
➔ **GUATEMALA:
COORDINATION AND FLEXIBILITY HELP CIVIL SOCIETY BROKER
TRUST AFTER WAR**

In a Nutshell

An experience in Guatemala bears lessons for engagement in post-conflict reconstruction. In this case, an assembly of civil society organizations played a key role in starting to rebuild a country devastated by civil war. They were assisted by donors, which devised a coordinated strategy, with one agency acting as facilitator. The careful construction of a process of dialogue, capacity mapping and eventually the commissioning of pilot development projects helped foster an atmosphere of trust that led to civic regeneration.

The Story

In 1996, Guatemala emerged from 36 years of unremitting civil war. As expected, the physical infrastructure was in ruins. But the years of fighting had also left a legacy of widespread mistrust, with psychological scars evident in every walk of life. Human development indicators had plummeted to levels that were among the worst in the world. There seemed little margin for hope, except for the fact that throughout the conflict, civil society organizations had kept the channels of dialogue and reconciliation open. This came at a price though, as many suffered human rights abuses.

When peace first gained a foothold, sincere recognition for civil society efforts followed with the establishment of a Civil Society Assembly, which both the government and the rebels recognized as an interim platform for negotiations and future planning, a middle ground in the hotly contested political space. A multitude of civil society organizations participated, including labour unions, women's organizations, indigenous people's groups and human rights advocates. Broad representation ensured that the Assembly considered diverse concerns, not merely those that the government or revolutionary commanders deemed important. In particular, marginalized communities, indigenous people and women's groups

placed great trust in civil society organizations. So besides being a forum for negotiations, the Assembly quickly became a venue for rousing popular support for the peace accords and implementing essential rebuilding tasks.

While it was necessary to centrally involve civil society in development and national reconciliation, it was not at all clear at first how these organizations should or could be engaged in a coordinated fashion by the international community. The peace accord had mapped out an ambitious agenda for reconstruction, but in reality it hit many bumps. Principal among these was the completely withered capacity of the government and major institutions.

At this point, UNDP was asked to play the role of coordinating agency in the reconciliation and capacity development process, even though its own credibility first had to be re-established, because it was seen to have been pro-government during the war. Also, activities had to be carefully chosen so as to unite the full spectrum of civil society organizations.

A three-step process began, encompassing identification and mapping of civil society, assessment of capabilities and cooperation for action. The first stage involved preparing a directory of civil society organizations, which built confidence by teaching the community about itself. It also raised awareness among government agencies and donors about the huge variety of groups working on a vast number of issues.

The second stage assessed the capacities of these organizations, with mainly Guatemalan experts conducting wide-ranging research. They specifically looked at two categories of groups – those focusing on human rights and those representing the Mayan people. The assessments provided a fairly accurate map of civil society organizations, including their areas of operation and core capacities.

With an enhanced understanding of needs and priorities, UNDP helped mobilize funding for the third stage, seeking assistance from bilateral partners, including Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands, as well as from private foundations such as the MacArthur Foundation. Targeted capacity development interventions began – mainly aimed at building institutions and starting small with grants for pilots. This laboratory approach helped distil lessons for subsequent fast-track upscaling, as other donors soon gained confidence to engage with civil society groups. The reconstruction of Guatemala slowly but surely took its first few steps. Since then, the growth in civil society participation in a variety of arenas related to the peace accords, including demobilization, land issues and judicial reform, has been quite remarkable.

Results and Critical Factors

- This case underscores the importance of donor coordination in post-conflict societies with fragile institutional frameworks. Had each donor intervened with its own unique strategy and programming requirements,

local capacities, in so far as these existed, would have been overwhelmed – leading to a donor- and development-industry-driven regime.

- A number of flexible aid instruments were applied – their essentially experimental nature allowed room for trial and error.
- The choice of civil society as the principal agent for building trust, and eventually for developing the capacity to deliver services, was a sound decision, given that this sector was the only one with credibility among the various parties to the conflict.
- The somewhat time-consuming participatory mapping exercise highlighted priority areas for engagement, identified potential implementation partners, and ensured that these partners (mostly civil society organizations) were representative of the full range array of stakeholders. Helping to develop civil society capacity in the priority areas made for smooth implementation and easy upscaling of pilot projects later on.
- UNDP played a pivotal role in anchoring the process in Guatemala, mediating between the factions, earning the faith of the various actors stepping forward as the conflict ended, and then helping to nurse smaller pilots until other donors were ready to work with civil society organizations. UNDP itself learned much about engagement with civil society – and more so under difficult circumstances.

Further information

A. Russell. 2000. “Reviving Civil Society in Guatemala: Learning from UNDP’s Experience.” In *Changing Policy and Practice from Below: Community Experiences in Poverty Reduction. An Examination of Nine Case-Studies*. Edited by Anirudh Krishna. New York: UNDP, Civil Society Team.

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(www.undp.org/csopp/CSO/NewFiles/about.html).

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