

The Value of Listening to Community Voices

A Peacebuilding Approach to Armed Social Violence

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1 Introduction

In *Armed Social Violence and Peacebuilding: Towards an operational approach*, Bernardo Arévalo de León and Ana Glenda Tager make a timely contribution to discussions on the phenomena of armed social violence. The article successfully identifies the gaps in current policy approaches to armed social violence that focus solely on the symptoms or outward manifestations, without attempting to address structural conditions that serve as fertile ground for their emergence. This lays the foundation for the article's main argument on the value of using a peacebuilding approach to study and better understand the complex dynamics of armed social violence, thereby allowing the formulation of more effective policy responses.

We respond to the lead article from the point of view of conflict transformation practitioners from the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS), a non-governmental organisation based in Siem Reap, Cambodia, which focuses on strengthening and supporting the peace processes in the Philippines and Myanmar and peacebuilding efforts in Sri Lanka. We thus operate within contexts involving state and non-state armed groups engaging or previously engaged in political conflict, and any exposure we have to armed social violence emerges from this context.

This response will briefly discuss our understanding of conflict transformation before we propose the application of Listening Methodology (LM), one of the conflict transformation tools we use at CPCS to inform our interventions in armed political conflicts. In evaluating how CPCS has used LM through the years in various violent conflict settings, we find that it intersects directly with the discussion in the lead article (Section 3.2) on the critical ways that a peacebuilding approach can improve interventions addressing armed social violence by: (a) allowing for a disaggregated understanding of the conflict dynamics and contextual variations of the violence, which lays the foundation for the formulation of more strategic/targeted policy interventions; (b) encouraging stakeholders to learn about the different perspectives of the conflict that exist, based on how these stakeholders interact with and are affected by the conflict; and (c) empowering community stakeholders by recognising the importance of their perspectives and opinions. We then go on to discuss our experience of identifying issues of armed social violence within an active political conflict situation through the use of LM.

2 Establishing commonalities between violent conflicts

A probable critique to the lead article's proposition to operationalise a peacebuilding approach to armed social violence is the issue of fit – can peacebuilding, an approach meant to address violent conflict cycles within a country between state and non-state actors generally motivated by political aims, be applied to non-conventional violence that involves quite different agents of violence with vastly different motivations and intended targets?

The article addresses this challenge by noting the blurred lines between different categories of violent phenomena, whether in the form of war, large-scale violations of human rights, organised crime, or urban violence. If only to strengthen the lead article's proposition, we would posit that the value of using a peacebuilding lens to understand all violent conflicts, including armed social violence, lies in the three main underlying assumptions this approach makes about conflict, which are as follows:

(a) conflict is a natural part of all societies and will naturally arise in the course of human interactions;

- (b) although some conflicts may resemble others, each conflict is unique and driven by different causal factors;
- (c) all conflicts are dynamic – as they go on, they evolve and change by responding to the social, political, and economic contexts within which they operate, but in the process, also affect these contexts.

Essentially, then, taking a peacebuilding approach to any conflict would require, from the start of engagement, an acknowledgement of the need to carefully study the different conflict actors, as well as the causes and factors driving a conflict, and how these elements interact with each other and the contexts within which they operate.

By recognising the complexity and nuance of each violent conflict, peacebuilding approaches can provide a conceptual and operational framework that could take into account not only the symptoms of armed social violence, but also the structural factors that lie at the heart of violent conflict. As the lead article notes, “the dialogue and research methodologies of peacebuilding allow the development of a highly granular, context-specific understanding of the social dynamics of each phenomenon and mobilise stakeholders to take collaborative and complementary action across the state-society divide” (Arévalo de León/Tager 2016, 2). Taking this approach not only helps those seeking to intervene in the conflict to better understand the complexities of armed social violence: it also identifies avenues for interventions that not only treat symptoms but also contribute to systemic change.

3 Conflict transformation: systemic change grounded in inclusivity

Taking the lead article’s proposition a step further, we would posit that not only a peacebuilding approach but more specifically a conflict transformation approach would be an innovative lens to apply. At CPCS, we have explicitly chosen to characterise our work as being in line with conflict transformation theory. We make specific reference to conflict transformation, if only to differentiate it from other approaches traditionally associated with peacebuilding, such as conflict management or conflict resolution.

From our understanding, conflict transformation views violent conflict as being caused not just by incompatible goals but by the fundamental problems of inequality and injustice, as embedded in social, cultural, and economic frameworks. It is therefore the aim of conflict transformation to prevent the physical manifestations of violence (direct violence) by addressing the underlying context and attitudes that give rise to these expressions. By promoting systemic changes that address the wider social and political contexts which serve as the breeding ground for violent conflict, conflict transformation seeks not to suppress but to transform any negative energy produced by these competing needs, interests, and motivations into positive social and political change (Fisher et al. 2000).

This requires a theory of social change that aims to alter not only the structures but also the behaviours and attitudes underlying these structures, bringing people and relationships to the fore. Interventions thus need to be formulated, keeping in mind that transforming relationships between different stakeholders are crucial. We do this by presenting the different perspectives, interests, and positions of the various stakeholders, with the overall goal of deepening understanding based on empathy.

To illustrate the merits of operationalising a peacebuilding approach to armed social violence, Arévalo de León and Tager identify two of the most prominent expressions of this phenomenon, namely, organised crime and urban violence. In the course of their discussion, they recognise that the underlying condition linked to the emergence of this phenomenon is exclusion, whether in a political, social or economic sense,

of sections of society, resulting in their marginalisation. They also note the failings of common policy approaches to armed social violence, which focus almost exclusively on development cooperation and security measures.

Similar to most peace processes, state responses to criminality and armed social violence commonly take a top-down approach, with experts and top-level government officials taking the lead in formulating policy responses. This generally means that policy discussions often fail to take into account the views, perceptions, and opinions of communities who are the most affected, not only by the consequences of armed social violence, but also by the coercive responses taken by the state in seeking to quell or suppress the violence. Despite the direct impact that national policy discussions on responses to armed social violence will have on their lives, communities often remain voiceless and their perspectives are given little consideration in these discussions.

Inclusivity and wide local ownership are necessary to ensure the effective implementation of many policy decisions, particularly where communities are not only affected by these decisions but also have the means to affect them. Where policy responses and programmes are formulated without valuable community perspectives, they generally fail to address root causes of violence, and can even exacerbate the situation by furthering the perception of social exclusion felt by groups/actors who resort to violent expression. This is particularly true in cases where the underlying issue to be resolved is based on the erosion of social cohesion. This erosion is identified in the lead article as being one of the main consequences, as well as perpetuating causes of both urban violence and organised crime. For those wanting to intervene, creating a mechanism that allows inclusive engagement of all actors in addressing armed social violence and that ensures local ownership and public support is therefore essential to sustainably reduce violence in society.

4 Listening Methodology: CPCS research methodology and intervention tool

At CPCS, we believe that listening to the diverse voices of communities and considering their experiences with violence is crucial to finding solutions to address the longstanding problems that are at the heart of political conflict. These conflicts generally develop in response to the perception that state institutions have institutionalised discrimination, leading to marginalisation of certain groups, as manifested by the effective stunting of their economic and social development. This context provides fertile ground for armed social violence, as marginalisation is one of the key elements in eroding social cohesion.

CPCS has utilised *Listening Methodology (LM)*¹ since 2009 in various violent conflict contexts across Asia in order to conduct a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the ideas and insights of people living in and affected by a particular situation. Originally starting out as a qualitative, subject-orientated research approach, LM has come to be viewed by CPCS as a conflict transformation tool in itself. We believe that such a methodology can also be a useful tool in addressing armed social violence.

¹ Listening Methodology as utilised by CPCS is derived from Collaborate for Development Action (CDA) – Collaborative Learning, which developed listening as a method of learning from communities about humanitarian aid. CDA identified the need for sharing and learning about the experiences and feedback from communities receiving humanitarian aid. As a result, CDA was able to illustrate the effect of humanitarian aid across communities in order to promote new ideas about ways of making the distribution and utilisation of humanitarian aid more effective (see CDA's Listening Program 2014).

Since the main purpose of LM is to create opportunities for individuals or groups whose voices often go unheard, we generally use it to speak with communities. One of the main challenges of eliciting information in violent conflict settings is that people are usually reluctant to share information. To address this, CPCS enlists the help of people (called “listeners”) who are from the same or similar communities, speak the same language and are familiar with any context sensitivities. As no CPCS staff are present during these conversations, listeners are able to hold conversations, not interviews, in a more relaxed environment. This, we believe, facilitates more honest and organic, unscripted exchanges.

The process of LM in communities, we have found, also creates transformational dialogue spaces. The conversations that occur between our listeners and the participants become a tool to empower communities by the mere action of asking their opinions about current situations and their thoughts on how to address the violence. It is also an occasion for people to take the time to critically reflect on their situation. Giving diverse and, at times, opposing groups or actors in a conflict setting spaces to interact and share their perceptions provides participants with opportunities to better understand each other, allowing them to think about their situation in a new light. This opens up possibilities of transforming relationships by challenging the dominant, often conflict-reinforcing, narratives, providing scope for further dialogue and collaboration.

To retain the transformative aspects of LM, CPCS has gradually set itself outside the process by recognising the critical contribution that local partner organisations make. It is through these local partners that we are able to enlist listeners, individuals from target areas who are familiar with local contexts and can conduct conversations in the local language. This, we believe, is key to facilitating trust and openness between the community members who participate in the conversations and the listeners who seek to elicit candid responses. This also guards against the research process being purely extractive, as a key element of LM is to strengthen local listeners’ capacities to engage in qualitative research and participate in the analytical processing of data.

5 Applying Listening Methodology to armed social violence contexts

In the area of armed social violence, LM can make a valuable contribution to the formulation of more effective policy responses. Because information is elicited from the actual experiences of communities living with the effects of violence and the consequences of policy interventions meant to address the violence, LM can capture multiple facets of the specific manifestations of armed social violence occurring in their area. Since this analysis is based on a bottom-up approach to understanding the conflict, different actors can use it to identify points of entry for collaborative efforts at various levels (community, state, regional, or national) and among various stakeholders such as communities, national and local civil society groups, churches, and the like.

Beyond this, the effects of LM on local stakeholders within violent conflicts also need to be acknowledged. As those primarily engaged in LM, listeners and participants are asked to engage in conversations about how violent conflict affects them and how they would propose to address the conflict. They are encouraged to reflect on their own place within the conflict. Having to engage with people who have different experiences and perceptions exposes them to new ideas and helps dispel prejudices, contributing to dialogue and understanding on both sides. In conducting LM for one CPCS publication, *Listening to Voices – Perspectives from the Tatmadaw’s Rank and File*, listeners were asked to engage with

soldiers in the Tatmadaw (the Myanmar army) and have conversations with them about their perceptions of the peace process. Most listeners reacted negatively to this as Tatmadaw soldiers are thought to regularly commit human rights abuses against civilian populations. After conducting their conversations with Tatmadaw soldiers, many listeners reported changes in their perception of the soldiers, whom they saw as being “just like us”, with similar concerns, fears, and challenges. By exposing them to the similarities in their experiences, LM had the effect of “humanising” Tatmadaw soldiers to the listeners, creating space for them to empathise.

Lastly, the recognition by community members that they have a voice and that their opinions and perspectives matter has an empowering effect by reminding them of the roles they play within conflict dynamics – that they are not merely affected by the violence but also have an effect on it.

Political conflict as fertile ground for armed social violence: Kachin State

While CPCS works primarily in politically motivated armed violence contexts, we have observed how these contexts provide fertile ground for armed social violence, such as the emergence of non-political militia or vigilante groups.

In the course of providing support to the peace process in Myanmar, we have embarked on a multi-year project to monitor the effects of the ceasefire agreements on communities.² This project was conceptualised in cooperation with local civil society organisations based in the different states/ areas in Myanmar where the research was conducted. These organisations recognised the need to strengthen inclusivity in the peace process by integrating the collective perceptions and experiences of communities in policy discussions relating to the peace process.

In the resulting publication, *We Want Genuine Peace: Voices of Communities from Myanmar's Ceasefire Areas in 2015*, one of the key findings was the alarming pervasiveness of illegal drugs in the country. Communities in all the states covered by the study spoke of the increase in the availability of illegal drugs, resulting in rising drug use and drug addiction across the country. Communities recognised the highly fluid interactions between illegal drug production and trade and the violent political conflict; in some areas, community members shared their belief that various individuals – from the state security forces (at both the national and the local levels) to government officials and members of the ethnic armed groups – were profiting from the drug trade. Notably, communities in northern Myanmar (Northern Shan State and Kachin State), which are most affected by drug addiction and where drug production and trade are believed to be most prevalent, actually considered drug eradication to be an integral component of the peace process.

With community members in Kachin State growing all the more frustrated at what they perceive to be a lack of any government measures to effectively address the drug problem, which they see destroying their families, communities, and their culture, the communities decided to organise against the production, trade, and use of drugs. This led to the formation of the *Patjasan*, a community group made up of civilians from across the state that conducts anti-drug activities such as destroying opium fields and detaining suspected drug dealers and drug users. The emergence of this group can be traced to the conditions sustained by the ongoing political conflict, which made authorities either unwilling or unable to address the problem. On their last march in Kachin State, suspected militants protecting opium producers attacked *Patjasan* members despite a police presence, leading to a number of casualties.³

² The project encompassed 772 different conversations with 1072 participants across communities from six ceasefire states in Myanmar throughout 2015. The main findings from these conversations helped to create a map of community perspectives and expectations from the Myanmar peace process, which also identified the main challenges faced by communities.

³ See: <http://www.irrawaddy.com/burma/several-anti-poppy-activists-injured-in-attack-in-waingmaw-township.html>.

If this situation is not properly addressed, we anticipate the possibility of more instances of violent expression as this conflict evolves in response to the competing demands of the communities and those involved in drug production and trade.

While most Myanmar observers are aware of extensive drug production, trade, and use in northern Myanmar, LM was able to reveal that this is not a community or state but a national problem. Furthermore, the findings from LM revealed the perception amongst communities that the increase in drug trade was an unintended consequence of the various bilateral ceasefire agreements; as these truces translated into greater freedom of movement between villages and states, it became easier to transport larger quantities of drugs throughout the country. These details add nuance to the national drug issue by revealing unknown or overlooked connections that are essential to formulating holistic and context-sensitive interventions.

As these findings have just been released, and in light of the fluidity of the newly formed Myanmar government's plans for the peace process, there has been limited scope to use the findings for advocacy efforts. The publication has been translated into Burmese and shared with local partner organisations, which are now collaborating with CPCS to design different interventions based on the information revealed by the LM research.

6 Conclusion

We believe that Listening Methodology can be a powerful tool for international as well as national actors in developing interventions to address grievances that lie at the heart of any violent conflict, whether manifesting as political or armed social violence. LM serves to remind high-level decision-makers of the importance of considering community experiences in designing effective and sustainable policy responses to these grievances.

But more than this, the value of LM lies in the act of giving communities the space to be heard and to realise that their voices are important. Given that one of the drivers of political and armed social violence is grievance, which is caused when the perception of non-inclusion and marginalisation leads to disintegration of social cohesion, providing opportunities for the voiceless to speak helps to prevent frustrations from bubbling over and exploding into violent expression.

LM also opens up avenues to reach out and engage agents of violence. This is particularly important in contexts of armed social violence, where these agents are generally not engaged with because they are not recognised as having legitimate grievances or genuine aims. LM provides the possibility of working within the in-between space to elicit the perceptions, needs, and motivations of these agents as participants in the conflict. This can potentially help to develop a holistic and highly nuanced analysis that would allow the formulation of practical rather than theoretical approaches to prevent violence.

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