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POLICY BRIEF

Assessing Civil Society Engagement with the New Deal

“The only way the New Deal can be successful on the national level is if the government fearlessly comes to sit with local communities, sit with civil society, sit with their citizens to work together. Civil society sees the New Deal as the best, most comprehensive document ever crafted by the international community to help move countries in violent conflict away from fragility.”

— Civil society representative from New Deal pilot state

The New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States (the New Deal) represents a new, multi-stakeholder approach to the problem of prolonged conflict and its impact on development. Emerging from the International Dialogue for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (IDPS) in 2011 and initiated by the g7+, a self-identified group of 19 fragile states, the New Deal establishes new partnerships between donor states, the g7+, and civil society for the purpose of creating “country-led and country-owned transitions out of fragility”.¹ This approach addresses the democratic deficit in many multilateral institutions and processes by recognizing that peacebuilding and statebuilding must be led by affected countries rather than by donor states. It also recognizes that state-led implementation is not sufficient and that building peaceful societies requires a whole of society approach.

The New Deal is unique in its recognition of civil society as a partner in strengthening state resilience and its acknowledgment of citizens as the ultimate beneficiary of peacebuilding efforts. The agreement recognizes that, “constructive state-society relations...are at the heart of successful peacebuilding and statebuilding. They are essential to deliver the New Deal”.² Civil society engagement reflects a core tenet of the New Deal.

The degree of civil society engagement in New Deal implementation varies and depends on the pace of government progress, government openness to civil society participation, and the capacity of the civil society sector itself. In pilot countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Togo, South Sudan*, Liberia, and Somalia, civil society has given input into New Deal processes either at the invitation of government or through self-driven initiatives. In other countries such as Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Burundi, and the Central African Republic, civil society engagement has been limited by the slow pace of New Deal implementation, insecure environments, and/or low government openness to civil society input.

Most civil society groups have conducted outreach to governments to encourage progress in the New Deal process and civil society's inclusion in its implementation. In some cases, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Togo, outreach has broadened government awareness of and buy-in to the process. In other states such as Sierra Leone, civil society outreach has been in the form of unanswered letters requesting greater inclusion in the process.

In spite of significant challenges to their full engagement, including limited resources and access barriers at national and international levels, civil society actors exhibit a high level of commitment to the implementation of the New Deal. They believe the principles of the New Deal are sound and unique in elevating peacebuilding, development, and government accountability onto national and international agendas.

As stakeholders, many civil society actors see the New Deal process as a “springboard” that provides an unprecedented opportunity for civil society perspectives on conflict and fragility to be heard by governments and donor states. With few exceptions, national civil society leaders believe that the success of the New Deal depends upon popular understanding and support for the principles of the New Deal that can provide the accountability needed to ensure government commitments are backed by action. They are leading voices for the fullest interpretation of the “country-led” principle of the New Deal. Civil society actors see a robust oversight function for themselves, but more importantly see their role as building public awareness and facilitating national ownership of the process.

Civil Society Contributions to New Deal Implementation

Civil society leaders have facilitated broad and in some cases national conversations within pilot states to raise awareness of the New Deal and promote its implementation. They are doing so by strengthening and mobilizing national and international cross-sector coalitions of a broad range of civil society organizations

(CSOs) to implement the New Deal. By connecting CSOs in such areas as peacebuilding, development, human rights, gender equality, and environmental protection, the New Deal process itself is deepening relationships and communication channels among actors that previously operated in silos. It has created a space for civil society to engage with their governments on highly political issues, enabling conversations that previously would have been unthinkable, and has encouraged the emergence of new and credible civil society leaders from the global South.

Through the official New Deal Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS), civil society leaders have provided key technical knowledge and advice that has been adopted into official New Deal documents. For example, at national levels, civil society representatives helped formulate and advocate for sex-disaggregated data that will allow pilot countries to track progress on key indicators for women. At the international level, civil society leaders advocated successfully for the adoption of mechanisms such as global indicators across pilot countries and perception-based indicators to ensure citizen experiences are represented when assessing country progress towards peacebuilding and statebuilding goals.

National civil society groups advocate for a robust definition of country ownership and seek to broaden awareness of and build public accountability for the New Deal's implementation. Most believe that accountability for the New Deal must come from bottom-up advocacy and an engaged citizenry, in addition to a supportive international process. Activists in pilot countries are tracking government progress on New Deal implementation and act as advocates to hold governments accountable for their New Deal commitments. They stress the importance of mutual accountability and holding donor states to their commitments as well.

Across the pilot states, civil society has sought to build political momentum on the New Deal — advocating to parliamentarians, cabinet ministers, and other government officials for its meaningful implementation. Civil society from the g7+ countries often hold themselves responsible for helping develop more positive state-society relationships that are at the heart of the New Deal. They have reached out persistently to government officials, in some cases building new state-society bridges and carving out a role for civil society in national policymaking. One Liberian representative noted that, “As a result of our [outreach] efforts, there has been a small level of improvement.” Civil society leaders are promoting a culture of inclusion, tasking themselves with strengthening state-society relationships that inform the core concepts of the New Deal.

Challenges to Engagement

Despite these contributions, significant challenges remain to civil society's engagement in the process and the implementation of the New Deal. Due to pre-existing state-society tensions many g7+ governments are hesitant to empower civil society actors as full partners and are wary of civil society's efforts to hold them accountable to New Deal commitments. The g7+ governments have been reluctant to embrace civil society-backed mechanisms such as global indicators and perception-based indicators, seeing them as potential threats to their political legitimacy and ability to receive future aid rather than a means of facilitating effective development. In some contexts governments have attempted to establish parallel networks of government-backed CSOs rather than work with CSPPS representatives.

A tension between the technical and political aspects of the New Deal process, and insufficient g7+ buy-in are perhaps the greatest challenges to successful implementation. A low level of government engagement and awareness characterizes most contexts. Few ministries or elected officials outside of the government ministry designated as the New Deal focal point are aware of the process. Participants in the international dialogue are often technical experts who do not have the political authority to advocate for the political support needed to ensure governmental commitment and buy-in to the New Deal. Conversely, seemingly technical decisions can have highly political implications that must be resolved to move the process forward. Donor states also demonstrate varied levels of commitment and prioritization of the New Deal.

At the international level civil society faces bureaucratic, logistical, and resource barriers that obstruct participation. While CSOs have been included in international meetings, they do not have formally allocated seats and representatives often face difficulties securing visas. Efforts to address these logistical challenges place a significant drain on the energy and capacity of the CSPPS. Within the CSO Platform the disparity in technological capacity, particularly in pilot countries, poses a participation barrier and results in lower visibility, inconsistent engagement and less collaboration with and among pilot state CSOs. The rapid pace of the New Deal process poses challenges to meaningful civil society engagement, as multi-sectoral civil society networks have taken time to form and civil society organizations have fewer resources to respond to the large volume of materials generated through the international process.

Due to the multi-leveled nature of the New Deal, there can be a difference between the priorities and political approaches of international and national CSOs. Northern organizations reference donors, g7+, and civil society as primary stakeholders. Pilot country CSOs see the national population as a key stakeholder that must be included in the New Deal process. Differences in the two

approaches create a lack of coordination between national and international strategies to promote the New Deal. More clarity is needed about the complementarity and place of both approaches within a unified strategy.

An initial imbalance of North-South civil society representation in the international process was recently corrected, but has contributed to perceptions of Northern predominance in the Platform and to g7+ ambivalence towards the CSPPS. Some Southern CSOs want greater support from the CSPPS in terms of funding and advocacy at national and international levels. Northern NGOs are perceived to have unrealized advocacy opportunities to support Southern CSOs, by holding donor and g7+ governments accountable to their commitments and ensuring greater support for the process. The CSPPS has increasingly emphasized the importance of collective action and mobilization of donor funds to support Southern CSOs in their efforts.

Integrating the New Deal with existing development plans is an ongoing challenge. In most contexts there is lower awareness of the New Deal than other peace, development, or anti-poverty plans. Overlapping but distinct indicators for different national development or peacebuilding plans divides attention and limited resources. Some criticize the New Deal for not addressing corruption in aid or the need to cultivate the eventual financial independence and self-sufficiency of g7+ governments.

There is a widespread concern that gains made to date in civil society access to the process will be reversed as the New Deal moves into later implementation stages, especially the formulation of aid compacts between donor and g7+ governments. Civil society representatives interviewed voiced fears that the policy window would become narrow, with governments designing policy almost exclusively. Proactive strategies should be developed by the CSPPS in order to guard against a fall-off in civil society participation within the later stages, and donor governments should advocate for their sustained inclusion.

Growing impressions of a lack of donor and g7+ commitment to the New Deal may gradually diminish support for the process. There is therefore a need to demonstrate that the New Deal is truly making a difference: that it is informing a changed approach to peacebuilding and statebuilding by the major actors who are driving peace and conflict dynamics. "Civil society needs to feel that the New Deal is reshaping dynamics, and that it is providing a way into discussions and engagements with the governments," remarked a member of the CSPPS. "Otherwise," he continued, "the entire process will be more of an international policy discussion on valuable concepts, but without the necessary momentum and results that are needed within actual contexts of fragility."

Recommendations

While the New Deal officially recognizes the importance of improving state-society relations, civil society's work to engage government must be recognized by donors and g7+ as a critical element of peacebuilding, equally as important as outcomes in the technical process. Efforts must continue to improve trust and cooperation among the many different stakeholders involved, as well as to ensure that recent progress is sustained and built upon. Donor and g7+ governments must ensure the presence of civil society and equip CSOs with the requisite capacity and resources. CSOs must also remain strong advocates for their inclusion. As one CSO representative said, "We need to ensure we're part of the process and we're able to make an impact." Without further investment, civil society will remain an under-resourced and under-recognized partner in realizing the transformative potential of the New Deal.

Key recommendations to New Deal stakeholders include the following:

- **Support civil society as key partners in implementing the New Deal.**
 - **Donor states:** Give greater political and financial support to civil society efforts at both national and international levels.
 - **IDPS Secretariat:** Formalize civil society presence in international meetings and increase the minimum number of civil society participants at international meetings; seek special visa status for civil society members based on precedents in other international processes.
 - **g7+ governments:** Invite civil society organizations to participate in regular discussions on New Deal implementation, including in the compact phase.
 - **CSO Platform:** Proactively articulate civil society's role in the Compact formulation and advocate for a civil society seat in the table in all countries, (as in South Sudan) to maintain civil society's inclusion at later implementation stages.
- **Recognize civil society as key partners in promoting oversight and accountability of New Deal commitments.**
 - **Donor states:** Consult with pilot country and international CSOs to establish verification and accountability systems to track g7+ performance and progress on New Deal implementation.
 - **All:** Reopen space for political dialogue and debate in addition to holding technical meetings. Balance technical and political approaches to the New Deal.
 - **CSO platform:** Develop greater oversight and advocacy roles for Northern civil society organizations in holding donors and g7+ accountable to their commitments.

- **For all stakeholders: Address the following issues raised by civil society to promote the success of the New Deal:**
 - Conduct educational outreach among and within g7+ government ministries and the parliament to raise awareness of and support for the New Deal.
 - Address the challenge of integrating the New Deal with preexisting development plans by holding thematic consultations and workshops on this topic.
 - Build private sector alliances to broaden awareness of the New Deal within the private sector on issues such as natural resource management.
 - Ensure that gender mainstreaming is integrated into all stages of the New Deal process, particularly the formulation of the Compact.
 - Develop early warning and crisis response mechanisms in the New Deal process based on the fragility assessments and indicators.
- **For the CSO Platform: Invest in improving internal communications and regional information exchange and knowledge-sharing:**
 - Support more peer-to-peer consultations among Southern civil society, possibly in regional groupings, and create internal forums for Southern NGOs to share experiences and lessons learned with international members.
 - Invest in communications technology and infrastructure.
 - Continue to clarify guidelines and priorities for Secretariat funding; discuss the balance of using of funds for international meetings versus in-country implementation.

Emerging Challenges: The New Deal in South Sudan

Just prior to the publication of this brief, a political crisis between President Salva Kiir and former Vice President Riek Machar plunged South Sudan back into violent conflict. Renewed violence in South Sudan offers a cautionary tale for advocates of the New Deal, whose implementation is now suspended. Among the pilot states, South Sudan's New Deal process was one of the more inclusive, committed, and consistently paced. The country's fragility assessment optimistically claims that "reform efforts seem to have borne most fruit with regard to legitimate politics."

A closer analysis of the fragility assessment, however, finds that it missed key political drivers of the current conflict, including uneasy ethnic powersharing in government and the military and a dearth of checks and balances on the executive. During the period of rapid political escalation of the conflict, the New Deal lacked robust early warning mechanisms. The tragedy in South Sudan demonstrates a weakness in the design and application of the New Deal to crisis settings, which should be pre-emptively addressed in other pilot countries.

The CSPPS issued a statement on January 17, 2014 that offers a similar critique of the fragility assessment methodology and calls for an ongoing and more robust process for conducting analyses of root causes of conflict in dynamic political situations.³ Their analysis calls for more political dialogue and greater inclusivity in the New Deal process to enable more effective responses to drivers of conflict and sources of fragility.

[1] International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, *A New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States*, December 2011, 2.

[2] International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, *A New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States*, December 2011, 1.

[3] Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, *Amplifying the chances for stability and peace in South Sudan: Statement from the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS)*, January 17, 2014.



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This brief is based on a report that analyzes the role of civil society in implementing the New Deal for Engagement with Fragile and Conflict-Affected States (the New Deal), which emerged from the *International Dialogue for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding* (IDPS) in 2011. The report assesses the degree of civil society engagement in parallel international and national processes and identifies contributions civil society has made to the New Deal process and the challenges that exist to greater civil society engagement. The report is based on interviews with twenty-one international and national civil society leaders representing eight countries implementing the New Deal, including Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, South Sudan, and Sierra Leone. The full report, **Assessing Civil Society Engagement with the New Deal: Opportunities and Challenges**, is available at kroc.nd.edu.

This report was written by Kristen Wall and Rachel Fairhurst at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame. It is part of the Strengthening Peacebuilding Policy through Civil Society Empowerment project, a collaborative partnership between the Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP), the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), and the University of Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, with generous support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.