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Civil society in reconciliation: beyond the 'Cyprus problem'

Linda Lönnqvist¹, October 2008

Conversations with Cypriots or about Cyprus usually turn to 'the Cyprus problem' before long. This term refers to the longstanding division of the island: triggered by a decade of violence and foreign interventions in 1963-1974, the United Nations-enforced Green Line separates the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot populations. Between 1974 and 2003 Greek and Turkish Cypriots ('TC' and 'GC', respectively) could not meet or communicate with each other. The societies were steeped in polarised thinking and grievances. Under these circumstances, some Cypriot civil society organisations (CSOs) managed to maintain links to the other sides and work towards reconciliation. In 2006-2008 INTRAC, the TC Management Centre and GC NGO Support Centre ran a civil society strengthening programme on Cyprus, dealing indirectly with CSOs as supporters of the social basis for democracy and an open society – whether focusing on their own communities or bi-communal work. This paper discusses the experiences of Cypriot CSOs as agents of reconciliation, comparing Cyprus to other contexts and to current thinking about CSOs in peacebuilding. It is aimed at civil society actors who are interested in supporting civil society in reconciliation, in Cyprus or elsewhere.

Introduction

Cyprus, independent since 1960, has had little chance to develop a civic and democratic culture: it suffered sporadic intercommunal violence in the later 1950s, in 1963 and 1967. It has been a *de facto* divided island since 1974, with little contact between the two sides until 2003. When there have been steps towards reconciliation, in 1978, 2003 and 2008, concerned citizens have often provided the main voices for tolerance and cooperation. After decades of antagonism, reconciliation efforts need to take place at all levels of society. This is where the role of civil society in promoting the social basis of democracy, producing social trust and reciprocity and as creators of alternatives really come into their own².

Civil society can be defined broadly as the space where people join to express their interests outside of state or market structures. In the Cypriot case this means CSOs such as foundations, not-for-profit companies and associations, but also smaller numbers of research centres, universities, advisory groups, umbrella organisations and clubs (INTRAC Cyprus CSO Mapping

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¹ Linda Lönngvist is Research and Policy Officer at INTRAC

² These are three of the functions of civil society under INTRAC's classification. See 'Executive Summary: Civil society and aid in theory and practice', INTRAC August 2008 (www.intrac.org/docs.php/3138/ INTRAC%20conference%2008%20-%20civil%20society%20and%20aid%20in%20theory%20and%20 practice%20summary.pdf)

2006), trades unions and chambers of commerce. Bicommunal initiatives include organisations such as environmental conservation groups, women's groups, a history textbooks project, a young peoples' basketball club and well-established specifically reconciliation-focused groups.

Civil society on Cyprus has historically been relatively weak for an industrialised country, lacking formal support, institutional coherence and momentum for mobilisation (CIVICUS Report 2006). However, the bi-communal initiatives are an exception. In the highly politicised context of the 'Cyprus problem', these actors have kept alive the vision of commonalities and cooperation between the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities (GCC and TCC) and worked hard to achieve it when the political climate has seemed favourable – only to face repeated setbacks.

The Cypriot case of CSOs in reconciliation is discussed here with reference to literature on and experiences of civil society in reconciliation and peacebuilding internationally. The paper starts with an overview of modern Cypriot history to give the context to the current negotiations, then discusses different ways for CSOs to influence post-conflict situations and tracks Cypriot CSO activity in preparing for peace and during negotiations. It concludes with a discussion on the prospects for a unified civil society in the event of a Cyprus settlement.

What is 'the problem'? The historical context of Cyprus

The island of Cyprus is home to Greek- and Turkish-speaking Cypriots. These two groups have been divided by militarised antagonism since 1974. Tensions began in the mid-1950s, before independence from Britain. Britain was reluctant to give autonomy to the strategically located island, and the strongest fight against colonialism was fuelled by extremist nationalists in Greece and Turkey. The resulting rightwing militias, EOKA (Greek Cypriots fighting for union with Greece) and the smaller TMT (Turkish Cypriots supported by Turkey) terrorised people seen as supporting the British, and leftwing sympathisers (Anderson 2008, pp. 5-7).

When independence was eventually reached in 1960 the leaders were GC Archbishop Makarios as President, and TC Dr. Kuchuk as Vice-president with veto power. Independence came with a constitution ("the Zurich constitution") that was influenced by the interests of the US, UK, Greece and Turkey. An additional Treaty of Guarantee allowed Britain, Turkey or Greece to intervene unilaterally in the case of a breach of agreement (Anderson op.cit).

The constitution turned out to be unworkable, and tensions escalated into bouts of violence. After clashes in 1963 which "were not planned by either side, but [where] after initial random incidents, Greeks inflicted more casualties than Turks" – Turkish Cypriots, under pressure, withdrew from state posts and grouped together in enclaves for protection. The capital Nicosia was divided, with barricaded streets (Encyclopedia Britannica). After 1971 Greek Cypriot Hellenists, controlled by the junta in Athens, started a campaign of terror to assassinate president Makarios and to join Greece. In 1974 the Hellenist destabilisation efforts peaked in a coup d'etat: a military assault on the presidential palace and state structures.

Immediately Turkey, invoking the Treaty of Guarantee, sought to intervene militarily in the coup. These 1974 events are the turning point for the 'Cyprus problem' and the division of the island today. The Turkish army invaded and occupied the northern two-fifths of the island, driving Greek

Cypriots to the south. Estimated casualty figures are in the region of 4,000 Greek Cypriots deaths, with 12,000 wounded. Proportionately as many Turkish Cypriots also died in reprisals (Anderson 2008:18) – the official number being 800 persons in 1974 (Peter Loizos personal communication, citing Sant Cassia 2005). Soon TCs were crossing the line to settle in the northern part of the island, both out of fear and, later, under pressure from the Turkish authorities (Anderson 2008:19-20). Thousands of people lost loved ones, homes and land, and were internally displaced. The UN stationed troops on Cyprus and maintain a buffer zone (the 'Green Line') across the island.

Essentially, the two communities were closed off from each other after this time. Refugees settled in others' evacuated properties, thousands of persons remained missing, political positions hardened into propaganda. In 1983, Turkish Cyprus declared unilateral independence as the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus, recognised only by Turkey. The main leaders during this time, Glafcos Clerides in GC and Rauf Denktash in TC, made high-level agreements about the island's shared future in 1977 and 1979 (Bülent Kanol, personal communication October 2008) but there was little political momentum to solve the 'problem'. Nevertheless, Cyprus made significant progress in terms of economic development, education and improving living standards during this time. However, the TC economy has not prospered as much as the GC and remains heavily dependent on mainland Turkish subsidies.

The biggest movements for reconciliation took place in 2003 with the 'Annan Plan' – a UN-sponsored plan setting out a new system for governing Cyprus in a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation. It was accompanied by the first opening of crossings across the Green Line. There were emotional scenes as Cypriots saw their old homes for the first time in decades. A UN-sponsored bi-communal Committee for Missing Persons was set up in 2006 to exhume and identify bones – providing much-needed closure for the relatives.

This took place in the run-up to Cyprus' accession to the EU (and, complicating matters further, while Turkey was negotiating its own EU accession). The Annan Plan proposed the creation of the United Cyprus Republic - a loose confederation of the two communities joined together by minimal governance (Marriott 2007). The proposal received a favourable vote from 65% of the TCC, but was rejected by over 75% of the GCC. Since both communities needed to approve the plan, it was not implemented and reunification did not take place. Greek Cyprus joined the EU in 2004 alone. Some of the most significant civil society activities for reconciliation took place in TC preparing for the Annan Plan referenda, mobilising people to vote 'yes'. This and other methods and functions of civil society throughout Cyprus for reconciliation are discussed below.

The historical events of 1963-1974 are understandably still central for Cypriots. One example of the level of complexity and intensity generated by any discussion of the 'Cyprus problem' may be seen in the recent Guardian newspaper's article on the start of talks between GC and TC leaders in July 2008. The online discussion following the article comprises 71 comments from over 20 contributors, ranging from the impassioned to the pragmatic, reflecting the range of opinion triggered by any mention of a 'solution' (Pitas: July 2008 and comments).

Nonetheless, there are urgent pressures for a solution: TCs want to end their isolation, benefit economically from EU membership, and be able to travel and represent their country. GCs want to

end the Turkish military presence on Cyprus. All want the chance to return to their origins, reclaim property and end the current legal and regulatory complexities. There are also human values involved of peace and equality, communication and getting to know 'the others' again.

Cypriot civil society

Cypriot civil society exists in a situation where party politics dominate "virtually every aspect of the public sphere" (CIVICUS 2006) and where CSOs tend to be affiliated to a party; where intolerance in society is high, and where economic growth and improved quality of life have come about quickly *despite* the division of the island. According to CIVICUS, conducting the first mapping of Cypriot civil society, in 2006 it was fragmented and less than efficient. The CIVICUS civil society index below shows Cypriot scores out of a maximum of 3:

	Southern part	Northern part of
	of Cyprus	Cyprus
Structure of civil society	1.3	1.0
Environment in which civil society is located	2.1	1.6
Extent to which civil society promotes social values	1.9	1.6
Impact of civil society on society at large	1.8	1.2

This means that the structure of civil society in GC was considered 'slightly weak', and 'weak' in TC. The impact of civil society was considered 'moderate' in the Southern part and lower in TC. Also, bi-communal cooperation between GC and TC citizens was seen as 'very limited'. This is partly because most CSOs are run by activists who are passionate about their cause, but have few resources to professionalise their operations: most are run by volunteers in their spare time.

A range of different factors hinder cooperation between TC and GC CSOs. These constraints include psychological and personal factors (distrust, prejudice, bad experiences, lack of exposure), historical (persecution, violence, displacement and dispossession), political (rhetoric, fomenting mistrust, negative portrayals of 'the other' in media) and regulatory factors (the unrecognised status of the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus and the resultant difficulty in forming island-wide networks). Bicommunalism is seen as a risky area to engage in – less politicised activities enjoy easier access to funds and support (INTRAC Needs Assessment 2006:9). The rejection of the Annan Plan in 2003 also demoralised many civil society activists (op cit:10). These factors are the background to the efforts of peacebuilding-minded CSOs' efforts.

Civil society's roles in reconciliation

The functions of civil society in reconciliation are many and complex. Reconciliation in this case involves a politically negotiated solution that allows a functioning government for both sides of the island and ends the isolation of Turkish Cyprus. PRIO (the Peace Research Institute, Oslo) lists different levels of cooperation: 'co-existence', 'reconciliation', 'peacebuilding' (more than an absence of fighting) and the biggest prize – a functioning political and territorial 'solution'.

The involvement of civil society in post-conflict reconciliation is most legitimate if we understand peacebuilding as going beyond simply the end of conflict, but as "establishing the socioeconomic conditions for peace" – addressing the root causes of conflict in everyday life or 'conflict transformation' (World Bank 2006:7). In the concept of multi-track diplomacy pioneered by John

Paul Lederach (cited in op.cit:5), civil society has a role away from Track 1 or official negotiations, by practicing conflict-resolution, engaging people and inputting into formal processes. It should be stressed that civil society can potentially have a much wider peacebuilding role than the one that has taken place in Cyprus: for example, an active advocacy role or facilitating relationships and inter-group dialogue (Merkel and Lauth 1998 cited in op.cit: 12).

The Cypriot context can be compared to other areas where populations have lived in segregated spaces in a situation that may feature occasional violence but is not 'officially' in a state of violent conflict: Northern Ireland and Apartheid South Africa being two examples. Following decades of violence and antagonism, reconciliation needs efforts at all levels of society, and this is where civil society's roles in promoting democracy, producing social trust and reciprocity, and as creators of alternatives come into their own. The South African transition to democratic rule was supported by civil society groups such as churches, sports associations, NGOs and trades unions (Meyer speech 7.6.2008). In Cyprus this has been achieved with individuals who have undergone bicommunal mediation training; participants in common youth camps or workshops; members of bicommunal groups (working on the same issue with both TC and GC participants) and monocommunal organisations whose aim is peacebuilding. Looking at the Merkel and Lauth model (World Bank 2006:12) we can see that Cypriot CSOs have worked to some extent on awareness raising, participation in official peace processes, working for tolerance and conciliatory mindsets, and attempts to build bridges between people and heal societal cleavages. However, these are the activities of a minority of active Cypriots, and a minority of Cypriot CSOs.

Cypriot civil society in preparations for peace

Peace processes can be seen as having three phases: preparation for peace, formal negotiation and implementation/consolidation. (Oliver 2002). Cypriot CSOs have made great efforts during a political impasse when their role has been to "prepare society for change" (Hadjipavlou and Broome examples), widely acknowledging that the bi-communal groups would be the main ones with a track record of understanding how to work with each other in the event of a solution.

According to Quintin Oliver, "the preparation phase is [...] a time for mobilising voices, formulating substantive agendas, designing processes and developing a popular constituency of interest to support and engage in conflict resolution" (Oliver op.cit). The Cypriot bi-communal movements have mobilised voices (notably for the 2004 referendum on the Annan Plan in the TCC) and formulated agendas (according to Ben Broome, many of the ideas that were formulated in the Annan Plan first saw the light in bi-communal workshops – Broome 2006:96).

They have also, to a lesser extent, 'developed a popular constituency of support'. A report by Sitas, Latif and Loizou (2007:54) that correlated demographic background factors of Cypriots with their attitudes to reconciliation showed that involvement in bi-communal NGOs and being active in civil society were both among the top ten characteristics of those who support a settlement.

Many notable achievements of Cypriot civil society 'only' take place on the personal level. But this level can be very significant: in a society where it was impossible for most Cypriots to cross the Green Line between 1974 and 2003, bi-communal activities kept open a small space to interact

with persons from the other side. Their insistence on more freedom of movement played a part in the authorities' decision to open crossings across the UN buffer zone in 2003 (Broome 2006:96).

In many ways bi-communal activities provided the only contact between the two sides and allowed basic but essential links to be formed, for example:

- Understanding the hopes and fears of the other community and preventing them from being entirely lost
- Ameliorating the memories of past traumatic events allowing persons to see the other community as other than perpetrators of violence
- Creating a forum where difficult issues can be discussed productively away from posturing, polarisation and propaganda. (Broome, op.cit).

This ethos was also part of the Cypriot Civil Society Strengthening Programme. Representatives of GC and TC organisations interacted and cooperated at joint training courses and events, sometimes meeting counterparts working on the same issues from the other side – or rediscovering old acquaintances. The informal networking that arose strengthened participants' sense of belonging to something bigger – 'civil society' – throughout Cyprus (INTRAC CCSSP final evaluation, 2008). Such 'social glue' is crucial not only for reconciliation but democratisation and civic empowerment.

Before 2003 the bi-communal mediation workshops (run mainly by American experts through the Fulbright Commission) have done a great service in accustoming Cypriots to each others' views and beliefs, in a safe environment. There have been positive follow-on effects, such as having workshop participants who are sensitised to the views of 'the other side' in positions of influence (Öztoprak 2000:4). Some of the most noteworthy civil society activities during this time included:

- Following clashes in 1996 at Dherynia in the buffer zone, a bi-communal activity was convened at Ledra Palace by the UN at the insistence of bi-communal groups. Thousands of people attended.
- In 2002, 86 organisations (mainly NGOs and the Chamber of Commerce) signed the Common Vision document calling on the GC and TC leaders to come to a settlement, outlining criteria for a solution.
- A coalition of 91 NGOs, opposition political parties, the Chamber of Commerce and trade unions united under the banner 'This Country is Ours' and mobilised demonstrations in favour of the Annan Plan. It is estimated that 60-80,000 people took to the streets.
- TC women's demonstrations during Denktash-Clerides dinners the women chanting "It is enough, reach an agreement and let's join the EU together" (Hadjipavlou and Kanol 2007:24).

Generally bi-communal demonstrations were of modest size and 3,000 participants was considered a good number. However, the TC demonstrations in favour of the Annan Plan gathered an impressive 30,000 – on the TC side. One of the central problems of reconciliation in 2003 was that the GCs failed to mobilise the same mass of people in favour of a solution (personal communication, Peter Loizos October 2008).

In 2008 there are few parallels to this upsurge of civic action. The Ledra Street opening attracted thousands of people, and the February presidential elections are a sign of changing times – and,

most notably, goodwill from the GC side. There is a sense that Cypriots are wary of investing too much emotional energy into activities that may not lead anywhere. Also, the Track 1 processes are progressing and there may be a certain amount of complacency that the leaders will find a solution – or that they should be left in peace to try to.

Cypriot civil society in negotiations

In negotiations there are certain things that civil society can do to support reconciliation and peace - and others that are beyond the scope of civil society action (RPP 2008). The main actors in reconciliation are the formal negotiators and officials in charge – "Track 1". Civil society rarely has a mandate to negotiate at this level. However, "Track 2", unofficial initiatives between citizens, are also crucial to make people feel part of, influence and accept the negotiated solution. There are clear indications that the two levels of pressure have to complement each other to achieve peace or reconciliation (RPP 2008, Chigas presentation and Meyer speech 7.6.2008). In Cyprus the momentum of civil society reconciliation activities has been tied to the state of the official negotiations: during island-wide crises and political stalemates, there has been neither enthusiasm, funding nor, at times, the physical possibilities for running bi-communal or peace-oriented activities. In the 'freeze' between TCC and GCC in 1997 following violence at the Green Line in Dherynia (Broome 2005) and setbacks for Turkey's EU accession (Öztoprak 2000:5), the buffer zone crossings were closed to civil society activists and permits for bi-communal groups to meet were denied. In contrast, when talks between the GC and TC leaders have picked up momentum, a surge in interest and funding for island-wide civil society activity follows. 2008 has been a year of positive meetings and goodwill between leaders Dimitris Christofias and Mehmet Ali Talat, the initiation of official working groups and technical committees on practical matters, opening the main shopping street in the centre of Nicosia for inter-communal crossings for the first time since 1958, and a start to negotiations from September onwards.

When formal Track 1 negotiations are happening, civil society can (RPP 2007:6):

- Fill in communications gaps e.g. selling a negotiated solution to people more widely (Broome 2006:100)
- Connect tracks 1 and 2 informing their constituencies about official events
- Synchronise domains linking progress in several domains such as policy, structural causes, strengthening the social fabric and political dynamics. According to the RPP, it is crucial that progress is seen to be made in several domains.
- Converge agendas e.g. the pressures for democratisation, economic development and conflict resolution that all supported the 'yes' vote in TCC.
- Mobilise critical mass: the fact that people feel part of a peace process appears to be more important than the results of their actions when it comes to building momentum for reconciliation.
- Empower people from targets to actors: people initially involved as 'targets' in peace processes often become involved and reach out as 'actors'; for example the Cypriot bicommunal workshop participants who became "leaders of the pro-settlement movement" reaching out to others.
- Broaden ownership of the peace process. (RPP:3-4)

The key role for civil society is to make wider society feel ownership of and part of the peace process. In South Africa this was done by televising the trust and reconciliation trials (Roelf Meyer speech at the International Civil Society Forum, Nicosia, 7 June 2008). In Northern Ireland people

have made enormous efforts through a myriad small initiatives to bring Catholics and Protestants to interact with each other, thus fostering a sense of an ongoing peace process.

One of the most impressive civil society efforts in Cypriot peacebuilding – the TC mobilisation for a 'yes' vote in the Anna Plan referendum – built on exactly these strengths. At a time when the political moment was favourable, in the run-up to the referendum in 2004, bi-communal activists and other CSOs joined forces with membership-benefit groups and set aside their differences. There were two separate 'yes' movements: the 'Common Vision' platform (led by NGOs and the Turkish Cypriot Businessmen's Association) and the 'This Country is Ours' movement (comprising public sector trade unions and political parties). "This was the first time that the TC businessmen dared to confront the establishment in the North and joined forces with the rest of civil society" (Hadjipavlou and Kanol 2007:25). When these two mobilised with public benefit organisations, the movement was able to reach the critical mass of people for 'Solution and EU' protests as well as, crucially, to link the mass movement to persons in influential positions. It is considered that the GC 'yes'-groups failed to link together to the same extent and to lobby at higher levels in a coordinated fashion (RPP 2007:6, Loizos 2006).

The question of outside support

Many of the bi-communal civil society groups that started during the division of Cyprus were stimulated and made possible through outside interventions. Non-Cypriot funders and agencies (such as the UN and USAID) were the main sponsors of bi-communal events (RPP:11, Hadjipavlou and Kanol 2008, Öztoprak 2000). Bi-communal cooperation on common issues (environment, women, education, support for sufferers of illness etc) has only recently become possible formally, funded by UNDP and permitted by authorities on both sides.

Cypriot CSOs are often linked to political parties and have been reliant on funding from a local government that (up to 2008) favoured the status quo (RPP 2006:10). This is one factor that undermined the influence of civil society in the peace process for a long time. On the other hand, using foreign funds may buy autonomy, but has other drawbacks. Funding can stimulate latent organisations – or create artificial interest in an issue (RPP:9). Again in 2008 there have been explicit calls from the UN for "a much greater role than in previous efforts for civil society in the north and south to help create political space and build public support in favour of a settlement, even if this demands compromise on both sides" (ICC 2008:8). Funding for civil society is being channelled overwhelmingly towards explicit trust-building and reconciliation projects.

In the past, bi-communal activists were regularly demonised as traitors in the media; accused of elitism, neo-colonialism and anti-patriotism, and faced capricious access to permits that allowed them to meet. The taint of anti-patriotism and the reality of elitism are in no small part due to the fact that bi-communal meetings have to take place in the lingua franca, English, and as such they are only really open to well-educated Cypriots who speak fluent English.

The use of English and restricted access to bi-communal events is a significant problem for other reasons too. Peter Loizos (Loizos 2006:188) points out that the 'managed environments' mean that the bi-communal ethos was removed from everyday life: "once you leave the workshop, you can, if you choose to, forget the whole thing". Using English as the lingua franca also excludes a large

section of Cypriots. A report by Sitas, Latif and Loizou (2007) shows that the typical Cypriot who supports a solution is male, Greek Cypriot, highly educated, from the new middle class, and not religious. Conversely, peacebuilding and bi-communal activities face a challenge in involving more women (who tend to be more apprehensive about the effects of a solution), people who live in rural areas, the working-class and Turkish Cypriots. Akova Women's Association is an good example of a TCC rural women's organisation that has become a powerhouse of civic action, improving living conditions locally and benefiting women, young people and the environment. Yet such organisations tend focus on local issues and face barriers to cooperating across communities.

The barriers for common interest NGOs to work 'across the line' are high: there are no formal registration possibilities for bi-communal networks; financial transactions in the TCC are complex, transport to meetings is cumbersome – and in addition there are the psychological and historical issues that each individual has to overcome. On the other hand, many bi-communal activists have kept up these ideological activities at great personal expense in an ethos that is far from the development sector's reliance on outside funding: "they are best understood as citizen-activists, for whom funding facilitation is a useful lubricant, but not essential" (Loizos 2006:188).

Lessons for foreign supporters of bi-communal activities are:

- Know the Cyprus context and get to know your partners
- Uncompromising equality between GC and TC partners is indispensable consultations, meetings, funding allocations etc *must* be 50-50
- Try to link up activities in varying areas, e.g. sensitisation as well as policy influencing.
- Sometimes outside influence can give the necessary 'push' to break a deadlock.
- Be wary of short-term support 'organic' local civil society takes time to mature and is very vulnerable to the sudden funding shifts that are typical of 'project society'.
- Foster empowering approaches that stimulate people as actors, not subjects. Part of this is recognising that most reconciliation activists are already highly committed and probably need a catalyst rather than a supporter.

Future scenarios - Cypriot CSOs in settlement implementation

Bicommunal CSOs are one of the few areas where Cypriots have a history of dealing with each other in constructive ways (Broome 2006:100). At the time of writing new and long-standing initiatives that build trust and contact between the TC and GC communities can benefit from an influx of support and funding. There are also other reasons to be optimistic: recent research from PRIO shows that the mood of Cypriots is broadly speaking favourable for a settlement. Sitas et al cite 'cracks in the system' appearing despite longstanding fears and the recalcitrance of elites and political classes:

- People believe that dialogue is possible
- There is a convergence about social norms
- There is an openness to forgiveness, more economic cooperation and a solution (Sitas et al 2007:63)
- The international political situation is changing: Greece and Turkey can no longer afford to stay antagonistic
- And, finally, CSOs are learning to use diplomatic language and tactics, advocate effectively and link their efforts together. (Broome 2006:104-105)

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In this moment where hope for a solution and fear of disappointment jostle for space in the public mind, CSOs' habit of organisation, exposure to the other side, vision of a common society and existing networks will need to be mobilised for the difficult journey ahead.

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