A REFLECTION ON 20 YEARS OF CIVIL SOCIETY INITIATIVES ON THE NAGОРNY KARABAKH CONFLICT
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Larisa Sotieva

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Contents

Foreword 3
Executive summary 4
Introduction 5
Factors contributing towards the success of peacebuilding initiatives 7
Influence of civil initiatives 9
Positive outcomes 10
Negative outcomes and missed opportunities 12
Role of international organisations in social processes in post-conflict societies 14
Factors that have to be taken into account when engaging in conflict transformation 16
Conclusions and recommendations 17
Afterword 19
Hungry and tired at the end of a long week spent studying the Northern Ireland conflict together, the conversation of International Alert’s partners from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorny Karabakh turned to food – from a conflict perspective. One of the Azerbaijani related how surprised he was to see Azerbaijani Cinar chocolate bars on open display for sale in Nagorny Karabakh shops during a visit back in 2004. Encouraged by this apparent indicator of tolerance to the ‘enemy’ produce, another Azerbaijani enthused that there was still room for hope, only to be gently let down by the partner from Nagorny Karabakh, who quipped that, indeed, there is hope – for business interests, illustrating his point by contrasting the open sale of Azerbaijani tea and chocolate in Nagorny Karabakh with the illicit, ‘under the counter’ trade of Armenian Cigaronne cigars in Azerbaijan.

This light-hearted conversation about how these divided societies buy each other’s goods is illustrative of the overall social context and provides a unique insight into the social and psychological state of these post-conflict societies. Clearly, the conflict parties can be persuaded to consume each other’s luxury goods, yet the extent to which they are willing to do so in public varies. This is just one illustration, but anyone working in this context needs to understand the subtleties of attitudes and norms in the respective societies and take into consideration a wide range of factors when designing and implementing peacebuilding programmes.

This review of 20 years of civil peacebuilding in the Nagorny Karabakh context provides an insight into the emergence and evolution of civil ‘peacebuilding’ or ‘conflict transformation’ in the region, facilitated by international non-governmental organisations, the positive and negative outcomes of such work, missed opportunities and factors contributing towards success or failure. It should provide an insight into a wide range of factors that have to be taken into account when engaging in such work, and some recommendations on how to move forward.
Executive summary

Two decades after the ceasefire agreement, the official peace process on the Nagorny Karabakh conflict mediated by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group has been unable to reach a peaceful settlement. In the meantime, civil society groups in the region have sought to further the prospects for peace outside of the political negotiations. This review of 20 years of civil peacebuilding in the Nagorny Karabakh context provides an insight into the emergence and evolution of civil ‘peacebuilding’ or ‘conflict transformation’ in the region, facilitated by international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It examines the positive and negative outcomes of such work, missed opportunities and factors contributing towards success or failure. It should provide an insight into a wide range of factors that have to be taken into account when engaging in such work, and some recommendations on how to move forward.

While the study does not provide the answer to all the difficulties inherent in such work, it does aim to deepen understanding of what works and what doesn’t, and why, and as such should be required reading for any international organisation working on conflict in the region. Otherwise, assumptions about the ‘failure’ of civil peacebuilding made against the backdrop of a deteriorating political context may be incorrectly drawn, and strategies for the future based on false premises.

Given the long list of factors hindering progress to peace in the region, and the limited nature of international support in this area, contrasted with inflated expectations, it is hardly surprising that there are cycles of frustration over the apparent lack of progress. These days, with a deteriorating context, peacebuilders often justify their work in terms of ‘preserving the space for dialogue’, or ‘preparing the ground for when conditions in the future are more conducive’. These are valid objectives and we hope that this review helps to put those arguments into perspective. In the meantime, looking back, we can appreciate the significant role that post-conflict peacebuilding measures have made in promoting democratic values and institutions in the region; and while the current socio-political realities in the societies in conflict mean that civil peacebuilding has only a limited influence on the political level, it is nevertheless the only bastion of society against the totalitarian effect of nationalistic, jingoistic ideologies.

This study is a meta analysis of research conducted by experts from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorny Karabakh in 2012. The research itself is presented in the publication Advancing the Prospects for Peace, published in 2013.1 This study draws together the research findings, analysed through the author’s own experience as a facilitator of different dialogues and social change processes in the Caucasus over many years.

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Introduction

Looking at the civil and political processes around the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, one gets the impression that much of the blame and frustration about the lack of visible results on a political level is directed at the civil sector, rather than the political forces engaged in the official peace talks.

It is also clear that, compared with the political actors, civil society has had (and continues to have) minimal resources. As a result, there is little scope for influencing the dynamics of the conflict – although there has been no examination of civil society’s longstanding and considerable contribution to preserving stability.

For various reasons, including the ideology perpetuated by military propaganda, narratives about participation by civil society representatives in peacebuilding initiatives or their successes are not popular in the societies. In fact, there is more likely to be active support for the official line that civil peacebuilding has led to nothing and will not lead anywhere. This creates a sense of powerlessness in the societies in the face of major political manoeuvring. It also helps to generate a sense of chronic social passivity, even apathy, making it easier for people to be manipulated and controlled.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to undertake any kind of formal assessment of this type of peacebuilding. It is even more difficult to convey results of peacebuilding to the general public. Each side in the conflict has its own view and understanding of the desired results of such interventions. Even neutral mediators are often not always sufficiently realistic in their understanding of what constitutes an effective intervention, for example, asking questions attempting to quantify ‘how many peacebuilders’ emerged from a training workshop. At the other end of the spectrum, there is also the risk that effectiveness is discussed only in terms of the ‘process’.

Role of retrospective reflection on civil society initiatives around the Nagorny Karabakh conflict

The prevailing situation of ‘neither war nor peace’ requires a critical analysis of what has gone before and a search for new methods from within society and from elsewhere. Understanding this, International Alert took the approach of initially looking back, reflecting on and analysing the course taken by civil society initiatives around the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, in order to proceed in the future on the basis of experience accumulated. When Alert conducted this reflection exercise, it worked with people who had been active in the region from the very beginning and with others who had come later to the process.

Since 2004, Alert has initiated and employed a complex approach in its work on the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. When Alert first came to the region, it began with a strategic approach to the development of civil society. This comprised of a number of elements, including providing opportunities for socially active people in the conflict regions, so that these civil actors would be able to engage in peacebuilding initiatives in the future. As a pioneer in this field, Alert brought other organisations into the region, sharing expertise and contacts. Over time, this involvement became more systematic and structured and the organisations that came contributed other experiences and approaches. These organisations have worked together in close professional partnership to develop and appraise a variety of approaches to transforming the conflict. This retrospective reflection focuses on all activities undertaken by civil society in relation to the Nagorny Karabakh conflict and has been conducted during the preliminary stage of the European Partnership for the
Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK). Reflecting on the past was extremely important for Alert in terms of its accountability as the lead agency in this consortium of organisations working on the conflict.

However, it was not only Alert’s opinion that such a reflection was needed. According to one expert from Nagorny Karabakh, there is a social imperative, both within these conflict societies and beyond, to reflect on the effectiveness of peacebuilding projects, whether they should be continued and in what form. One of the Azerbaijani respondents also stated: “Unless you look at past experience, you get the impression that we’re starting from scratch every time, without taking any account of the work done by others.”

Research methodology

Three groups of researchers from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorny Karabakh, facilitated by Alert, agreed on a single research methodology for evaluating civil society initiatives from the last 20 years. A general questionnaire was developed for use by each of the researchers, and agreement reached on which social and professional groups would take part in focus groups on the topics concerned. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with regional experts, the names of whom had been proposed and agreed by the research groups in advance. The results of the research are presented in three reports by the regional experts, Alert’s regional partners.

Benefits of the research process

The research process was unique and valuable in itself, because it brought together civil society activists from different periods and with different degrees of involvement in civil society peacebuilding initiatives to engage in collective retrospective reflection. This sort of shared reflection by socially active members of the communities, facilitated by professionals, helps to strengthen the very idea of civil activism and enables analysis of the conflict dynamic from different points of view. It also provides an opportunity to develop new approaches to existing problems and to anticipate issues that may arise over time in a changing context.

In addition to the three reports from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorny Karabakh, the research generated a list of questions, topics and recommendations, which have formed the basis for a series of public discussions led by Alert’s regional partners with various different social and professional groups from the three societies.

In reading the three reports produced by the groups of researchers, one cannot help asking: what would the situation be like now if there had been no civil society peacebuilding initiatives? Thinking about this, one becomes aware of the great contribution made by civil society to resolve the conflict, and of a great sense of civic ownership.

As an actively engaged mediator in the conflict, Alert undertook this process of retrospective reflection both with its partners and internally within the organisation, making use of institutional memory. This report therefore not only provides an overview of the main conclusions of the research and reflection process undertaken by the three sides, but also brings the author’s own reflections and experience to bear, offering some food for thought for those continuing to work on peacebuilding in the region.

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2 The European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK) is an independent European civil society initiative that works with local partners in the South Caucasus on a wide range of peacebuilding activities to positively impact the Nagorny Karabakh conflict settlement process. EPNK is funded by the European Union. The members of the partnership are: Conciliation Resources (UK), Crisis Management Initiative (Finland), International Alert (lead agency – UK), the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (Sweden) and the London Information Network on Conflicts and State Building (UK). For more information see www.epnk.org

Factors contributing towards the success of peacebuilding initiatives

The research reveals that civil initiatives in the early stages of the conflict were spontaneous in nature and largely centred around an urgent humanitarian response to the military situation, both within the societies and beyond them. Generally speaking, they were initiated by unofficial community leaders who had unshakeable authority within their communities.

Through humanitarian initiatives, lines of communication and relationships of trust were established between individuals across the conflict divide, setting a significant precedent in wartime. Not all humanitarian initiatives led to successful relationships between representatives of the opposing sides. However, where contact was maintained over time, the initiative could be described as successful. The idea of peacebuilding, therefore, can be said to have emerged through the engagement of community leaders with the opposing side for humanitarian purposes. Over time, such involvement in humanitarian activity led to these people developing an active public position on the importance of peace.

From the research we can identify the following factors behind successful civil peacebuilding initiatives:

• The participation of authoritative figures and national leaders from the respective societies, whose role in society is significantly magnified during periods of active conflict;
• Strong public support for humanitarian initiatives;
• Involvement across broad sections of the population;
• An identified social mandate for a particular initiative;
• Diversification of approaches to different initiatives;
• A high degree of influence on the participants of an initiative (although personal change is the most difficult and subtle aspect to measure, requiring a specific research methodology. Nevertheless, if people taking part in peacebuilding initiatives express the desire to continue such work, this is a clear indicator of positive impact);
• Dialogue on different social levels (both bilateral and multi-party dialogue), providing a wide range of opportunities, especially at times of marked aggravation in the socio-political situation, when direct contacts between different sides become extremely risky; and
• Long-term involvement of particular individuals in peacebuilding, or the existence of ‘established peacebuilders’.

In relation to the last point, one often encounters considerable cynicism among the international donor communities regarding the ‘usual suspects’. However, the people who are involved in peacebuilding over the long term have a resource that is overlooked by external actors, yet which is extremely important for internal socio-political dynamics: they are able to openly go against the official, nationalist discourse. This means that they have the potential and invaluable social capital needed to find alternative solutions to the conflict.

Moreover, before initiating the first humanitarian contacts with the other side, people with long-term involvement in peacebuilding will have generally gained authority in their own society, based on their support for and contribution to the national idea that was one of the main causes of the conflict. The important factor here is that, when contact was first initiated with the other side, the population was confident that the leader in question shared the very values and ideas over which the war was fought, and so there was no risk of positions being renounced or of the sort of betrayal currently being spoken about by people in all post-conflict societies.
Looking back, in the last decade, no dominant figures have emerged among the civil society actors engaged in peacebuilding. There are new people but no clear leaders. It could be suggested that there is an element of mistrust within the societies towards the new, post-war generation and a possible assumption that they might enter into a compromise that could be potentially disadvantageous for the society.
Influence of civil initiatives

Early in the post-conflict period, when only community leaders were initiating and facilitating contacts between the conflicting sides, officially registered peacebuilding NGOs began to emerge. The societies on both sides of the conflict thus started to become aware that, even in the wake of such a bloody conflict, contacts with the other side could be made and that it was possible to work on the conflict. The value of having representatives of the conflicting sides together at the same table, and the realisation that they were still able to talk to one another was uniquely significant in terms of its impact on societal attitudes on all sides of the conflict.

Experience also shows that contact between the opposing sides and involving them in dialogue reduces the level of negative national stereotypes and myths so widespread in post-conflict societies. People who have been involved in joint projects start to view the other side differently; the enemy image instilled in them through the experience of war and through post-war nationalist propaganda is shattered. Looking at attitudes before and after participation in such projects, it is quite possible to identify a clear impact on understanding the reasons for and substance of the conflict and how it is perceived.

At the same time, it is not only attitudes towards the other side that change, but also people’s perceptions of themselves as individuals and as members of their society, sharing in its discourse. Participants in successful projects develop a more critical view of their own society and no longer simply see the whole conflict in black and white terms.

In terms of the authorities and the political sphere, it is difficult to establish in the short term whether humanitarian and peacebuilding projects have had a radical impact. However, it is anticipated that they will contribute to long-term changes in the political landscape once the seeds of peace, tolerance and the need to resolve conflict through compromise are sown in the minds of the public. The existence of civil peacebuilding initiatives within societies divided by conflict means that the political forces on each side will have to respond to the messages thus disseminated – messages that may become popular across large sections of society, especially against the background of ineffective official political processes.

The current socio-political realities in the region mean that civil peacebuilding and humanitarian projects can have only a minimal influence on political resolutions. Nevertheless, it is important to note that such initiatives are hugely important in resisting the onslaught of nationalistic and even chauvinistic rhetoric and ideology.
Positive outcomes

It can be argued that the conflict and the post-conflict rehabilitation measures have contributed towards the development of democratic institutions in the region. It is significant, in the post-Soviet, post-war landscape, that independent NGOs have been established. As a result of the need in the post-conflict period to find channels of communication across the divide for humanitarian purposes, civil society organisations that worked both within the societies and externally were established. Humanitarian and peacebuilding initiatives over the last 20 years have proved effective in many ways and yielded positive results, including the following outcomes:

• Reduced isolation: The post-conflict isolation of the societies has been broken down; mediators have appeared and provided means of communication and spaces for dialogue.
• A more open society: The involvement of international experts has added a new dynamic to the post-conflict situation; Russia’s media monopoly in relation to the conflict has begun to be dismantled, contacts have widened and new platforms have been established for the dissemination of their messages.
• Formation of peacebuilding constituencies: Through the support of external facilitation, groups have been formed and maintained, comprising people who are prominent and respected in their communities and already able to talk directly with each other in various contexts, without external facilitators and even during periods of extreme conflict escalation, or open hostilities.
• Increased dialogue: It is important to note that these people who are engaged in dialogue are not rejected by their communities. As a result of peacebuilding initiatives, there are groups of people on each side of the conflict who have the courage to engage in dialogue in neutral, safe spaces provided by international organisations. Disseminating the message of this dialogue to broad sections of society is the first and perhaps most important step towards the transformation of conflict.
• Independent thinking: International humanitarian and peacebuilding initiatives have succeeded in drawing sections of the region’s population away from a state of perpetual confrontation, giving them the opportunity to seek their own route towards resolving the situation, allowing them to step outside the nationalist propaganda wars, battling for the hearts and minds of the local population.
• More balanced information: Bilateral and Caucasus-wide meetings have helped to establish direct sources of information on each side of the conflict and reduced dependence on local sources of information, which are often filtered and distorted.
• Greater conflict awareness: The Armenian and Azerbaijani participants, in Caucasus-wide meetings and discussions, have developed an awareness of similarities between aspects of other conflicts in the Caucasus and potential prospects for their resolution.
• New communication methods and transformation tools: International mediators working over a long period with local experts have developed and adapted methods of communication and tools for use in conflict transformation.
• More space for peace: Rather than bringing in ready-made solutions from elsewhere, space has been created for forging a peaceful future, through the facilitation of debates, the delivery of training and the exchange of experiences from other conflicts by international organisations. This approach enables those involved to work on equal terms and stimulates initiative.

It is important to mention that, in peacebuilding, both the results and the process are important. Interestingly, the process may generate results different from those intended, and these results may be of greater value than those envisaged by the donor. A professional approach to peacebuilding
yields positive results. When the agency involved is professional in its engagement, the process, output and outcome are intrinsically linked.

Everything experienced so far has been a lesson in conflict sensitivity for all the external actors, something that is the main unwritten requirement to endure in the field of peacebuilding.

Concrete products (e.g. publications, films, etc.) from peacebuilding initiatives are extremely important for the development of an institutional memory of peacebuilding. Such products serve to increase the transparency of projects. They also help to explain and present initiatives from the perspective of those leading and participating in them and avoid false interpretations by various interested parties. Thus, the people taking part in the process are better protected from manipulation. Journalism and film projects can be a particularly effective approach, having a significant impact on public attitudes.

It should be noted that the experience of civil society leaders involved in dialogue and peacebuilding initiatives has been effectively used in supporting the authorities engaged in the official peace talks. And although it was noted earlier that civil society initiatives have minimal impact on political processes, it is nevertheless the case that the authorities do recognise and make use of the substantial expert potential in civil society, when it suits them.
Negative outcomes and missed opportunities

Civil society initiatives of the last 20 years have produced not only positive results, but some negative results as well, some of which are summarised below:

- Lack of public awareness: The lack of transparency about some initiatives has meant that the interpretation of such initiatives is distorted through the prism of the prevailing propaganda. In societies traumatised by war and post-war political tensions, such opaque initiatives encouraged stereotyped perceptions and even conspiracy theories. There is no doubt that such initiatives have been damaging both to the idea of conflict transformation and for the societies themselves, not to mention the people who initiated or took part in them.
- Unrealistic projects: Some projects were so remote from the realities of everyday life that the population believed that those proposing these ready-made ideas lacked the competence to work in the local context and, moreover, were not prepared to seek to understand it.
- Vested interests: For the local partners, projects often became a business opportunity and a step on the career ladder. Local partners’ motivation for becoming involved in peacebuilding has to be understood and it is often difficult for international partners to identify. The peacebuilding value of those initiatives – even successful ones – is thus eroded in the eyes of the local population, as all projects are viewed by the local people as part of one single international contribution.
- Artificially created joint business projects often led to negative outcomes, due to inherently unworkable ideas and utopian expectations.
- Poor diversity of social groups: The failure to involve a wide range of social groups gives communities the subconscious message that involvement in peacebuilding is not open to all. Initiatives that only involved people from the capitals caused concern, anxiety and isolation among people living in rural communities.
- Poor facilitation and design of initiatives: Politicisation occurs at all levels of civil society engagement and emerges particularly in contacts with the opposing side. The key issue should be the extent to which a project is professionally designed and facilitated, in order to provide a safe, neutral space for the partners, so that they are detached from their political and national identities and can concentrate on the practical issues at hand. Often, an open display by project participants of their political and national identity is a defensive reaction to an insensitively facilitated process and its practical insignificance.
- The ‘usual suspects’ syndrome: Having the same people take part in every project. There are several explanations for this. Firstly, for the international NGOs managing projects, these people are a known quantity. Secondly, they already know how to implement projects, and so it is easier and more efficient to work with them. Thirdly, they already have a constituency that is involved in peacebuilding, meaning it will be easier to demonstrate that a project is successful.

A number of important opportunities have also been missed in relation to civil society humanitarian and peacebuilding initiatives, including:

- Engaging Armenian and Azerbaijani businesses in sponsorship of peacebuilding initiatives: This approach would yield more tangible results for the societies, since their contribution to peacebuilding would be interpreted as being more significant than the same contribution by international organisations, whose motivation is often subject to a distorted or even cynical interpretation in post-conflict societies.
- Engaging the diaspora: The diaspora are important as one of the elements in the conflict and a potential source of influence; however, it should be noted that the role of the diaspora would be different for the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities.
• Establishment of an accessible information archive of peacebuilding initiatives: There are many reasons why this is not currently available, but one of the main reasons is the lack of close cooperation between the peacebuilding actors themselves; there is also reluctance sometimes to share information fully about their activities, for reasons of competition.
Role of international organisations in social processes in post-conflict societies

The appearance in the region of international NGOs was of great significance for the societies caught up in the conflict and now living through a post-conflict, post-ceasefire context. After 70 years of authoritarian Soviet rule – and having just lived through war during which the only possible style of government was authoritarian – there was a severe dearth of knowledge and skills in the conflict-affected societies about how to rebuild their communities. Against this background, western experience, introduced by international NGOs, the media and other means, was undoubtedly a positive influence.

Early on in the post-conflict period, representatives of international NGOs were involved in activities such as exchanges of prisoners of war and training of journalists in objective reporting of the conflict. Later, international NGOs initiated confidence-building measures. Gradually, the role of civil society in the post-conflict environment expanded and became increasingly professionalised.

The use of the expertise of local community leaders in the official peace process and the establishment of alternative dialogue processes at civil society level can be seen as evidence that international, independent organisations contributed to the dismantling of the monopoly by state institutions of the negotiating process.

Despite the significant role of the international organisations, there have been shortcomings in their approach, as follows:

- Poor strategic understanding of the conflict and its aftermath: The war and the post-war devastation compelled local community leaders to take spontaneous action in response to immediate needs. Similarly, representatives of international organisations found themselves in a situation where it was simply impossible to carry out strategically planned activities, based on research and analysis, because they had to respond to urgent needs here and now. However, over time this approach acquired a more permanent character, even though the needs were no longer urgent and what was required was strategic understanding of the conflict and its aftermath to inform the work of conflict transformation.

- Duplication of initiatives: Many initiatives by international organisations have duplicated one another. Moreover, successful actions that were tried and tested in the context of the conflict were constantly repeated by new actors. This creates the impression in the societies that there is only one way to do peacebuilding. It narrows the perspective of local people who are socially active and restricts creative approaches to peacebuilding. It can be argued that the repetition of identical initiatives discredits the very idea of working on conflict. In addition, repeat initiatives can lead to misconceptions about peacebuilding: if doing the same thing over and over again does not yield results, it must mean that peace between the two sides is impossible.

- Over-reliance on funding policies: International NGOs are hostages to the funding policies of donors and have to negotiate a complicated system of competition for grants in order to work on the conflict. As a result, they often carry this rivalry and competitiveness over into the region and the local NGO community. Moreover, donors sometimes operate on the basis of what they know through their previous project experience, not necessarily in this region. They fund initiatives that have already proved successful but, in doing so, step up their demands, while duplicated initiatives deliver diminishing returns and it is impossible to fulfil the expectations of the donors. International organisations should take greater account of the essence of the conflict and of understanding the culture of the societies and the specifics of the context.
• Manipulation by local partners: Local partners have learnt how to derive advantage from the contradictions and frictions between international NGOs working in the region. For local partners, this is fertile ground for manipulation; interestingly, it is the representatives of international NGOs themselves who become the subjects of this manipulation.

• Failure to articulate aims and objectives: By sometimes not explaining the aims and objectives of a project, those implementing it thereby leave the people and societies involved second-guessing, a practice that is generally interpreted negatively.

• Failure to remain impartial: The role of independent international mediators is important both for civil society and for the power structures of the conflicting parties. Consequently, these organisations may be subject to manipulation by local NGOs, political elites and the situation, which may impair the impartiality of some of their representatives. Publicly, this is seen and interpreted very simply as identifying with the other side, raising the issue of positioning.

Moreover, international experts who live and work in a particular region may sometimes become, without realising it, part of that community and may no longer be able to look at the other side as a neutral agent.

However, there is another side to the same coin: a perception by the people that, if a particular international mediator is not seen to take their side, then he or she must automatically support the other side. Clearly, there is a lack of information in the societies about the mandate and the code of conduct of the organisations working there.

Notwithstanding the shortcomings of international actors and their often insufficiently analytical and strategic approach to their work in the region, it is important not to overlook the fact that, on the whole, they achieve positive results. Obviously, the values of the organisation running the project and the specialists implementing it make a difference here. In addition, experience shows that many international NGO workers are particularly good at the operational activities, meaning that projects that may not be strong strategically can nevertheless be well executed and yield results. In such cases, the results achieved by the project are often not those originally outlined in the plan, but other, similarly positive ones.
Factors that have to be taken into account when engaging in conflict transformation

International NGOs with ambitious aims to change the discourse of the conflict find that limited resources and real-life circumstances conspire against them. In particular, belligerent rhetoric, the exploitation of the frozen conflict for political ends, control of public opinion and the manipulation of attitudes are significant obstacles to peacebuilding. Here are a number of other factors that hinder the process of transforming the conflict:

• ‘Victor’ and ‘victim’ complexes within the societies and corresponding patterns of behaviour.
• ‘Mythologisation’ of the public consciousness: Over the last 20 years, the political propaganda machine has been far more effective than the efforts of those engaged in the conflict transformation.
• Internal political conflicts within all three societies, and the exploitation of the unresolved conflict for the purposes of maintaining power and suppressing opposition: The opinion of the majority has prevailed over the minority of people who think differently, hampering attempts to transform the conflict.
• Frequent escalations of the conflict bringing the societies to the brink of war: This has had a destructive influence on every peacebuilding process; each time there has been a step forward, these escalations have meant two steps back.
• Mistrust of peacebuilding initiatives by the societies: This often arises due to lack of awareness and manipulation of information by interested parties; the societies perceive these initiatives as a threat to their national interests and identity.
• The persistent unwillingness of the societies to consider compromise: On one side, there is a feeling that ‘We won the war, so how could a compromise be in our interests?’ On the other side, there is a deep sense of injustice in the post-war situation, as well as a strong desire for and increasing possibility of remedying it. However, this difficulty with compromise is exploited by the authorities as a means of controlling the societies.
• The passive stance of the majority of the population involved in the conflict during ‘frozen’ periods: The dominant opinion in the societies is that nothing is contingent on them, but that everything is decided at a higher level. Nevertheless, during periods of escalation, this social passivity disappears. It seems that this may be a throwback to Soviet ideology and thinking – going to war and being killed for your motherland is a sacred act, but during peacetime you have to put your faith completely in the authorities.
• The politicisation of civil society processes: The parties to the conflict have often had undue influence on the peacebuilding projects, exploiting them for their own political agendas.
• The lack of strong, independent media and NGOs: This lack is reinforced by the fact that the authorities are actively uninterested in encouraging their development.
• The desire to preserve the status quo for political aims means that peacebuilding initiatives meet with obstruction from the political elites.
• The risk factor for participants in peacebuilding projects: There are different degrees of risk, but of particular significance is the risk of being manipulated by different actors.
• The marginalisation of local NGOs: This often arises due to the misguided grant-making policy of the international community, whose prioritisation of ‘peacebuilding’ over other forms of civil society support has led to the creation of an exclusive elite of ‘peacebuilding NGOs’, quite inaccessible to ordinary people.
• The limited scope for influencing political elites not democratically elected – or the authoritarian regime factor.
Conclusions and recommendations

The course of the last 20 years illustrates both the achievements and the shortcomings of peacebuilding initiatives implemented around the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. Outlined here are some ideas for improving the effectiveness of future civil society initiatives.

Analysis, reflection and learning

• Learn from the experience of local experts: It may sound clichéd, but it is important to take heed of recommendations from experts from the region who have taken part in projects and also conducted analysis at the project planning stage.

• Include space for reflection at different stages of project implementation: Ideally, reflection should form an integral part of peacebuilding projects, despite tight deadlines and the pressures of project and donor requirements. This would help the different sides to get a sense of the project. Receiving feedback would enable shortcomings to be remedied and successful elements to be developed and made more robust.

• Engage in ongoing analysis of the impacts of our engagement: The experience of the last 20 years has shown that projects that focus on influencing external actors, external factors and the international community, such as Track 1.5 dialogues, while important in themselves, unless they link back to change processes at the community/societal level, do not bring about changes in public opinion in the societies at conflict. On the contrary, such projects are perceived with cynicism by the societies. There is a paradox here: these projects are very successful outside the societies but not within them; yet the decisions about which projects should be supported and continued are not taken within the societies, but in the circles on which the impact of these projects is focused. It would be helpful to have an ongoing analysis of the impacts of our engagement.

Partnerships and relationships

• Closer cooperation between civil society and the authorities on conflict transformation: Establishing links will clearly have an impact on the effectiveness of initiatives and address the insufficient cooperation over the last 20 years. The lack of cooperation (which is due to reluctance on both sides) results in the perception that NGOs work only in opposition to authority, which in turn hinders wider civil society engagement in peacebuilding initiatives.

• Closer cooperation between peacebuilding practitioners and donors: With peacebuilding being so dependent on donor policy, it is important that policy be informed by a thorough analysis of the situation. Peacebuilders should seek to provide this analysis, articulating a strategic approach to change, and clearly defining what change is needed as well as the methods and opportunities through which change may be brought about.

• Awareness of the nature of the relationship between international experts and local civil society representatives: Relationships are multi-faceted and for the uninitiated outsider it is difficult to navigate the subtleties of relationships with local actors, and sometimes internationals become hostage to local actors’ agendas. A shared perception exists even between opposing sides that it is their conflict and it is difficult to admit outsiders whom they mistrust until they have proven themselves through experience. And this process of gaining experience can be quite tough, as can be the consequences. As soon as international experts seek to manoeuvre and manipulate, they automatically become subject to manipulation themselves by local partners. It sounds paradoxical, but the conflicting sides may join forces against a third, external party. Consequently, the more transparent and unified the messages articulated by international mediators on all sides are, the greater the probability that they will be received by local actors into their circle and treated with respect. It is not just the reputation of the international experts that benefits from this, but the action as a whole.
Methods, approaches and actors

- **Make room for new rules to be developed:** The last 20 years have seen the establishment of ‘rules of the game’ for peacebuilding in the Nagorny Karabakh context that everyone adheres to, for better or for worse. It would be difficult to break these rules and, in fact, there is no need to. The important thing is to widen the circle of actors involved in peacebuilding, to include people with different worldviews and vision of the future, who can question how things stand in the peacebuilding sector, and open up new avenues with new rules of the game – indeed a new game – as effective peacebuilding requires a multi-track approach.

- **Find new areas of potential cooperation for the conflicting societies:** By analysing the evolving context, needs and opportunities, and by expanding the range of actors involved.

- **Adopt methods that facilitate reframing of the conflict:** Abstract notions of peacebuilding do not work in such complicated socio-political situations, and meeting to discuss the conflict repeatedly is not always the most constructive approach to confidence building. Bringing sides together on areas of professional development can be more purposeful. Or it may be more effective to work with civil society on areas of humanitarian concern, supporting them to influence local-level change. It could be more pragmatic to focus on security – security for the individual, family, friends and society as a whole; economic and social security; security of identity; or the security for some form of coexistence in the future.

- **Encourage transparency:** This is one of the main criteria for success, as shown over 20 years of experience. It also fulfils a preventative role, reducing the room for negative interpretations of initiatives’ aims and objectives. Transparency in financial affairs is equally important. Any secrecy or unequal allocation of funds will have a negative impact on reputation and ultimately on the future impact of the activity itself.

- **Ensure constant efforts to overcome enemy images:** Unfortunately, in an environment of nationalist propaganda, taking a project-based approach to this objective is a serious miscalculation. There must be a systematic, strategic approach, in order to reach as many sections of society as possible in all three communities.

- **Involve young people in peacebuilding:** Draw them in through people with authority and influence in the community, in order to develop their leadership skills and give them the opportunity to use them. It is necessary to work on the assumptions and even fears that the younger generation – not having experienced the war – will betray national interests and concede positions, because they have more liberal attitudes and might turn out to be less loyal to the national ‘idea’ over which the war was fought. However, being more pragmatic in their thinking, young people may bring something new to the process of conflict transformation. At the moment, the situation is quite the opposite – young people have taken on the myths and have often been radicalised by effective nationalist propaganda. Nevertheless, working with the new generation who have grown up without any experience of coexistence or interaction with each other is extremely important.
Afterword

Given the long list of factors hindering progress to peace in the region, and the limited nature of international support in this area, contrasted with inflated expectations, it is hardly surprising that there are cycles of frustration over the apparent lack of progress in the sphere of civil peacebuilding. These days, with a deteriorating context, peacebuilders often justify their work in terms of ‘preserving the space for dialogue’, or ‘preparing the ground for when conditions in the future are more conducive’. These are valid objectives and we hope that this review helps to put those arguments into perspective. In the meantime, looking back, we can appreciate the significant role that post-conflict peacebuilding measures have made in promoting democratic values and institutions in the region; and while the current socio-political realities in the societies in conflict mean that civil peacebuilding has only a limited influence on the political level, it is nevertheless the only bastion of society against the totalitarian effect of nationalistic, jingoistic ideologies.