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**A PEACE PROCESS FOR  
AND WITH SYRIANS:**

HOW CANADA CAN  
ENSURE A LASTING  
PEACE IN SYRIA



Development  
and Peace  
CARITAS CANADA



PHOTO MATTHIEU ALEXANDRE,  
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## Introduction

Development and Peace is leading a national advocacy campaign which calls on the Government of Canada to show leadership in its response to the crisis in Syria. Among the policy proposals, Development and Peace recommends that:

**“Canada must absolutely strengthen its work on the international diplomatic front to find a lasting peace through political rather than military means, and bring the voice of Syrian civil society to the negotiating table.”**

In a war that has seen civilians themselves, as well as hospitals, schools, and markets as targets in the conflict, Canada must ensure that Syrian civil society, including Syrian women’s organizations, play a distinct role so that their voices are heard during the negotiations and during the eventual reconciliation process. Canada should show leadership by creating parallel, secure avenues that would enable groups from Syrian civil society to express their priorities and to engage in the peace process currently led by the United Nations.

For a lasting peace, the process must come from within the region, taking into account the perspectives of representatives of Syrian civil society, rather than solely armed groups. As has been proven in previous peace processes, a sustainable peace cannot be imposed from the outside. A political process led by Syrians which includes the participation of women and marginalized ethnic and religious groups must be the foundation of peace and reconciliation in Syria.

## The importance of civil society participation

Despite being confronted with difficult dilemmas and risky realities, civil society actors can make significant contributions to peace processes. The inclusion of civil society organizations (CSOs) in peace processes and the empowerment of civil society are increasingly recognised as essential factors in post-conflict peace building, especially in the establishment and consolidation of democratic structures. Their capacities may assist in creating the conditions for talks, shaping the conduct and content of negotiations, building confidence between the parties, and influencing the sustainability of peace agreements. However, local CSOs rarely get a seat at the negotiation table for peace negotiations and this absence can negatively impact the sustainability of a peace agreement. Studies surveying a wide variety of peace processes found a strong correlation between active civil society participation and the sustainability of peace during the peace-building phase. Cases in which CSOs actively engaged in peace accords seemed to enjoy more sustained peace in the peacebuilding phase (even for cases in which CSOs did not have a direct seat at the table)<sup>1</sup>. There are numerous examples of successful peace agreements where civil society played an important role, including:

- **Mozambique**  
General Peace Agreement signed in Rome in 1992
- **Guatemala**  
Peace Accords signed in Guatemala City in 1996
- **Sierra Leone**  
Ceasefire Agreement signed in Abuja in 2000
- **Liberia**  
Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in Accra in 2003

Civil society actors can assume a variety of roles and their contributions can take many forms. These roles are clustered into four broadly distinct and complementary approaches for the purpose of this short overview:

### 1. Advocating dialogue as an alternative to armed violence:

CSOs contribute to shaping the social and political context necessary for sustainable dialogue and agreement between the opposing groups, and may add moral authority, in the case of religious leaders. In societies where violence has become the dominant mode of conflict resolution, CSOs can catalyze public mobilization for peace through demonstrations and petitions, and by educating their membership and the public about non-violent approaches to conflictual issues.

### 2. Facilitating dialogue between the parties:

Civil society-led dialogue processes can build trust and understanding between the grassroots membership of divided communities; they can assist in identifying and resolving local-level conflicts which benefit the communities affected as well as build confidence between the conflicting parties; and they can create a safe, unofficial space for middle-ranking members of the conflicting parties to engage in problem-solving in advance of negotiations. In some cases, modest activities by civic actors can even lead to their acceptance by the leadership to mediate formal negotiations.

### 3. Monitoring compliance and violations and ensuring accountability:

Local and national human rights organizations can document violations and provide accurate information on atrocities committed during armed conflict. Human rights advocates can ensure that peace processes and agreements address the structural injustices that gave rise to the conflict, and ensure accountability of and effective sanctions against perpetrators of violations, which ensures that peace agreements do not perpetuate injustice, discrimination or a climate of impunity.

### 4. Participating at the negotiating table:

Consultative mechanisms create spaces for non-combatant groups to contribute their views on the issues discussed in formal negotiations, and facilitate greater participation by women and youth. In divided societies, representative decision-making mechanisms are essential in creating sufficiently inclusive processes that can be “owned” by a broad cross-section of the population, rather than solely by political leaders or armed groups, and are then less vulnerable to sabotage or breakdown<sup>2</sup>.



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## Syrian civil society

Before the revolution started in March 2011, most CSOs in Syria were either banned or controlled by the government. Except for charities with no political or advocacy agenda, active organizations were not allowed to be formed nor to operate inside the country. When the domino effect of the Arab Spring reached Syria, it marked the awakening of civil society on all levels and peaceful activists have played a very important role since then. Initially convening spontaneously in order to organize demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience, they have since established a multitude of groups and networks across Syria, campaigning for democracy, justice, equality and respect. Many activist groups have also become engaged in distributing relief aid and providing medical, educational and other services to Syrians in need in response to the dire humanitarian situation. Most of the CSOs in Syria are relatively small and their influence is mainly local. Young Syrians between 16 and 30 years of age play a significant role in CSOs while women's participation is weak but increasing. Civil society activists inside Syria and in the diaspora are targets of the Syrian regime, war lords, and extremists, because of their relentless efforts to take non-violent action against abuses. The main challenges facing CSOs in Syria are the dangers they face and their limited financial, logistic and technical resources. Despite these enormous challenges, numerous CSOs are still active in Syria and play a crucial role in counteracting the influence of a variety of military, political, economic and extremist groups and individual warlords.

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## Why should women be involved?

Women are too often left out of peace deals because of the exclusive nature of political negotiations. The Graduate Institute's Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) in Geneva has conducted 40 in-depth case studies on the role of women and gender during political negotiations and their implementation. Their main findings were:

### The quality participation of women's groups is correlated with positive negotiation outcomes:

When women's groups were able to strongly influence negotiations or push for a peace deal an agreement was always reached. Even when there was only some involvement of women's groups, agreements were mostly reached. When women's groups were not involved, the chance of reaching an agreement was considerably lower.

### Quality participation by women's groups is correlated with positive implementation outcomes:

When women's groups were able to exercise a strong influence, the chances of agreements being implemented were much higher than when women's groups could only exercise moderate influence or when women were not involved at all.

### Numbers are not all that matter:

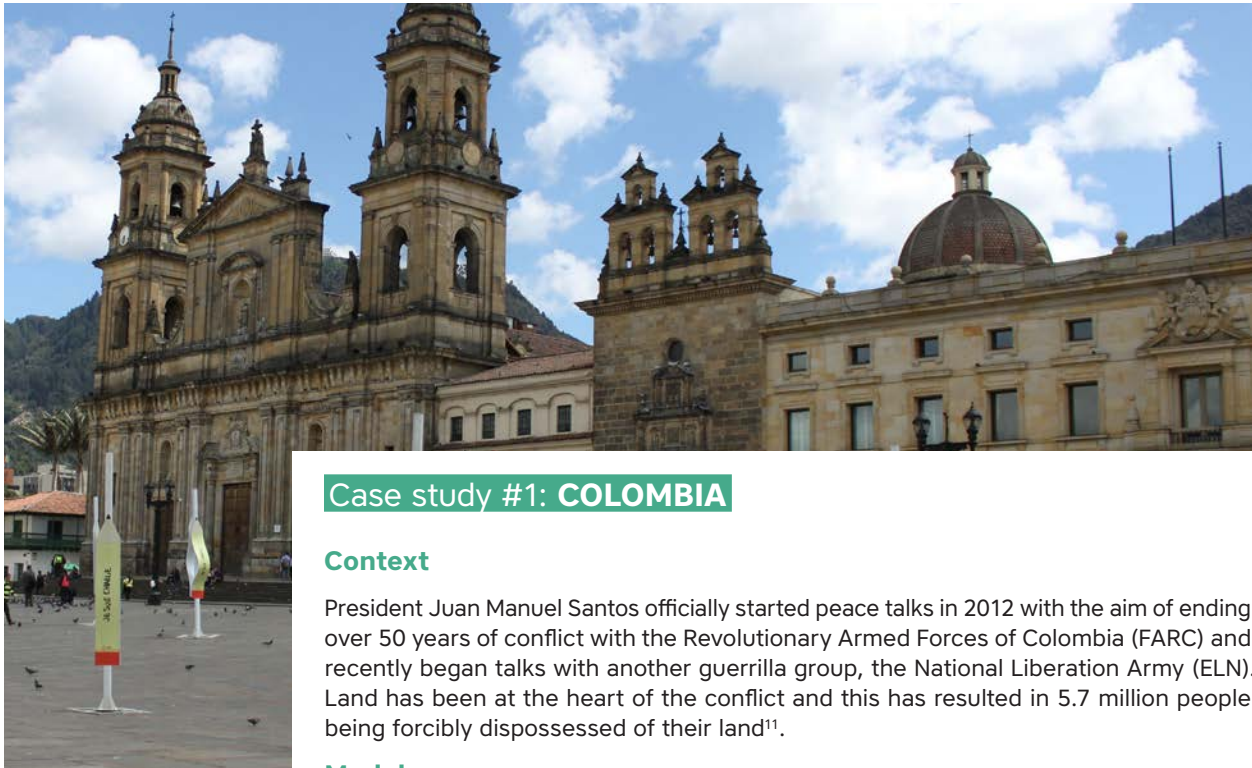
The findings on quality participation by women demonstrate that it is not simply enough to increase the number of women involved, rather it is their ability to exercise influence that counts.

### Women's inclusion does not only take place at the negotiation table:

There remains an excessive focus on the negotiation table as the locus of the peace and transition process. However, inclusion can take place during all phases of the process and at varying distances from the table<sup>3</sup>.

## Canada and the UN Security Council Resolution on Women, Peace and Security

Canada is a strong supporter of international laws and mandates regarding women's rights and empowerment, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325)<sup>4</sup>. Canada was on the Security Council when it unanimously adopted Resolution 1325 on October 31, 2000<sup>5</sup> thereby urging "all actors to increase the participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all United Nations peace and security efforts"<sup>6</sup>. More specifically, "the resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security"<sup>7</sup>. Canada is also a founding member and chair of the "Friends of Women, Peace, and Security" coalition in New York and often convenes forums that promote dialogue on progress and challenges of implementing UNSCR 1325<sup>8</sup>. To ensure the implementation of the principles of UNSCR 1325, in 2001 Canada created the Canadian Committee on Women, Peace, and Security. This committee is comprised of parliamentarians, government officials, and civil society representatives.<sup>9</sup> More recently, Canada launched its National Action Plan (NAP), "Building Peace and Security for All" in 2010, which includes "Participation-advocating for the active and meaningful participation and representation of women and local women's groups in peace and security activities, including peace processes"<sup>10</sup>.



## Case study #1: COLOMBIA

### Context

President Juan Manuel Santos officially started peace talks in 2012 with the aim of ending over 50 years of conflict with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and recently began talks with another guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN). Land has been at the heart of the conflict and this has resulted in 5.7 million people being forcibly dispossessed of their land<sup>11</sup>.

### Model

Organizations of farmers, Indigenous peoples, Afro-Americans and women's associations have been involved in a "network of grassroots peace initiatives" since 2011. Participation by civil society is the subject of one of several sections of the General Agreement that has guided the negotiations. Several mechanisms have been created to allow civil society to participate, such as regional roundtables organised by the Colombian Congress, a web page, and several forums for debate<sup>12</sup>. Despite recognition by the Colombian State, women's civil society organizations (CSOs) struggled for over a year to ensure that they were represented in the frontline negotiating team in Havana. This struggle culminated in a Summit in Bogota on Women and Peace in October 2013 where over 400 women called on the government to appoint women to the negotiating team and to give women a leading role in the construction of peace<sup>13</sup>. This Summit was supported by UN Women, and with support from several countries<sup>14</sup>. In August 2014, the talks included a delegation of survivors of crimes perpetrated by guerrillas, paramilitaries and by the State. The decision to hear the testimonies of 60 victims of human rights violations was unprecedented and suggests recognition of civil society as a contributor to and builder of peace in Colombia<sup>15</sup>. Finally, in September 2014, a dedicated gender subcommittee was established at the talks with a mandate to ensure a gender perspective and that women's rights are integrated into all agreements.

### Impact

In November 2013, the government appointed the first two women to their negotiating team and at times, one-third of delegates in Havana have been women, still far from parity but above global averages<sup>16</sup>. The delegation of survivors included 36 women, accounting for more than 60 per cent of participants<sup>17</sup>. The victims' delegations participating in the peace talks raised a range of issues, including: the need for an immediate and definitive ceasefire; the importance of truth, the recognition of responsibilities, restitution of rights and guarantees of non-repetition as the basis of reconciliation and forgiveness; justice, not revenge, as a right in order to construct peace; the immediate need to remove landmines laid by all the groups; the truth about why they were forcibly displaced and who the authors of these crimes were and the need to return land to indigenous, peasant and Afro-Colombian communities<sup>18</sup>.

## Case study #2: DARFUR, SUDAN

The Institute for Inclusive Security in Washington analyzed women's involvement in the Darfur peacebuilding process<sup>19</sup>.

### Context

The Inter-Sudanese Peace Talks on Darfur, organized by the African Union (AU), began in July 2004 in N'Djamena, Chad and moved then to Abuja, Nigeria. The talks brought together the Government of Sudan, the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A), and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). Despite several rounds of peace talks and an AU protection force of 7,000 in Sudan, violence and broken ceasefires continued in 2004 and 2005. After seven rounds of talks, ending on May 5, 2006, the Sudan Liberation Army faction led by Minni Minawi and the Government of National Unity signed the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA). The SLM/A-Abdul Wahid and the JEM however refused to sign. While the DPA was not ultimately successful in ending the violence in Sudan's western province, the Institute for Inclusive Security has argued that the process itself stands as one of the most gender-sensitive peace agreements yet created and that women's contribution to its creation and its gender provisions offer numerous lessons for improving women's participation in negotiations<sup>20</sup>. The negotiations surrounding the DPA involved important Canadian contributions.



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### Model

To promote women's inclusion in the talks, a variety of mechanisms were developed. Advocacy by the international community and Darfurian women civil society leaders resulted in the creation of a neutral Gender Expert Support Team (GEST) and an AU gender adviser, who together acted as a technical resource to the female delegates on the formal negotiating teams and brought the voice of women in civil society to the talks. The GEST consisted of 15 women (both highly educated professionals and grassroots activists) from the three states of Darfur, and was included in the seventh round of peace talks.

UNIFEM in Nairobi, the AU Mediation Commission, the Government of Canada, and the Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) technically, logistically, and financially supported the participation of the GEST and several additional Darfurian women. Canadian Senator Mobina Jaffer, Canada's Special Envoy for Peace in Sudan from 2002 to 2006 and Chair of the Canadian Committee on Women, Peace, and Security from 2002 to 2005, helped women develop strategies to lobby within their delegations<sup>21</sup>.

### Impact

Women's participation increased as the talks continued, increasing markedly by the seventh round in 2005-2006, as more women participated in the delegations and as advisors. The Government of Sudan included two women in its delegation, and several others were part of the delegations from the SLM/A and the JEM.

Women's participation highlighted the need for protection and security of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. The GEST raised issues of common interest between the parties—such as food security—that effectively served as confidence-building measures. The final agreement included calls to improve women's participation, increase protection from gender violence, and recognize women's role in peace building. The GEST interacted directly with all official women delegates to develop a common position paper, "Women's Priorities in the Peace Process and Reconstruction in Darfur." Women significantly shaped the final round of the negotiations and the DPA. Women on the formal negotiating teams participated in all three official commissions—wealth sharing, power sharing, and security arrangements. The GEST successfully advocated for attention to property ownership, economic empowerment, and human rights issues that negotiating parties previously neglected.

## How can Canada increase the engagement of civil society in Syria?

### Through humanitarian assistance:

- Develop funding mechanisms that promote local participation and provide financial support to Canadian organizations that channel humanitarian funding directly to national and local NGOs in Syria thereby putting responsibility in the hands of people most affected by the crisis<sup>22</sup>.
- Focus on those who are most vulnerable, especially women and girls.
- Integrate capacity-building of CSOs even during the humanitarian response phase.
- Provide financial support to the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) which integrates humanitarian and resilience interventions, strengthens national ownership and ensures alignment with national and local development planning, and refocuses investment in local delivery systems, particularly municipalities<sup>23</sup>.

### Through development assistance:

- Provide forums to CSOs so that they can exchange and debate ideas, visions and projects. This would help to overcome the divisions between different groups in the society, enhance the implementation of projects, as well as create a sense of unity and belonging.
- Support NGOs, CSOs, and faith-based organisations (FBOs) to organize seminars and trainings on both peace and reconciliation and on human rights. For a successful peace process, communities at the grassroots level must accept and embrace the concepts of peace and of reconciliation, and there must be mutual respect for human rights<sup>24</sup>.

### On a bilateral and multilateral basis:

- Conduct sustained advocacy for the engagement of CSOs and especially women in the negotiation process. By facilitating communication and providing a platform for dialogue, CSOs contribute positively to conflict management processes.
- Conduct sustained advocacy for the engagement of CSOs in the reconciliation process. They can do advocacy and promotion at the grassroots levels, and participate in various bodies involved in reconciliation processes.

### Especially in regard to women:

- Commit up front to women's participation by conducting sustained advocacy for women's participation in the negotiation process and in the reconciliation process.
- Advance international norms and standards, especially regarding the implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.
- Create incentives for negotiating teams to include more women on the formal teams.
- Give gender expert technical teams more access so that they can be a greater resource.
- Create more formal opportunities for women to caucus within and across parties during negotiations.
- Provide security to women to ensure their participation in the negotiations.
- Offer specialized logistical support to women delegates<sup>25</sup>.
- Organize round tables with Canadian civil society organizations across Canada to support Syrian women in peace process (as it was done for Sudan, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka)<sup>26</sup>.





PHOTO SAM TARLING, CARITAS

## 9 models to broaden participation in practice

While in some cases all relevant groups can have a seat at the negotiation table, this might not always be possible. The Geneva-based Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies' Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue has proposed a variety of means to broaden participation of civil society and women in practice. The following nine participation options can take place in parallel or sequentially:

1. Direct representation at the negotiation table such as national dialogues
  - Women inclusion within delegations
  - Women's own delegations
2. Observer status for selected groups and direct presence during the negotiations
3. Consultations, before, parallel to, or after official negotiations
  - Official / unofficial
  - Elite / broader / public
4. Inclusive commissions
  - Post-agreement commissions
  - Commissions conducting peace processes
  - Permanent bodies
5. Inclusive post-agreement mechanisms, participation of societal and political actors in implementation institutions and mechanisms
6. High-level civil-society initiatives such as high-level problem-solving workshops
7. Public participation, involving the broader population via public hearings, opinion polls, town hall meetings or signature campaigns
8. Public decision-making, referenda and other elective forms
9. Mass action, street demonstrations, rallies, etc.

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PHOTO PATRICK NICHOLSON,  
CARITAS

## Conclusion

In peace processes, civil society actors widen the agenda of issues debated; ensure greater emphasis on structural causes of the conflict; enable broader ownership of agreements reached; and facilitate political reconciliation between participants. It is therefore crucial for the international community, including Canada, to support Syrian civil society organizations in overcoming challenges and provide them with more opportunities and space to engage in international peace talks. This financial and political support should be done in ways that respect their realities and needs on the ground and should include protection. The work of young activists and women must be facilitated, encouraged and promoted through media, and their voices must be amplified so that they can continue their battle for peace and justice. They are the foundation on which to build a peaceful and inclusive Syrian society where human rights are respected and celebrated and where participative democracy is promoted.

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