

Cultural responses to conflict

The Commonwealth People's Forum (CPF) is a biennial event held prior to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. CPF 2015 took place on 23-26 November 2015 and was jointly organised by the Government of Malta (host) and the Commonwealth Foundation. CPF 2015 critically explored policy based actions under the theme of "What Makes Resilient Societies?" It provided an innovative opportunity for civil society organisations to share knowledge and learn from each other as well as to interact with governance institutions on key policy issues. The CPF2015 series elaborates on the issues covered in the Malta Declaration on Governance for Resilience.

Introduction

A detailed session on 'Culture' is routinely deployed as both friend and foe. It can be a nationalist construct used to marginalise communities and an argument for retaining patriarchal structures. At the same time, it is the language in which identity and self-determination are framed. In organised mediations of conflict, culture has sometimes been overridden; in other instances, instrumentalised to create impressions of reconciliation. How then are both the enabling and disabling dimensions of culture negotiated in situations of conflict? This was a subject of debate and discussion at the Commonwealth People's Forum (CPF 2015) and was taken up at the session titled "Cultural Responses to Conflict."

The purpose of the session was to explore varied forms of good practice in cultural responses to conflict, in the interconnected civil society arenas of politics, activism and the arts; and to consider forms of engagement that are able to offer alternative paradigms and facilitate change.

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The session sought to reflect on the potential of culture to transform and be transformed. Presentations explored how expressions of culture during conflict were affected by political changes, by the safety of the presenters and artists themselves and others; and subsequent discussion sought to find answers to three inter-related questions: How does culture enable/disable inclusive engagement? What is civil society's role in challenging conflict narratives? And what are the implications for governance of including arts and culture in peace promoting strategies?

Key discussion points

Culture can be used in many ways in the context of conflict. It can be seen as a form both of oppression and of resistance. It can give voice to memory. As culture has many faces, resilience itself is present in many forms, capable of both supporting and resisting oppression.

Key Issues

Culture has both enabling and disabling dimensions. At CPF 2015, insights shared by speakers from political, activist and artistic backgrounds illustrated that cultural responses to conflict vary widely. A sense of exploration of work that was both personal and in progress, seeking to ask, to listen, to understand, to reframe and to reconsider was reviewed. Culture is sometimes re-written and imposed, forcing people to live under structures that are not indigenous. Power is at the heart of conflict; and in war and conflict women are commodified, sexualised, sold, abused and then discarded. For women in a society that objectifies women, cultural responses are characterised by resistance, not resilience.

“Transforming communities should not be about importing solutions but about healing them physically, mentally and psychologically.”

Culture can be and has been developed and presented in many forms, in response to conflict. Examples presented at CPF 2015 included commemorating the uncommemorated; to record and connect people with their experiences of war through the presentation of objects; and through artists' drawings of the architecture of people's homes. Cultural responses to conflict can serve as an exploration of individuals' internal and external experiences of conflict, but through this people often evolve a sense of agency. They offer people a chance to speak to others who have had common experiences of conflict; and can serve to hold up a mirror to prevailing structures in given periods of conflict. For example, in Sri Lanka, there was a time when mothers were considered lucky to receive back the bodies of their sons who died at war. Consequently, one expression of cultural responses to conflict has comprised building barrels in the form of art,

to commemorate events where people were abducted or killed; to remind people of practices such as security checks; and are also used to highlight issues - for example how many people were killed by army, paramilitary and rebel groups.

Another cultural response to conflict focuses on the use of objects – each a memory – to serve as a reminder of the destructive impact of displacement. Indeed, war causes extraordinary displacement. Over 500,000 people were displaced during the war in Sri Lanka, with no families in the North and East of Sri Lanka unaffected by displacement. Displacement occurs in cycles; and also effects the people in the community who are not displaced. In this context, exhibitions of objects that are part of one's memory have served to remind people of their experiences of separation, including separation during war and subsequently, including relatives displaced and now living abroad. Objects connect people with their experiences of war. They can include, for example, suitcases which were used to remember when persons had to go through checkpoints where their suitcases were searched; drawings of damaged houses and properties.

The use of drawing as a tool for bringing back memory through depicting house architecture was highlighted. The impression of people's stories becomes the artist's drawings, with multiple drawings, placed on top of the other serving to address past abolition of all previous civil memorials, so transforming individual pain into common loss, and unifying isolated individuals into a community. All of these initiatives have also illustrated that in developing cultural responses to conflict, there are no systems to listen; and cultural responses themselves evolve not only as cultural expressions themselves, but also as a channel through which many people share their stories.

Some cultural responses to conflict emphasise local solutions to conflict; and seek to maintain women at the heart of the process. In an African context women are traditionally negotiators of conflict. Transforming communities should not be about importing solutions but about healing them physically, mentally and psychologically. There is a need to 'reduce the tyranny of experts' and to allocate resources and dignity to local processes. Societies can learn from the way in which women respond to conflict. Women

bring resilience to conflict resolution through aspects of day-to-day life to address and resolve conflict, eschewing mainstream and dominant cultural responses, which are often ineffective in finding resolution. For example, mainstream responses to humanitarian crises, including

An excerpt from the Malta Declaration on Governance for Resilience

44. In respect of the interaction of culture and conflict it is recognised that culture can be deployed alternately as a framework of oppression or resistance, an argument for retaining patriarchal structures or a language of self-determination.

45. In this regard varying forms of good practice are acknowledged, allowing forms of resistance, agency and reflection through arts and cultural practices. The potential of culture to give voice to memory and commemorate the un-commemorated is recognised. It is noted that culture might play such a transformative role within as well as across communities in conflict. The importance of maintaining women at the heart of responses to conflict is affirmed; as is the desire to privilege intrinsic solutions to conflict over external negotiation, where it is culturally alienating.

46. While maintaining these principles it is noted that competing forms of resilience remain in play; that the resilience of division persists alongside the resilience of resistance and the hope of transformation.

forced migration, focus on the use of external forms of support. Local women, although “put in the shadows” in these forms of response, are typically the first to reach out to refugees with food and clothes; and know how to distribute food better. Similarly, women know what to do with people who have been violated, healing not only the body, but also the mind and spirit; and they have a stronger understanding of how to achieve post-conflict reconstruction, bypassing mainstream approaches which simply study and direct post conflict reconstruction and transforming communities, by healing them not only physically, but psychologically and emotionally. For these reasons, women should be at the centre of post-conflict development; yet mainstream approaches do not enable societies

to address conflict in their own context. Another interrogation of cultural responses to conflict highlights that culture can both reinforce and undermine postconflict dialogue.

The understanding and interpretation of resilience and culture is important. As a concept, resilience can have a positive but also a negative impact; while resilience is often spoken of in the context of those without power, it is important to recognise that oppressive structures are also extraordinarily resilient. Consequently, resilience should not serve as ‘a political fig leaf’. Just as resilience has no single face, culture itself presents in many ways. One interpretation of culture constitutes ‘a set of stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves’. However, culture as an instrument for change can both support, but also undermine capacities for resilience. For example, there is both transformative and regressive potential in the cultural arts - arts can be used as a form of indoctrination or as a weapon of imperialism and colonialism; to humiliate; and to normalize patriarchal and homophobic elements. It can also increase division through commemoration; and can also increase narratives of victimhood.

Conclusions

A series of presentations at CPF 2015 illustrated that cultural responses to conflict vary in form, content and focus; and that both culture and resilience have enabling and disabling dimensions. Barrelism, the use and presentation of objects, as well as architectural drawings of houses all serve to evoke memories of conflict; and can help to shift these from individual to community loss; while other forms of cultural response emphasise local solutions to conflict.

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Commonwealth People's Forum, May 2016

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