



Promising Tomorrow: Exploring the Role of Youth Movements in Reconciliation and Conflicts

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Abstract

We are living in a world of intense change in which young generations play a major role in changing the world according to the markers of their generation. Peace and justice cannot be achieved by governments or institutions alone. It is no longer appropriate to use the tactics and strategies for peace that were developed for “old wars,” which were between nation-states. The “top-down” methods of ending conflicts, such as negotiation and the drawing up of treaties alone, have thus far proven insufficient to create a promising tomorrow (Kaldor, 1999). Instead, the peacebuilding process relies on non-political youth movements around the world that collectively take responsibility for humanity. Humanity needs to be positively inspired by the vision of a better future for all through movements that promote unity in diversity and non-violence. Thus, a new alternative for peacekeeping that involves grassroots activism, often developed by youth movements that have played an important part in both ending war and building peaceful reconciliation in recent history, must be sought.

As the global era develops into maturity, many changes have taken place across the social realm. As Kaldor (1999) suggests, one of the main areas of transformation is the way human beings wage war. Contemporary wars are messy, chaotic processes, intra-state, decentralised from national control, and often waged by criminals, particularistic power-seekers, and warlords (Kaldor 1999:1,8,90). Often, they are brutal and bloody, with civilians taking the brunt of the violence as fragmented armies, police, militia, and paramilitaries compete to gain control (Kaldor:69-70,90). These new wars are causing a problem in the fields of security studies and international relations as the strategies and theories developed for the management of traditional wars are no longer relevant. Today, it can be said that injustice everywhere is a threat to justice anywhere. For this purpose, the world, more than ever before, must be united and think as one organism, as taught by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are living in a world of intense change in which young generations play a major role in changing the world according to the markers of their generation. Youth are eager for change because the world depends on them. The younger generations did not inherit the world from the elderly, but rather older generations borrowed their world. This is why young people should be encouraged to unite and to become the change they want to see in the world. This paper will, therefore, explore the role of youth movements in reconciliation of conflicts

as a solution to this mismatch between old theory and new reality. To begin with, it will lay out ‘the problem’ as outlined by Kaldor. It will then move on to consider a possible solution with emphasis on youth activism as an effective part of global civil society. Youth activism in Vietnam and Bosnia-Herzegovina will be illustrated as a powerful social tool, as will the growing global networks of youth movements for peace. It will conclude that Kaldor’s prediction of a global civil society as a basis for perpetual peace is a strong contender as a solution to the new wars problem.

“One way of implementing grassroots activism is through youth movements within the global civil society.”

In the 1990s Mary Kaldor realised that the nature of war was changing. Whereas ‘old war’ was typically a ‘top down’ affair, in which governments would implement their armies to fight with other nations on the grounds of national territory or security, new wars tended to be a melting pot of tensions within the borders of a nation between different particularistic groups (Kaldor 1999:13-30). These new wars were not fought in the name of protection and politics, but tended to be promoted through propaganda focused on fear and hate of the particularistic other (Kaldor 1999:114). Of course, in reality, often these particularistic groups who found themselves at loggerheads were previously neighbours and friends—even families—who had lived together peacefully (Kaldor 1999:2). Using the example of the power of nationalist rhetoric in Yugoslavia, Kaldor develops a picture of intrastate war as a vicious and manipulative process: a cynical vehicle to gain power by any means necessary.

Kaldor realised that traditional ‘top down’ methods of ending wars, such as negotiation and the drawing up of treaties, were not going to work with new wars (Kaldor 1999:119). It was not appropriate to give the power to make positive change to those who found it more financially beneficial to keep the war going, nor did it seem morally right to give a voice to those who supported and implemented ethnic cleansing and genocide (1999:120). Instead, Kaldor outlines a cosmopolitan approach which promotes:

a positive political vision, embracing tolerance, multiculturalism, civility and democracy, and a more legalistic respect for certain overriding principles which should guide political communities at various levels, including the global level. (Kaldor 1999:116)

She adds that the best way of achieving this vision of tolerance is through grassroots activism, the relegitimisation of governance, and an ongoing reconciliation period. In simple terms, only by undoing the propaganda of hatred and returning to tolerance and friendship can intrastate wars be ended (1999:119). One way of implementing this grassroots activism is through youth movements within the global civil society (Held 2010:1, Kaldor 1999:120).

Global civil society is key to the cosmopolitan approach and is often identified as a non-political movement of people around the world who collectively take responsibility for

humanity. NGOs and large-scale community projects make up a large part of the global civil society movement; however, smaller movements, such as the youth movement, which promote civility and social justice can be just as important (Held 2010:30). Nguyen-Marshall (2015:43) identifies the 1960s as a pivotal moment for global youth activism as university students across the USA, Europe and Vietnam used peaceful protest and the powers of civil society to voice their opposition to the Vietnam war (2015:43). Vietnamese students are of particular interest as their ability to protest was inhibited by strict governmental policies and laws. Whilst they did protest in spite of these measures, much more powerful was their grassroots activism which paid attention to empowering their own communities (2015:48). A civil society developed within these communities which focused on self-preservation (2015:49). Although at risk of conscription, something many young men dreaded, rather than go into hiding, these young men stayed with their families, ensuring their neighbours, families and friends were getting food, and developing strategies for self-defence (2015:50). Whilst this activism may have been as small as helping elderly neighbours who might be considered 'enemies', collectively, the micro makes for a powerful macro global movement.

Another example of youth movement as part of the global civil society is illustrated by Wollentz in his observation of youth activism in Mostar in the Summer of 2016 (2019:197). As Wollentz (2019:197) explains, Mostar, in what is now called Bosnia-Herzegovina, was considered 'a divided city' for many years after the Bosnian war. Separated and exclusive ethnic identities dominated the social make-up which had previously been united under the single national banner of Yugoslavia (2019:197). This domination of ethnic identity was rejected by a group of youths who turned a local coal mine into a temporary monument to those workers who fought for workers' rights (2019:198). By painting the coal mine in memory of these rights activists, local and state-wide media, as well as inhabitants, were invited to look beyond the post-war ethnic categorisation, towards a shared civil heritage of social power (2019:199). Wollentz argues that this desire to look back to pre-war social movements, a process which he refers to as inclusive heritage discourse, creates a new sense of post-war togetherness and social dignity unrelated to ethnic identity (2019:200).

Interestingly, after Mostar, youths across Bosnia-Herzegovina began to create similar monuments to celebrate their heritage and reclaim their post-war dignity (Wollentz 2019:2006). Other youth movements in Bosnia-Herzegovina began reclaiming their cultural heritage through art installations and performance as outlined by Kurze (2016:451-453). It has become a powerful example of how micro civil youth movements in Bosnia have repaired so much damage done during the war—a role model for other youth movements across the globe. Youth activism as a tool of reconciliation and recovery in new wars is not exceptional to Vietnam or Bosnia. There are also countless examples of how the global civil society is growing as a result of these young men and women who desire change. In fact, as Cromwell (2019:62) argues, studies in Pakistan have shown that teaching youth the skills of peacebuilding in school results in more stable and tolerant communities in areas which experience political tension. There is perhaps something about the responsibility they have to the world that drives them, which brings about the connections needed to look beyond particularistic differences.

Of course, as youth activism is part of the *global* civil society, there are global youth movements starting to form which bring a broad range of individuals together from around the world to fight social injustice and work towards world peace (Sherblom 2006:np). Organisations such as the Youth Civil Activism Network (YouthCAN) and the Global Youth Cultural Exchange & Peace Summit (G.Y.C.P) reach millions of like-minded youths who can discuss strategies to bring about change and work together on projects which celebrate the global civil society. These groups might be present in nations where intrastate war and violence dominates everyday life, which can communicate with youth groups that have lived through intrastate wars to understand more about how to contribute to peace. The global nature of these grassroots movements is previously unseen, and their power is yet unquantified, but it is exactly what Kaldor predicted would emerge from the new global era and precisely what she described in her cosmopolitan approach for perpetual peace. The global civil society is being realised and youth activism plays a large part in its development as an antidote to war and a harbinger of peace.

“Youth activism plays a key part in building strategies to end and prevent new wars through the development of a cosmopolitan, tolerant, and responsible global civil society.”

This paper has outlined the problems caused by a new pattern of conflict described by Kaldor as ‘New Wars’. It is no longer appropriate to use the tactics and strategies for peace developed for ‘old wars’ which were between nation-states. A new alternative must be sought, and Kaldor offers her cosmopolitan approach as an option. It involves grassroots activism, also referred to as global civil society, often developed by youth movements, who have played an important part in both ending war and building peaceful reconciliation in recent history. Two notable instances of this youth activism can be seen in Vietnam and Bosnia-Herzegovina as detailed above. The activism of youth is globalising as communications become more readily available globally, and this builds up large networks which promote peace across the globe. The paper concludes that youth activism plays a key part in building strategies to end and prevent new wars through the development of a cosmopolitan, tolerant, and responsible global civil society predicted by Kaldor in 1999. It is an effective option for solving the problem of the management of new wars.

Maybe the youth are more interested in change because it is theirs tomorrow, they stay with what we leave them with; our acts define their long-term reality.

Who would not want to change chaos for peace? Maybe one who has no intention of staying longer in the chaos he creates.

All men are mortal, but their actions are eternal. If one leaves lasting peace behind, one will keep his immortal existence.

Chaos will destroy itself, and therefore everything we once created. Who would want to disappear in ashes of conflict like they never existed? Perhaps the one who did not love his soul enough to preserve its eternal existence.

For our souls to become immortal, I invite you all to create peacebuilding a culture, not something that is re-taught.

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