

Peace Work and Networks. The Case of the Cameroon Network of Human Rights Organisations - RECODH

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Intro

The relationship between peace and network building, although important, is not easy to analyse. We would like to shed some light on the problem and then present the case of the organisation RECODH, exploring ways forward.

Let's take a look at global terror threats. Attacks happen wherever we are, it seems, on all continents, in capitals as well as at the margins. Terrorism appears omnipresent, at least at first glance. And this has a lot to do with – networks. Daesh, IS and other terrorist collectives perform as highly efficient networks – violent and brutal because of their connections and coherence. Collective violence and networks do not contradict each other. On the contrary, analysing terrorist networks has become almost a key discipline not only in security studies.

Even more, in places where civil peace service efforts are at risk of being overshadowed by the impact of terrorism, we really need to face the social complexity at stake when reflecting on strategies for peacebuilding.

Lessons from Peace Research

In search for suitable peace concepts both the idea of connectivity and the distinction between negative versus positive peace are already implied in the early research by Johan Galtung (Johan Galtung, *A Synthetic Approach to Peace Thinking* (Ms. Unpublished, Oslo 1967) published in 2005 by transcend.org). A “connected peace theory” (Galtung, p. 27) looks for connections between peace and development as well as conditions, “means to obtain peace” (Galtung, p. 50) or consequences of forms of peace. Complexity is accounted for through analysing “the world as a set of related groups of related individuals” (Galtung, p. 53) and more systematically by what Galtung calls “associative approaches to peace problems” (Galtung, p. 63) – we will come back to this.

At the same time, since its inception, we find in Galtung's peace research the distinction between negative and positive peace: What defines a state of peace in a more appropriate manner than just calling it the “absence of organized collective violence”?

What characterizes peaceful social life, i.e. life with “a wide range of actions open to themselves (the people)”, Galtung suggests we ask ourselves. Perhaps that is what today we might coin “good life”. It is interesting to see at that early stage of theory building that the concept of peace did not refer to human rights but to the following list of “positive relations” or values: 1. Presence of cooperation, 2. Freedom from fear, 3. Freedom from want, 4. Economic growth and development, 5. Absence of exploitation, 6. Equality, 7. Justice, 8. Freedom of action, 9. Pluralism, 10. Dynamism.

Johan Galtung's search for a more comprehensive concept took into account early on what positively qualifies interaction (communication, cooperation, integration). Conditions of peace, regarded from "associative approaches to peace problems" (Galtung 63), build upon interpersonal and inter-group relationships.

However, how to make sense of this in more concrete terms today? New concepts of positive peace refer to dozens of criteria when comparing different nations and the state of their society. Let's take the 2016 Global Peace Index (www.visionofhumanity.org) from the Institute for Economics and Peace (GPI). Now, positive peace is defined as "the attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies." And since this also seems a rather vague definition, the index additionally refers to Sustainable Development Goal 16 (UN) with its 21 indicators. Key is nevertheless the close connectedness of peace and justice and on the other hand strong institutions, favouring "societal resilience".

Case in point: RECODH

Speaking of the Cameroon Network of Human Rights Organisations (RECODH, www.recodh.org), we might think of a kind of umbrella alliance or coalition rather than an informal network – a set of contacts and relationships - as the result of networking. Like other associations, it has its own constitution and constitutional governance bodies. This is not to say RECODH does not need networking, on the contrary, in order to extend coverage or to reach out to more rural areas RECODH must connect and link up with still more actors. For instance, observing, watching human rights situations: are they violated or respected in certain zones? For the creation of effective monitoring, we have to build contacts with many stakeholders, also informants. And contact building means developing networks, i.e. networking.

Created in 2010, RECODH is the manifestation of the joint will of organizations working for the promotion and protection of human rights in Cameroon. According to its strategic plan, the network's vision reads: "In 2020, Cameroon shall be a country where human rights and fundamental freedoms are effectively respected without discrimination, through the performance and credibility of the members and officers engaged and deployed nationally."

Typical activities of RECODH up to now include;

- Capacity building for members and others;
- Publication of reports on the human rights situation (electoral observation reports, respect for human rights in the Lom Pangar Hydroelectric Project, respect and violations of human rights in the fight against Boko Haram, human rights situation during ongoing evictions in the city of Douala, etc.);
- Organization of conferences: on freedom of assembly and public events (2014), first national forum on human rights in Cameroon (2015);
- Defence of human rights activists in conflict with the law and authorities.

RECODH's members are human rights organization across the whole country, its target groups: firstly, the member organisations; secondly, Cameroon population in general and especially vulnerable social groups in targeted areas of Cameroon.

With several regional members and network branches already active for several years, a special focus on organizational regionalization has been applied since 2015, achieving the effective running of regional coordination boards in all ten regions. Last year for example, RECODH Littoral carried out an action research project on forced urban resettlements; and RECODH Centre implemented a public forum and parallel events on the occasion of the International Human Rights Day (10th December) in Ngoro, Central Region, in cooperation with the Civil Peace Service as well as the National Commission for Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

Thus, RECODH's new regional focus has become part and parcel of the running of the network, coordination teams in all ten regions of Cameroon link local member organisations (sub-division and division level) via focal points to the regional and national levels. What really gave decentralization a boost is RECODH's strategy process since late 2015, including, for instance, the strategic objectives, indicators and actions to be broken down into the specific regional realities. In order to facilitate the top down and bottom up communication of strategic processes, four interregional workshops gathered representatives and members from all network levels and places. Thus there is one strategy but ten ways of implementation, so to speak. And at national level some things like global advocacy are easier than at local, while some human rights violations are most prominent in rural zones far removed from the capital, thus outreach programs are a must as well as the monitoring of local situations in the regions.

The multi-level network approach opens up new ways to respond to several challenges citizens encounter in Cameroon. First of all, public or state decentralization is still emerging, if advancing at all; and the capital institutions or infrastructures are far away for most people. So, civil society especially needs connections between the centre and the other parts of the country when problems are to be tackled. Peace problems and peace needs result – according to the Civil Peace Service Program Strategy – especially from certain social dynamics which can be described as fragmentation and segregation. Again, we are facing disintegration tendencies between the different parts of the country or regions, for instance the English speaking versus French speaking, the so called great North versus the South etc., not to mention even more particular tribal or clan differences. (On a lighter note, segregations are too many to be overcome by dyads or intermarriages.)

Like civil society in general, the RECODH network of course needs considerable capacities aimed at bridging the above-mentioned gaps. Data flow resulting from local monitoring activities – let's say referring to specific human rights violations - might seem to be a simple starting point. But already the internal governance ruling the CSO network and enabling it to set up such monitoring, to keep the same example, needs deliberations, if possible by everyone at all levels and in all the regions. However, that might not always be possible for or before decision-making. Here again, decentralization is still a work in progress.

Meaningful consultations among members across the regions and geographical levels require suitable chains, perhaps occasions, resources, contacts, a common language or respective interpretation, know how, and readiness. In this regard, the network building has just begun. But the ground covered so far looks promising.

Is the realm of human rights and human rights defence especially favourable for associative approaches to peace building? Peacebuilding has as much in common with human rights defenders as it has in common with the work of conflict resolution. Reasons can be given from at least two points of view. Firstly, the goal of positive peace construction always builds upon some minimum consensus of respect of human rights in society and state. No (lasting) peace where there are (massive) violations of human rights. Secondly, and perhaps even more relevant in our present context, the task of locally promoting and protecting universally claimed human rights – i.e. the duty of human rights defenders and their network - appears specifically important when struggling to overcome afore-mentioned gaps in society.

If the commitment of human rights defenders favours the overcoming of – problematic – segregations, fragmentations while strengthening common ground (respect of human rights) it may seem just logical that a human rights network reduces conflicts etc. Yet, in real life of course it all depends on the methods. The best intention can lead to the worst outcome if not carried out in an appropriate manner. (As said above, “IS” is a kind of strong network too.) In this regard, we hope that our multilevel network approach facilitates ways of correcting and bettering human rights situations in the country. As much as human rights are supposed to reduce violence, RECODH aims at and hopefully succeeds in promoting peace.

Conclusions

To come back to the beginning: capacities of bridging or bonding, frequently referred to as social capital, is a capital with “two faces”, as we have seen with the seemingly globally organised terrorists – that’s why there is the word of the “paradoxal power of social capital in creating and resolving conflict” (Michaelene Cox, *Social Capital and Peace Building. Creating and resolving conflicts with trust and social networks*, London/New York 2009, p. 2).

As we know from RECODH, human rights and peace work by network building brings about its own challenges but of course mainly it provides many advantages. Organisational strength is crucial and is facilitated by network alliances, as even general research shows investigating on networking and coordination between human rights activists: “African human rights organizations profit from meetings. They learn from each other, reducing the sense of isolation their leaders often experience” (Claude E. Welch, *Protecting Human Rights in Africa. Strategies and Roles of Nongovernmental Organisations*, Philadelphia 1995, p. 293, p. 297).

Supporters, members, friends, they all belong somehow to the network. Here, the decentralized RECODH has increased its social diversity as the activists differ and complement each other from region to region. This does not mean that there are no conflicts. However, *la vie associative (the association’s daily life)* gains dynamics and space of action because of its growth at various levels.