

Catalysing Peacebuilding in Armenia: Insights and Recommendations from Grassroot Activists

Needs assessment report, 27 October 2023

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Introduction

This needs assessment study has been commissioned by a consortium of organisations led by International Alert as part of the ‘EU for Peace 2.0’ project. The primary objective of this study is to uncover the specific needs of activists in Armenia, with the intention of formulating targeted capacity-building initiatives to support their invaluable work. This assessment specifically aims to:

- a) Explore grassroots activists’ comprehension of peacebuilding and perception of their roles in advancing it.
- b) Investigate the local environment for grassroots activism in Armenia, shedding light on the key factors that enable or hinder peacebuilding efforts.
- c) Identify the essential resources, support systems, and capacities that grassroots activists require to enhance their contributions to peacebuilding.
- d) Craft recommendations for customised capacity-building programmes driven by the expressed needs and insights of the study participants.

The study was carried out through in-depth interviews with 14 grassroots activists actively engaged in, or interested in, peacebuilding. The interviews delved into a range of issues, including their perspectives on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict in the aftermath of the 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

These interviews took place during a critical period, from 15 August to 15 September 2023, while the people of Nagorno Karabakh were enduring the ninth month of a blockade initiated by the Azerbaijani government. On 19 September, an Azerbaijani military offensive in Nagorno Karabakh led to the mass exodus of the local Armenian population. It is crucial to acknowledge that the study does not reflect these dynamic developments that are significantly altering the conflict’s context.

This context is vital to our understanding of the challenges and needs faced by grassroots activists in Armenia during a period of profound regional change. While these developments may not be covered in the study, they provide a broader backdrop to the experiences and challenges shared by the participants.

Methodology

Our primary method for data collection involved one-on-one, in-depth interviews with carefully selected grassroots activists. These interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, providing a balance between the research objectives and participants’ freedom to express their unique insights. To ensure consistency and alignment with the research goals, we developed an interview guide comprising the following key sections:

- a) **Understanding of Peacebuilding:** In this section, we aimed to explore how participants perceive the concept of peacebuilding.
- b) **Definition of Successful Outcomes in Peacebuilding:** We inquired about their personal definitions of success in the realm of peacebuilding and the indicators they use to gauge this success.

- c) **Perception of Activists' Roles and Responsibilities:** Participants were encouraged to share their perspectives on their roles and responsibilities as grassroots activists in the peacebuilding landscape.
- d) **Enabling and Hindering Factors for Activism:** We delved into the factors that facilitate or impede their activism, exploring challenges and opportunities.
- e) **Resources and Capacities Needed as Activists:** We sought to understand the specific resources, support systems, and capacities that participants felt were necessary to enhance their effectiveness as activists.

The interviews were carried out using video conferencing platforms to accommodate participants' preferences and logistical considerations. On average, these interviews lasted 35–40 minutes, ensuring a balance between depth of discussion and participants' comfort.

To maintain the utmost respect for the privacy and confidentiality of our participants, we explicitly informed them about the anonymity of the study. This assurance was given to create an open and trusting environment for sharing experiences.

The interviews were meticulously recorded and transcribed for subsequent data analysis. In the analysis phase, we systematically identified common themes, patterns, and insights that were closely aligned with the objectives of the study.

Participants

Our study focused on grassroots activists actively engaged in peacebuilding activities, or those with a keen interest in contributing to peacebuilding efforts. The process of participant selection was comprehensive and designed to achieve a well-rounded representation.

We identified potential participants by reaching out to individual activists, local organisations, and relevant networks. Initially, we identified approximately 30 potential participants who fit our criteria. To ensure a balanced and diverse representation, we applied participant quota sampling, narrowing down our selection to 14 participants. While the majority of participants were based in Yerevan, we made a concerted effort to include activists from various regions of Armenia. Additionally, one participant hailed from Nagorno Karabakh. Ensuring equal representation of genders was a top priority in our participant selection process. The age range of participants was between 19 and 30 years, with one exception.

To capture a broad spectrum of experiences, we included activists who had been involved in peacebuilding both before and after the 2020 war. Some participants had direct experience in peacebuilding activism, others were working in related areas, such as gender equality, LGBT rights, youth participation, and education. This diversity of backgrounds and interests added depth and perspective to our study.

This careful and inclusive approach to participant selection aimed to create a well-rounded sample that could offer insights into the challenges and needs of grassroots peacebuilding activists in Armenia, taking into account a broad spectrum of experiences, demographics, and interests.

Analysis and Discussion

A Closer Look at Peacebuilding: Activists' Understanding and Roles

Defining peace

When participants were asked to articulate their understanding of peacebuilding, a common theme emerged. Most participants shared a fundamental belief that defining peace is paramount in peacebuilding. Several participants reflected on how their perception of peace had evolved, particularly in the wake of the 2020 war.

A critical insight that surfaced was that the mere absence of war, often referred to as 'negative peace', falls short of the desired objective. A prevailing sentiment among the participants was that genuine peace extends beyond this absence and hinges on the achievement of a lasting and sustainable state of harmony. It was widely emphasised that the road to peace is paved with specific conditions.

In the beginning, peace for me was just the absence of war. In the process, it has developed; it has become something more complex. When you as a human being do not have certain rights, your rights are not equal to other people in the world ... the meaning of peace is that you don't have those problems, you are free, you are valued, you are a human being living a dignified life.

If, at this very moment, both Armenia and Azerbaijan say that we have a ceasefire, we do not shoot at each other, we declare peace: peace will not be created from this. In other words, the society should also be ready for peace.

Two distinctive perspectives on these conditions came to the fore. The first perspective, conveyed by a participant from Nagorno Karabakh, placed a significant emphasis on the safeguarding of human rights, particularly for those affected by the conflict. For these participants, peace equates to the vital condition underpinning people's ability to lead lives of freedom and dignity.

Conversely, the second perspective concentrated on cohabitation. Some participants contended that sustainable peace embodies the coexistence of multiple dimensions: political dialogue, social and

cultural interactions, and economic cooperation. It is, in their view, the interconnectedness of these elements that forms the bedrock of enduring peace.

Three dimensions of peacebuilding

With the participants largely centring their understanding of peace on the concept of positive peace, the discourse around peacebuilding naturally gravitated towards the essential conditions required to attain this higher form of peace.

It is the processes that take place at different levels – at the highest levels of decision-making and at the most grassroots levels, in which everyone can participate – which are aimed at creating appropriate conditions and preparing the population for lasting and stable peace.

The participants' definitions of peacebuilding relate to three distinct levels or dimensions, namely, the national, cross-border, and regional levels. These dimensions encapsulate the various spheres of activity critical for fostering lasting peace.

The discussions regarding peacebuilding at the national level were framed by the conviction that societies must be primed for peace. Participants consistently conveyed the notion of 'readiness for peace'. Within this context, participants articulated two key themes: peace education and human security.

We need to establish peace not only at the level of state authorities, to sign documents and say that we are signing a peace treaty ... but the society should also really be ready for peace. And that peace should be in our consciousness. Fixing it on paper is just a legal formulation. If we don't want real peace, if we don't contribute to living in a really peaceful society, then peace won't happen.

Participants were unequivocal in their belief that peacebuilding efforts must prioritise the promotion of informed public dialogue about the conflict and its potential resolution. Education was perceived as a pivotal tool to equip citizens with the knowledge and understanding necessary to engage in constructive conversations about peace.

Two participants broadened the perspective at the national level, asserting that peacebuilding should be seen in the broader context of human security. They argued that an effective peace dialogue cannot take place unless the physical, social, and economic security of individuals is assured. In their view, security

In a post-war country, working with vulnerable groups of the population, being able to manage crises and reduce people's vulnerability ... from the perspective of impact and scale, this is more what peacebuilding is.

and peace are intimately intertwined.

At the cross-border level, participants emphasised the significance of dialogue between the conflicting parties. While recognising the role of official negotiations between political elites from the respective countries and the role of mediation efforts by international organisations, participants expressed a strong belief in the necessity of participatory dialogue. All participants underscored the importance of involving ordinary citizens in the dialogue process. They believed that lasting peace is contingent on a dialogue that is inclusive and participatory, fostering an environment where animosity can be

Peacebuilding comprises the efforts that will contribute to a certain dialogue, to overcoming the atmosphere of hatred, to understanding each other better. Traditionally, peace and war are more under the control of states and elites, and we can contribute to the dialogue to a certain extent.

You must talk directly with the person with whom you have a conflict. If we really are talking about sustainable peace, it should be a conversation between peoples, against a background of empathy towards each other, putting aside hatred towards each other. Participatory peacebuilding is the only way to have real peace.

diminished, and trust and confidence can be nurtured.

Some participants contended that peacebuilding efforts should not be confined solely to the conflicting parties. They asserted that understanding the broader geopolitical context and identifying the interests of different states in the region is essential. For them, peacebuilding transcends the boundaries of the conflicting nations and should extend to envisioning a harmonious future for the entire region.

Desirable outcomes of peacebuilding

The question of what success means in the realm of peacebuilding posed a profound challenge for many participants, particularly in the shadow of the 2020 war. Some seasoned activists, who had dedicated

When people were slowly becoming more willing to understand the other side, the 2020 war erased that. They say, 'Look, we were favourably disposed, and what did they do?' And the work of 15 years was lost.

If we had created something drop by drop, and some common ground had been found with slow steps, this war completely ruined it. Now it is difficult for me to understand whether it is right to take the same path again.

years to peacebuilding efforts, grappled with the notion that the war had seemingly erased the fruits of their labour. A prevailing sense of despair cast a long shadow over their ability to envision success in the post-war environment. For many, the fear of failure loomed large, prompting questions about whether they should start anew and causing trepidation among less experienced activists.

Nevertheless, the discourse on the desirable outcomes of peacebuilding did yield specific expectations that can be categorised into the three levels of peacebuilding identified above.

On the national level, participants underscored the importance of achieving informed and critical public

If a certain part of the public, which is significant in influencing public opinion, renounces the rhetoric of war or hate, it will be a very great result and success. Because the attitudes of people towards each other are very hostile in both countries. [In Azerbaijan in 2020] not only the elite was in favor of the war, but also the public. If there is a gap between the public and the elite, decision-making at the state level will not be legitimate. At the moment, the ideas of the elite and the public are identical and are directed more towards the conflict, not the other way around.

discourse while reducing hateful rhetoric. They contended that public judgements about the conflict are often marred by a lack of awareness and the manipulation of information. Years of state-sponsored propaganda via public education and media had, in their view, skewed the public's understanding of the conflict. Consequently, the promotion of a critical approach within society towards the information it receives about the conflict was viewed as a pivotal outcome of peacebuilding processes.

Transparency in ongoing peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan was highlighted as a key factor. The lack of reliable information about these negotiations left people vulnerable to conflicting and manipulative narratives, often propagated by actors with specific agendas.

Crucially, all participants shared a belief that peacebuilding processes should strive to challenge public discourse that fuels hatred. A significant indicator of success would be a shift in public perception, where individuals cease viewing ordinary people on the other side as 'enemies'.

The most important thing is not to be filled with hatred towards a person you don't know. 'The Turk is my enemy' is a popular expression that is spreading. This is a way of thinking that you do not analyse yourself, it is a text that you spread. And it spreads so much that it can reach my little brother, who knows nothing about all this, and he might call someone 'Turk' as an insult. We should be able to influence the spread of such discourse.

Open dialogue within society about the conflict was also seen as a prerequisite for cross-border dialogue to be effective.

Today, we have a problem with the level of trust, first inside our country and then outside the country. In other words, we have to start addressing the issues within the country ... to understand where we are going; then let's understand how we build it across the borders.

At the cross-border level, the primary expected outcome of peacebuilding processes was deemed to be the establishment of trust and confidence between the conflicting parties through participatory dialogue.

It was emphasised that both formal and informal channels of dialogue were essential. Formal processes should extend beyond political elites to involve civil society and community representatives. Public diplomacy and alternative channels of dialogue between the societies of both countries were also seen as vital. Participants stressed that the dialogue should encompass diverse communities, including

Peace will be possible if not only the elites from both sides communicate with each other, but also the societies; if an attempt is made to ensure the communication of large segments of the societies, so that reconciliation can begin. And in the last 30 years, the solution was not found, because mainly the elites interacted with each other. As a result, nothing was achieved, and the hatred and polarisation between the two societies deepened.

business, academia, arts, media, educational institutions, and more.

The content of this dialogue was considered significant. While a wide range of topics should be covered to build trust and confidence between communities, participants emphasised the importance of addressing the ‘elephant in the room’ – the conflict itself.

However, some participants also expressed uncertainty regarding the impact of cross-border dialogue, given the continuation of the conflict and the different political realities of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Lastly, while no specific responses were offered at the regional level, the general idea was that the dialogue should extend to involve other countries in conversations about regional solidarity.

The role of activists

There was a consensus among the participants that involvement in peacebuilding is not something one can opt out of, especially given the profound impact of war on society as a whole.

Simply by being a citizen of Karabakh, it is difficult not to be involved in peacebuilding. Especially when you really want peace, and you personally bear all the consequences. It has become a part of life. It is a part affecting the quality of life. It's not like, 'Well, it's work, we did it and that's it'. No, it is a distinct life of its own.



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We are not directly involved in peacebuilding activities ... but lately, some topics related to the war regularly come up [in the LGBT community]. It is kind of impossible to avoid these topics these days. In this case, our role is to try to open a discourse about the possibility of peacebuilding processes. Our activities can also be aimed at not encouraging and spreading hatred, not having an atmosphere of hatred in our space, and generally challenging that.

When discussing the role of activists, the participants acknowledged the different realities for activists in Armenia and Azerbaijan. While the civic space in Armenia is considered more open, activists in Azerbaijan face unique and often more challenging circumstances. This causes a certain disbalance of peacebuilding efforts between the countries. At the same time, some participants expressed disappointment with the response of certain Azerbaijani peacebuilding activists to the 2020 war, noting that they seemed to support their government's decision to resolve the conflict through force.

Nevertheless, the participants highlighted a range of roles they could play in achieving the outcomes discussed earlier, irrespective of whether similar processes were happening in Azerbaijan.

At the grassroots level, activists saw their role as initiating and supporting conversations about the conflict within their communities. These dialogues could encompass family members, friends, students, vulnerable groups, border communities, and others. These discussions should address existing misperceptions by providing factual information and encouraging debates.

I always have discussions on these topics with all my relatives. Little by little, I notice that on some small issues, on which we did not agree before, now people are starting to question what they have always known 100 per cent.

I am someone who does not have hatred despite all the bad things that have happened to me. I have a good reason for hatred, but I don't have it. And with that, I at least try to set an example.



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While the importance of peace education was acknowledged, some participants believed its impact would be truly meaningful if it were implemented on a larger scale, a task they saw as primarily the

There is a lot to do in education. if we promote [tolerance] in all disciplines. ... As a [teacher], I do a lot of work related to tolerance ... because children with difficulties are often not tolerated by children without difficulties. Generally, if our tolerance increases, we will understand that it is possible to listen to different opinions; that it is possible to have a neighbour who is an adversary, but not to fight endlessly, to reach some mutually acceptable solutions.

government's responsibility. Therefore, their role was seen as supporting critical and rational discourse within their communities in various capacities, such as teachers, journalists, researchers, and students.

As members of civil society, activists said they had not only a role within their communities but also a duty to actively influence the government's agenda. This involved seeking opportunities to shape peacebuilding processes and engaging in advocacy with the government. Specific areas of advocacy mentioned by participants included the women and peace agenda, peace education, and reforms in public education, particularly concerning the study of Armenia's history and the history of the conflict.

Some participants believed their role extended to actively seeking and establishing channels of communication with people in Azerbaijan. They acknowledged that information was not as accessible to the people of Azerbaijan and, as activists, they saw it as their responsibility to provide information and support rational discourse on the other side. While social media was considered one of the most accessible means for this communication, participants also noted that dialogues could take place between different professional communities.

I see my role within the framework of my profession as a political scientist as conveying more objective, unbiased information to our public and also, to a certain extent, to the public of the enemy state, especially to the youth. There is a certain scope for cooperation – there is a similarity in certain perceptions. Provision of accurate information, interpretation and analysis is my priority.

Finally, participants recognised their role in advocacy with international organisations. They believed it was important to amplify the voices and stories of the communities they worked with using the various

I realised during and after the second war that advocacy at a higher level was very important to make the voice of the peacebuilding community heard as well. Many people deny the importance of higher-level advocacy, but without it, it is simply impossible to achieve any changes.

advocacy platforms provided by international organisations.

Navigating the Landscape: Enabling Factors and Hindrances

The significance of the context

As our interviews unfolded, it became abundantly clear that participants' perceptions of peacebuilding, their roles, and their needs were intertwined with their assessment of the peacebuilding environment. They emphasised that this assessment is an ongoing, dynamic process intrinsically linked to how the conflict's various processes evolve. Among these, the post-2020 war realities played a central role.

The war cast a long shadow, prompting many in Armenia to question their beliefs and attitudes about the conflict. For activists, it compelled a profound re-evaluation and reshaping of their roles in the peacebuilding landscape. Moreover, these transformations were taking place within the context of an ongoing, active phase of the conflict. The Azerbaijani government's persistent military attacks on Armenia and the blockade of Nagorno Karabakh were not only fuelling animosity and undercutting grassroots peacebuilding efforts but also sowing uncertainty and fear among activists.

There is a change in perceptions of our work among our beneficiaries: 'You are working in vain; don't you see that there is no result?' Often, we also believe that, if I am honest. But taking into account the breadth of peacebuilding, it should not necessarily be bilateral, it can start from our internal problems.

Many participants stressed the necessity of contextual awareness. They underscored the contrasting civic and political realities of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Armenia's democratisation and the opening of civic space were seen as enabling activists to play a more significant role in peacebuilding. However,

participants held a collective belief that the impact of their efforts would be short-lived as long as authoritarian restrictions on civil society and political diversity persisted in Azerbaijan.

Government agenda

The participants shared a belief that, for the first time in Armenia's history, there exists a genuine political will to achieve lasting peace. The Armenian government's proclamation of 'the era of peace' has empowered activists to be more open and audacious in their endeavours. However, they also voiced several concerns regarding the government's approach to peacebuilding.

The participants observed that, despite political declarations, the government's agenda for peacebuilding remained unclear. They highlighted the absence of well-defined state programmes in this domain. The only government policy addressing peace is the National Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security. Even here, resources were considered insufficient by one participant.

Today's government of Armenia has adopted a peacemaking agenda. I don't know how realistic it is. I don't know how much the risks are measured; how realistic it is for the government to advance that idea. But it still exists, and it is one of the circumstances for people like me to work on this issue in Armenia.

The government has declared an era of peace. This means that at least they understand this topic and want to have it on the agenda. Things that you do do not interfere with their agenda. The bad thing is that they don't have a specific agenda, and anybody can promote whatever they want.

There was a shared concern among the participants regarding the scarcity of information about the government-led peace negotiations. The government was seen to be more focused on peace

Being open, so that the information that is behind closed doors should at least not be behind closed doors. [Government should] have the will to speak openly with society. At least civil society ... can be helpful. When the government speaks, it is in more serious, official terms, most of the time incomprehensible, and civil society actors speak in a more human language.

negotiations and not in touch with public attitudes and expectations. This lack of transparency leaves society uninformed about the government's peace agenda. The lack of access to the details of the negotiations and the inability to influence the outcomes contribute to a sense of disconnect and mistrust between the public and the political elite.

Moreover, participants saw these negotiations as being exclusively managed by political elites, without the creation of participatory mechanisms or opportunities for broader citizen engagement. This exclusivity in the negotiation process can limit the direct involvement of the broader public, including civil society and grassroots activists, in shaping the terms and conditions of peace agreements. The participants criticised the government's top-down approach to peacebuilding, as the exclusion of public input can lead to scepticism and resistance to the peace process.

Our government is making it so that civil society does its 'dirty work'. We help them more than they help us. I would like the peacebuilding process to be from the bottom up. There is a process from top to bottom: 'This is how the negotiations are going, folks, do something to get along with each other', not 'Dear people, do you want to get along with each other?'

The states on both sides should have special working groups in which individuals with social status and influence from civil society, business, and culture are involved, and these individuals will work on some strategy that will be related to phased reconciliation. Those groups should also have immunity, a lot of autonomy, and not be connected to the state that much. But the state should create them so that they are protected.

Despite not fostering mechanisms for civil society involvement in peacebuilding processes, the government appears to expect assistance from civil society in advancing the peace agenda. Compounding the challenges, the government does not provide security guarantees for activists engaged in peacebuilding work. This lack of protection exacerbates the risks and vulnerabilities faced by these individuals.



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The government really wants peace, but it wants civil society to speak about peace on its behalf. On the one hand, they want us to talk about peace, on the other hand, they do not create guarantees for our security. It is obvious that the physical safety of [activists] can be directly threatened. Despite having had so many attacks, we don't have a single case of punishment.

Public discourse on peace

The participants observed a significant transformation in Armenia in the public discourse about peace. For years, discussing peace had been a taboo subject, often perceived as defeatist and fatalistic. However, the landscape changed dramatically in the aftermath of the war, leading to broader public discussions on peace.

The war shattered long-standing dominant narratives and myths about the conflict. It opened up conversations on topics that had previously been unquestioned. This new era of discourse also made information about the conflict's history and peace negotiations, once accessible primarily to a limited number of people in politics and academia, available to the broader public.

There were topics that were closed before the war: what was discussed in the negotiations, what solutions were offered, what options there were. We lived under the veil of the idea that Karabakh would soon become independent, and we did not imagine anything else. It was the war that lifted the veil. It also changed the belief that 'we are the best army in the region'. The fact that we are practically alone in the region also had an effect.

Participants partly attributed this shift in discourse to the willingness of political elites to break the taboo and openly advocate for lasting peace. While seen as a positive development, the participants expressed concerns about the public's limited awareness of the formal peace process. This lack of information, combined with general distrust toward the government, creates fertile ground for various political groups to manipulate the discourse on peace and spread disinformation aimed at stoking societal fear for their political gain.



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The war triggered nationalistic and revanchist narratives in Armenia. Political factions that held power before the 2018 revolution strongly criticised the government's peace agenda. Rather than presenting

There is a division according to the citizen's political orientation. You either choose the conservative current or the liberal one. The conservative current ... they are against peacebuilding and development. This is an obstacle for peacebuilding because [it is built] on the misunderstanding of peacebuilding by many, on the fears of many, justified or unjustified.

I have always advocated the position of not losing realism. [The idea] that it is possible to achieve peace with moderate concessions ... was perceived as a non-national, non-patriotic approach – the 'us or them' principle. ... 'It is a struggle for existence, we cannot [live] in the same environment.' A part [of society] continues to claim that we are in this state because of bad leadership and our traitors.

their own vision for achieving peace, these groups manipulate societal fears for security and safety, leveraging them to garner public support and attempt to change the government.

Participants highlighted that the continuous aggression of the Azerbaijani government, the humanitarian crises resulting from the war, and the blockade of Nagorno Karabakh, combined with nationalistic rhetoric in Azerbaijan, had further inflamed revanchism and nationalism in Armenia.

Our nationalists feed your nationalists, and yours feed ours. The more they pour oil on each other, the hotter everything gets. Hate shuts down normal judgement. An [activist] simply refuses to talk to Azerbaijan about opening [the Lachin Corridor] because he does not like Azerbaijanis. He prefers to go and talk with the Frenchman – and the corridor will remain closed – than to go and talk [with Azerbaijan]. How can one directly reject the conversation with the party that is blocking the way and say: I will talk to others; it will be opened?



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The situation at our borders is now creating very serious obstacles because ... before the war there were many people who were ready for peace, the discourse of peace had started to be discussed in Armenia, it had become active, and after the war, there was a big step back because many people were filled with the desire to take revenge.

The participants recognised that nationalistic narratives remain popular in Armenia due to the history of state-sponsored propaganda disseminated through various channels, particularly in public education and media. They commented that, for years, the government has promoted a particular view of national identity and the history of the conflict. These narratives, consistently presented from an early age, have influenced how several generations have perceived the conflict. This has also cultivated a climate where alternative perspectives, critical thinking, and diversity of opinion are suppressed or marginalised. It can be challenging for individuals who grow up in such an environment to critically assess and question these narratives, as doing so may be considered unpatriotic or even subversive.

The vocabulary used [in school textbooks] about the Armenian-Georgian war and the Armenian-Turkish war are very different. Because there is no perception of the enemy towards the Georgians, a military operation is written there without evaluative words, and in the case of the Turks, there are many evaluative words. Whether he wants it or not, it introduces the perspective to the student.

For decades, the theses of being invincible, of not giving up a single centimetre, entered textbooks, universities, and discourse, and even after this difficult situation in which we now find ourselves, they have not yet come out.

The trauma of the war has cast a long shadow on conversations about the conflict. Many individuals, particularly those directly affected by the war, grapple with feelings of loss, despair, and apathy. This emotional backdrop complicates discussions about peace.



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There is an atmosphere of apathy and self-deception in society; that they are not living in a post-war period, everything is normal, life goes on. Many people are not interested in the peace process, nor the opening of borders, the unblocking of communications, and other issues. One person is not interested; the other doesn't want to listen because he just feels hate, he has a friend, brother, acquaintance, student, etc. who died. That indifference, it's actually not a normal indifference, it's a depressive and stressful state. They turned on an immunity so that they don't notice, and that's it.

Public perceptions of peacebuilding activism

The participants highlighted certain shifts in public attitudes toward activists involved in peacebuilding work following the war. These shifts paint a complex picture of how peacebuilding and its proponents are perceived in Armenian society.

Participants observed that people are generally sceptical about the effectiveness of peacebuilding activism and express doubts about whether such efforts could truly bring about meaningful change.

There is no belief that this community can change anything. They also don't understand what we do. People say, 'Well, what's your business, what do you do?'

They say, 'Keep on struggling, but there is no hope'.

One participant mentioned the existence of stereotypical perceptions regarding who is considered credible to talk about peace. Youth, in particular, are often not taken seriously in conversations about war and peace, which are perceived as the domain of older men in decision-making positions in politics and the military.



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For a long time, talking about security was the business of the elite, or you had to have military connections; it is the topic of the decision-makers, the upper echelons. Not every mortal should talk about it. There is ageism and sexism here. If young people talk about peace, it is not politicised in any way; it remains at the level of toasts.

The feminist agenda is completely separate and has often been frowned upon by the ‘serious peacebuilding’ male contingent. They did not try to understand the specifics of why it is important to pay special attention to women’s issues. Of course, these people have non-gender-sensitive views and approaches. Unfortunately, we still have a situation where, even if there is a female expert and a male expert, at the end of the day, it is much more likely that the male expert will be given more importance than the female expert.

Peacebuilding is a divisive topic along partisan lines. Given the clear political division between the ruling party, which promotes a peace agenda, and the opposition, which champions nationalistic and revanchist ideas, activists supporting peace are often labelled as loyal to the ruling party. This can lead to polarised and hostile attitudes.

It seems we are divided into two poles. ... There is a part that strictly says that we are against peace, any stabilisation of relations; that we should solve this issue, that is the conflict, only with weapons and war. There is a part that says, on the contrary, we should open the borders, we should make peace. If you talk about peace, then they think you are some kind of agent. ... If you talk with patriotic words about the struggle, they tell you that you are making toasts. You often stay silent and are afraid to express your opinion because you don’t know how those people will perceive you.



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We have certain political forces for whom the agenda related to peace is one of their political directions, against which they must speak. The government talks about an 'era of peace', etc., but our opposition forces talk about the opposite; they never talk about peace. Those civil activists, those people who talk about peace, which the government is promoting, become the object of stoning by the opposition. You become a target for some groups by which they try to associate you with the government and target the government.

Negative attitudes toward peacebuilding activists are largely fuelled by conservative and nationalist groups. These activists often become the targets of smear campaigns by such groups, who use derogatory labels such as 'cowards', 'fatalists', or even 'traitors'.

If before the war it was possible to try to talk, to listen to criticism, to be hated, to come out as a 'traitor', I was okay with it because whenever you talk in a conversation, you bring arguments: the human 'I want water, they also want water'. But now it is difficult to think about 'wanting water' in that way because the war has greatly worsened the hatred.

It has always been bad. The majority associated peace with defeat and loss. Disappointment was added to all this in the post-war period. It is enough to say some message and they say: 'Was this your peacebuilding? What did you achieve?'; 'You were simply doing projects, eating money'.

Participants noted that one of the fundamental challenges peacebuilding faces is its lack of visibility. Many people are unaware of the work being done in this area and do not understand its purpose or significance.

The state of the peacebuilding activist community

The participants recognised that Armenia has a well-established tradition of peacebuilding activism. The liberalisation of the civic space following the 2018 revolution provided a more conducive environment for activism. As a result, numerous new and diverse peacebuilding initiatives emerged in the wake of the 2020 war.

[After the war], when everyone was writing about everything, the whole thing was revealed, people's eyes were opened. It made it possible for people to start speaking more bravely. Things they did not say before, now they say more easily; they are not afraid. The discourse is very broad and free; there are many narratives. Freedom of speech also contributes to this.

While the opening of public discourse on peace and the proliferation of new initiatives were seen as positive developments, participants also discussed challenges in the civic space since 2020. Dominant security concerns and the rise of nationalistic narratives impacted civil society activism across the board, regardless of the issue. Activists working on more sensitive topics, such as women's rights and LGBT rights, felt a heightened need for caution in their communications.

Anti-gender movements also became very active after the war. In this period, feminist activism and LGBT activism are the most manipulated topics. This leaves you with fewer opportunities in terms of carrying out any activity when your activism is aimed at raising the issues more publicly. This whole discourse reduces the few opportunities that are already there.

At the beginning of the year, I saw three articles in the opposition media where our peacebuilding education was associated with some anti-national activities. One thing I would never want to do is to make the team or organisation a target, so we try to be more careful. We have gone a little more low-profile in terms of the work of the organisation.

Participants emphasised the fragmented nature of the peacebuilding activist community in Armenia. Despite the emergence of a new generation of activists who are well-informed about the conflict and more proactive in their efforts, they struggle to connect with or integrate into the broader activist community. Two main reasons were identified for this disconnect: limited information and an inter-generational gap. Peacebuilding activism historically operated within a small circle of dedicated individuals, making it challenging for new activists to access information about previous peacebuilding work and connect with experienced practitioners. Participants highlighted an inter-generational gap. More experienced activists often discouraged younger counterparts and were overly critical of their ideas and approaches. Some participants claimed that the more experienced activists had fixed beliefs on what works and what does not, unable to think beyond their personal experience of activism. At the same time, some individual grassroots activists criticise traditional NGOs for being liberal or not radical enough, which prevents collaboration between them.

Have you ever heard of a peacebuilding conference that brings together all the important players in the field? I have not heard of it. Or, if there is a strategy, a concept that we've worked out together, we know what we're going to do, etc. Or, for example, how we are going to protect people involved in peacebuilding. In that sense, fragmentation, lack of connection with each other, fighting with each other for finances is negative.

We are in an elitist ideological vacuum where some people consider themselves to be 'proper feminists' or 'proper peacemakers'. There is no healthy dialogue between different parties. Today there is no connection; when actions are done, they are done very separately.

Empowering Peacebuilding: Knowledge, Communication, Collaboration, and Resources

Access to knowledge and information

Participants emphasised the critical role of knowledge, information, and expertise in driving peacebuilding efforts. They recognised that while Armenian civil society has amassed substantial knowledge, experience, and expertise through years of peacebuilding activism, this valuable resource often remains out of reach, particularly for those new to the field.

Activists, especially those embarking on peacebuilding for the first time, frequently lack access to this wealth of accumulated knowledge. Several participants underscored the need for a centralised

A lot of great resources are simply left somewhere. Also, since they worked low-profile, you don't even know where these resources are if you don't have personal connections. It is necessary to create a large database of knowledge, experiences, individual non-personalised programmes – what has been done, what results have been produced – so that you simply know from which point you will continue.

knowledge hub or repository where information about past initiatives, resources, and lessons learned can be made readily accessible. They envisioned this platform not only as a repository of historical data but also as a space to showcase existing programmes and initiatives.

In addition to historical knowledge, participants identified a need to develop knowledge and capacities in conflict transformation. They stressed the significance of supporting critical discussions about the history of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Several participants highlighted the imperative for activists to gain a better grasp of peacebuilding and conflict transformation theory and practice. They advocated for continuous research into a wide range of conflict-related issues. One participant proposed the establishment of a university degree programme in peace and conflict studies, signifying the need for academic rigour and professionalisation in the field.

Strengthening communication and community engagement

Participants underscored the importance of expanding the reach and impact of peacebuilding activism beyond the traditional circles, emphasising the need for specific communication and community engagement capacities. They recognised that peacebuilding efforts had often been confined to a small, dedicated community of activists and called for broadening the engagement horizon.

There is a lack of information. Many people try to get involved without understanding how serious the problem is and how many layers the conflict has because it is a decades-old problem, not a new one, and you need to be able to work with it properly.

There is a great need for research in order to understand how a given country understands peacebuilding and which tools are most applicable in a given country.



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PUBLIC JOURNALISM CLUB

Activists emphasised the significance of developing skills related to engaging new individuals and communities. In particular, they stressed the importance of cultivating relationship-building and

In Armenia, people talk individually about topics related to peace. I don't know any groups who gather and talk about that topic. We need to have an anti-war segment in Armenia. We need mobilisation of people with anti-war ideas. We need our collective work, collective thought, collective struggle. ... If there were more people in Armenia who would talk honestly about peace, there would be a public demand not to have war of any kind.

community-organising skills, with an emphasis on leaders who enjoy the trust of their communities and can effectively engage them in conversations on peacebuilding.

The need to create more spaces for dialogue and discussion was emphasised. Participants pointed to the need for the skills to lead and facilitate conversations and discussions about the conflict. Effective communication, including the capacity to use accessible language and frame topics related to conflict and peacebuilding, was highlighted. Participants recognised the need for tailored communication with different segments of society, especially those directly affected by the conflict. This included considerations for trauma-informed work.

Participants stressed the importance of media engagement as a means to alter dominant narratives. They recognised that while discussions about peace are ongoing, groups promoting nationalistic

Depending on the audience, the vocabulary you use changes. You are responsible for every word you say because the topic is very sensitive, and you can say something ... we lost many friends in the war ... and every word you say can destroy a child sitting in the classroom; every material you show can have a strong effect on his psyche.

Because it is not public, and people listen to the old narratives and perceive them as reality. ... You can do some activism in your bubble, but you come back home, and the toasts will be on a different topic. The vocabulary and arguments that work somewhere do not work among ordinary people.



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narratives often have more media resources and coverage. To counter this, participants viewed generating more content on peacebuilding and related topics, such as addressing trauma and hate speech, as crucial. Some participants advocated for the creation of content, especially on social media,

Attention should be paid to the media ... the targeted dissemination of certain content by the media to our society as bearers of counterintuitive thinking. Trying to analyse the conflict, to shed light on the episodes of Armenian-Azerbaijani or Armenian-Turkish coexistence. In that sense, the media and social media are important. No matter how authoritarian Azerbaijan is, they still have quite a lot of access to social media, so there should be certain messages directed at them to try to involve them as well.

All the nationalists have a thousand media platforms and use them to spread whatever they want. And our resources are few, so the results are less.

not only for Armenian audiences but also for Azerbaijani audiences.

Advocacy skills were considered essential, especially for grassroots-level activists seeking to influence the peacebuilding agenda in Armenia. This emphasis on advocacy skills is rooted in the understanding that, in order to affect meaningful change and progress in peacebuilding, activists need to actively engage with both their government and international organisations. Activists need to document and articulate the needs of the communities they work with in a persuasive and compelling manner. This involves crafting clear and concise messages, understanding the specific needs and interests of different stakeholders, and tailoring their communication to address those concerns.

Keeping peacebuilding only at the grassroots level will not bring any results. We go, understand people's needs, work with those needs and leave them there. We do not take them to the place of solution. Peacebuilding [activists] did not take into account the fact that we really need to document everything we do in order to organise our advocacy as well. To have a foundation the message should be substantiated with facts.



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In many cases, we complain that [international organisations] don't do anything. But what do we do? Most importantly, there is a deep conviction that 'what can a single letter do?' But one letter can do many things. It should not be emotional, it should be factual, analyse the situation soberly, tell the dangers soberly; there must be actions, proposals, taking into account the mandate and competencies of the given organisation.

Participants acknowledged the challenge of effective communication during crises. Activists often find themselves at the forefront of providing support to conflict-affected communities, sometimes neglecting the importance of public communication during these moments. This missed opportunity to advance specific messages and narratives was noted as an area for improvement.

Strengthening collaboration and overcoming fragmentation

Participants highlighted the critical need for fostering collaboration and overcoming fragmentation within the peacebuilding community in Armenia. They recognised that connecting the various individuals, initiatives, and organisations involved in peacebuilding work was essential to creating a more cohesive and effective movement.

Participants stressed the importance of regular meetings and relationship-building efforts to break down barriers between different actors within the peacebuilding community. This included addressing intergenerational and elitist divides to create a more inclusive and connected environment.

The first thing to do is to unite that small community in Armenia. People who are interested and those who have some experience should gather to try to do something together. It can be some step aimed at expanding their communities, or in general, so that the community learns about itself. In my opinion, there are few of them in such a country. There should be more supporters of peace in a warring country. Gather those people; give them the opportunity to get to know each other. Maybe after that they will start making joint projects. If someone is weak in some component, another person is strong and will complement them, and this will increase the effectiveness of their programmes.

Some participants believed that fragmentation could be overcome through the development of a shared peacebuilding agenda or strategy. This shared framework would help clarify expectations, agree on shared messaging, and strengthen collective efforts. By aligning their goals and approaches, peacebuilding actors could present a more unified front.

Very often, peacebuilding has been implemented at a project level. Because of that, because of competition, etc., it became clear that we were not able to formulate messages and demands clearly. We have not been able to define the expectations we have towards different parties or towards each other, as people engaged in peacebuilding in one country; our expectations of donors or the international community; or our expectations towards the Azerbaijani side.

Inclusivity was seen as a way to enhance peacebuilding work in Armenia. One way of ensuring inclusivity was to apply the lens of intersectionality and connect the issue of war and conflict to the problems of vulnerable groups. Some participants emphasised the need to go beyond engaging only the ‘usual suspects’ and involve new groups and communities in peacebuilding efforts. However, they recognised the challenges in doing so, particularly concerning differences in values and perspectives between different groups.

It should come from the wider civil society – student councils, associations, unions, NGOs, foundations. There should be a real demand, demand for solutions, formulations and recommendations. We don't have that.

We may find some options for cooperation, but it depends on the organisation. Organisations that are not so much in favour of peacebuilding immediately come to mind. There are many non-governmental organisations, most of which consider themselves to be working in the field of human rights but which often say very contradictory things about the same human rights.

Activist safety and well-being

Participants recognised the challenging environment for peacebuilding activism in Armenia and the risks it poses to the safety and well-being of activists. They emphasised that activists not only need the skills to engage effectively but also require resources and support to ensure their safety, both physical and mental.

Activists are exposed to risks, and it is therefore essential to equip them with the skills and resources necessary to take care of their physical and mental well-being. Peacebuilding work can be emotionally and mentally demanding, especially in the face of adversity and conflict.

In an increasingly digital world, participants highlighted the need for activists to protect their digital security. They recognised the risks associated with online activities and communication and stressed the importance of training and resources to safeguard digital information and communications.

Activists often face smear campaigns and attacks, and it is crucial for them to build resilience against these challenges. This resilience can be cultivated through support systems, resources, and training to withstand external pressures and continue their work in the face of adversity.

The presence of resources that ensure and promote safety and security can be very important. This is about physical safety, from much more basic things to digital safety issues, or having some resources to provide initial safety measures related to emotional and mental health.

Many people leave peacebuilding because they feel they are alone. In my case, I became stable in terms of ideas when I entered an organisation that had a fairly strong community; the participants were connected to each other, you felt that support. It helps a lot that you feel protected.

Securing resources for uninterrupted work

Participants highlighted the critical need for resources and support to sustain their peacebuilding efforts. In addition to the resources mentioned earlier, they also emphasised the importance of financial support, particularly the accessibility of flexible funding and simplified bureaucratic processes in donor organisations.

Participants stressed the significance of flexible funding that allows them to allocate resources where they are most needed in their peacebuilding work. Flexibility in funding enables them to respond quickly to evolving situations and adapt their initiatives accordingly.

Simplified and streamlined bureaucratic processes within donor organisations were seen as essential. Cumbersome administrative requirements can limit the accessibility of funding, particularly for non-formal grassroots groups and initiatives. Reducing bureaucratic obstacles would enable these organisations to access the support they need more easily.

It is very important for donors to have a flexible budget [process] because changes happen so quickly that by the time you write the budget and they approve it ... there is no need anymore. It would be good if those processes were faster and the bureaucracy would get out of the way.

Participants noted that non-formal grassroots groups and initiatives often face challenges in accessing funding opportunities compared to larger NGOs. This inequity is often due to specific requirements set by donors. Ensuring more equitable access to funding can support a broader range of peacebuilding efforts.

Nurturing Peace: The Role of International Organisations

Local Presence and Communication

Some participants emphasised the importance of international organisations establishing a local presence in Armenia. This local presence would enable them to gain a deeper understanding of the context and respond more effectively to emerging needs. At the same time, participants noted that many international organisations not directly involved in peacebuilding might not be fully aware of developments in the conflict and their impact on Armenia. Given the prevailing lack of trust in international organisations, participants underscored the need for these organisations to improve their communication about their objectives and ensure the visibility of their programmes. Moreover, participants expected international peacebuilding organisations to engage in active communication with

Many people are not aware of these organisations at all, what they are doing, who the target group is, what their purpose is, etc. There is a question of trust here because many people experience some negative emotions when they hear the phrase 'international organisation'. There is a crisis ... people do not trust international organisations. Actions aimed at strengthening the atmosphere of trust are needed, as well as explaining what they do, who they are, what their role is.



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other international bodies to inform their strategies and programmes.

Facilitating collaboration and streamlining peacebuilding

Participants highlighted the pivotal role that international organisations can play as facilitators. They believe these organisations can help overcome fragmentation in the peacebuilding field by facilitating communication and collaboration among individual activists, groups, and organisations. Additionally, they saw international organisations as potential intermediaries between local activists and government institutions, which typically lack a culture of involving civil society. Some participants also noted that international organisations can foster connections between local activists and global organisations and networks, facilitating the exchange of experiences.

Effective programme design and engagement

The participants shared their guiding principles for international organisations seeking to support peacebuilding in Armenia. They stressed the importance of adopting a need-based and participatory approach when designing programmes. While participants appreciated the use of specific approaches and methodologies by international organisations, they expected more transparency in this regard. Crucially, participants believed that the identification of local priorities and methods of work should be left in the hands of local activists. They also emphasised the significance of relationships between international organisations and local groups being based on partnership and trust, with minimised hierarchical structures.

When I used to participate in these programmes, I had the impression that some kind of experiments were being done on me. They put the young people in a room with the Azerbaijanis; they do some strange exercises. They don't explain the methodology to you from the very beginning. And you appear in the role of the object of the experiment, which destroys confidence, causes doubts, and, in some sense, anger.

Storytelling is now trendy, and everyone pushes you to adopt it as one of your tools. It is very dangerous because we should not move forward based on trends. And because these trends do not come out of Armenia, it means they may not be relevant to Armenian communities. We don't understand what works for us. There is no possibility to do nothing, to understand, and then do something new. It comes from above. At least they have priorities in terms of tools. They should be flexible about who does what.

One of the participants highlighted that peacebuilding activists were expected to possess a wide range of skills akin to a ‘superman’, which was an unrealistic and often counterproductive notion. Activists engaged in peacebuilding initiatives often find themselves at the forefront of addressing complex and multifaceted issues, ranging from conflict resolution and trauma healing to community organisation and advocacy. The diverse skill set required to navigate these challenges can be overwhelming for an individual or even a group. In light of this, there is a need to reevaluate these expectations and shift towards a more specialised and professional approach to peacebuilding. This approach recognises that while grassroots activists play a crucial role in their communities, the field of peacebuilding can benefit from the involvement of specialised professionals with expertise in relevant areas, e.g., strategic communication. One way of doing this could be incorporating essential principles related to peace and conflict in professional development programmes for specialists.

Expanding beneficiaries

To maximise impact, participants recommended that international organisations move beyond the traditional beneficiaries and involve new leaders, especially those capable of engaging their communities. Some stressed the importance of supporting non-formal groups without expecting their further institutionalisation. These groups, unaffiliated with larger institutions, typically had more flexibility in their methods and were less susceptible to smear campaigns.

Flexible funding

The participants recognised the rising number of emerging initiatives, underscoring the crucial role of international organisations as donors. They stressed the significance of flexible funding, particularly when working with grassroots organisations. One participant expressed concerns about the potential pitfalls of ‘peace-washing’, where organisations lacking the requisite knowledge and capacity in peacebuilding initiate projects simply due to the availability of funding.

Broadening the discourse

Finally, participants believed that international organisations could contribute to expanding the discourse on peacebuilding by mainstreaming human security and intersectionality. This shift in focus would enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of peacebuilding efforts.