeing signs of peacebuilding practice informing some domestic criminal justice policies. In the UK, the Home Office has been supporting some ground-breaking responses to preventing re-offending (UK Ministry of Justice 2014). Work such as the Circles of Support and Accountability with sex offenders (see Box 2) is squarely taking place in the context of responding to social violence, but is also informed by best restorative justice practice from the peacebuilding field.

Box 2: A restorative approach to reintegrating sex offenders

Circles of Support and Accountability is a voluntary and community-based initiative which works with sex offenders to support reintegration and thus prevent reoffending.

“Circles” in the UK was set up in 2002 by the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), a group well-known for its commitment to nonviolence and involvement in peacebuilding internationally. Circles consists of a group of local volunteers and one “high-risk” sex offender, recently released from custody. The volunteers regularly meet with the offender and offer practical support, reducing the risk of social isolation. They also keep an eye on the offender’s activities to ensure the local community is safe and that the offender follows through on participation in treatment programmes.

The Circles model is conceptually informed by restorative justice theory of change as there is a focus on the offenders’ remorse and reconciliation with the local community. The process takes around eighteen months and ends when it is jointly decided whether the offender has developed the skills and social patterns that allow them to live in the community safely.

For more information see McCartan/Kemshall 2014.

Nevertheless, international peacebuilding practice and research are still worlds apart from national policy responses to preventing violent behaviour in the UK, although they have a great deal to learn from each other, especially when it comes to working with hard-to-reach and high-risk individuals and addressing the personal and external push and pull factors that draw individuals into armed violence and shape their pathways out of it.

3.2 Hybrid violences: overcoming oversimplified distinctions and tactics

The lead authors make a strong case that armed social violence is distinct from “conventional” armed conflict and that both are distinct from other forms of violence, including domestic abuse, sex offending, trafficking and terrorism – and that understanding these distinctions matters and is even essential for designing prevention and peacebuilding responses. While they challenge us to consider the spectrum of differences, the authors acknowledge that the violence that is experienced in the modern world may well have multiple or “hybrid” characteristics.

However, in their efforts to set apart armed social violence from conventional armed conflicts, they draw perhaps too disaggregated distinctions. Is it accurate to describe the phenomenon of armed social violence as (always?) “non-conflict-related” (Arévalo de León/Tager 2016, 5)? Of course it is a phenomenon that occurs in contexts that cannot be described as “in conflict”, but it also takes root in many conflict and

post-war contexts. These contexts often include former combatants on a detour from the transitional path back to a civilian life. Their links to organised armed conflict remain relevant factors in responding to these challenges.

The authors make it clear that “all instances of armed social violence are both political and systemic” (Arévalo de León/Tager 2016, 12). But if armed social violence is organised violence without an explicit political goal, often occurring in contexts without an ongoing war, this raises the question of whether it is significantly distinct from other forms of organised violence that has no clear political agenda or little connection with the original political roots that gave rise to the violence in the first place. I am thinking here of armed conflicts with groups like the Lord’s Resistance Army or perhaps Al-Qaeda. Such groups test the adequacy and imagination of the core tools and approaches of diplomacy and peacebuilding, and their behaviours belie a clear distinction between political and social or even private spheres.

The authors point out that, while conceptualisation is important, taxonomic classifications (as seen in the UN 2000 Palermo Convention), do not, in themselves, work as an effective “grand theory” (leaving aside the question of whether any grand theory would work). Given the specificity and complexity of each context, policy-makers need to remain politically engaged, adaptable and attentive to frameworks for enquiry and responses rather than looking for toolboxes and checklists promising false solutions.

3.3 Peacebuilding through a criminal justice lens: preventing the criminalisation of engagement

The authors also write that “it has always been a fundamental tenet of peacebuilding practice to engage with spoilers, but inclusive and participatory instruments developed to this end were designed for contexts in which ... open violence had ceased” (Arévalo de León/Tager 2016, 20). In my experience, many practitioners operate in contexts where violence is very much ongoing, though no organisation in the current global legal framework would be quick to admit that it is currently engaging with proscribed terrorists.

While dialogic engagements may be central to peacebuilding, in themselves they are not sufficient to end violence. In most contexts they are also fraught with risks. There is rarely a “safe” middle ground. State counter-terrorism policies have constrained peacebuilding to the point of criminalising contact and expressions of understanding. For the peacebuilding community, it is no longer enough to try to operate with discretion and navigate the legal pitfalls and the criminal consequences. It now has to engage directly with policy-makers in the criminal justice system to ensure that peacebuilding contacts with conventional and unconventional armed groups are not further criminalised. We have had some successes with these kinds of inter-sectoral dialogues in changing policy in the UK (see Box 3).

Box 3: Clarifying unconstructive legal ambiguities through inter-sectoral dialogue

Here in the UK, NGOs from the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding fields engaged in a sustained dialogue with the UK Home Office and their legal advisers. This resulted in the formalisation of the exchange and led to an important clarification of the intention of major counter-terrorism legislation as it relates to these sectors’ engagement with proscribed armed groups. For the peacebuilding sector, a significant clarification is that talking to such groups about negotiations and peacebuilding is not an illegal activity.

For more information see UK Home Office 2015.

This direct, policy-influencing engagement with governments is an important and new complementary domain for peacebuilding organisations. However, it needs to be acknowledged that many in our community of practice work uneasily alongside those seeking to resolve conflict through hard military and securitised tactics.

3.4 Strengthening inter-sectoral collaborations to prevent armed violence

The complex nature of conventional and social armed conflicts demands a deeper understanding and a response to the authors' call for more "inter-sectoral collaboration" and a "whole of society" approach. This transition will be uncomfortable and challenging and will not happen without real leadership that sees the benefits of working in this way and manages the new risks and consequences.

Not only are we as a field uncomfortable being seen as an extension of state-sponsored security responses to armed conflict, but many are also uncomfortable being seen as development actors, which are understood as not challenging the conflict's status quo (see, for example, Arévalo de León/Tager 2016, 16).

Also, and importantly, *international* diplomats, development and aid practitioners and peacebuilders need to get more comfortable with *endogenous*, or local, peacebuilders and vice versa. We need to gain new insights on the old questions of appropriate approaches for international partnerships. We need to give more consideration to power and comparative advantages. The authors state that "external actors cannot be, in essence, builders, but they can be enablers" (Arévalo de León/Tager 2016, 18). While the principle of local "ownership" is hugely important, the divisions of responsibility in successful collaborative relationships are not so black-and-white, and are more internationalised and more complicated. In my experience, when international partnerships deepen, even the most disciplined externals play primary, influential and complementary roles, inseparably entwined with endogenous or local ones. The well-documented role of the Berghof Foundation in Sri Lanka is a good example (Berghof Foundation for Conflict Studies 2008; Ropers 2011).

While we have yet to build a body of evidence on what ultimately works in influencing systemic and social conflict effectively (Cramer 2016), our collective task is to attempt to overcome those things that divide us.

4 In conclusion

In their recommendations, Arévalo de León and Tager point the way for our future. I would like to add to their excellent paper with these further recommendations:

- ≡ Policy-makers and practitioners need to find innovative and effective responses to armed conflict – not through our expertise alone, and not through a single "grand strategy", but through a commitment to embracing the diversity of stakeholders and engaging in challenging collaborations.
- ≡ For those working on organised crime and armed social violence, on domestic and sexual violence, and on inter- and intra-state conflicts, it is important to be mindful that we are all at the foothills of exchange and learning, and we will all be more effective as a result of learning from one another, particularly in clearing the pathways for those wishing to move out of violence and away from re-offending. International organisations may find that there are ample opportunities for this learning in their "home" countries too.

Finally, if we are going to find ways of pursuing a truly "whole of society" approach, we will need to better understand what it is that gets in the way of productive complementarities and continue to address them in new ways of working. Now that we are a more developed field, we need to remember our histories, and find collaborative, comprehensive and cumulative ways to prevent, end and transform armed conflicts (both conventional and social).

To put this into practice will require a new global consensus within ministries, departments and international organisations that are finding new and better ways to ensure effective complementarities so that our separate actions have real added and cumulative impacts on preventing violent behaviour.

This needs to be seen as a strategic priority for all organisations engaged in ending and preventing armed violence, social and conventional. Local groups will need to continue to wrestle with these challenges and encourage collaboration where they can. I believe the donors have a special role to embrace this strategic challenge and to pay attention to the unintended consequences of their market-based approaches, which tend to enable competition rather than collaborative learning. Donors should pay particular attention to how they can better support and enable coherent collective responses. International peacebuilding NGOs need to find ways to lead by example in close collaboration with their donors and governmental, multilateral and local partners working in “whole of society” networks.

While this represents a new level of ambition and way of working, the good news is that we will all be more effective if we can find ways to learn from one another. Discovering how to find these synergies and collective impacts to prevent and end organised violence is the next great global challenge of our time.

5 References

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