Understanding Grassroots Peacebuilding: Key Lessons from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Bangladesh

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Abstract

In the decade-old ethnic conflict of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), the Liaison Committee and Dialogue Committee, among many grassroots actors, have played a vital role in initiating negotiation and finally concluding the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord (1997) between the government of Bangladesh and Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS). On the contrary, as also observed in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Northern Ireland, just to

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mention a few examples, several grassroots actors are also spoiling the peace process of the CHT through reinforcing pre-existing ethnic divides and deteriorating the law and order situation. Hence, this study attempts to discover those grassroots actors and interventions that influence (negatively or positively) peacebuilding in the CHT, while also identifying domestic and international challenges that might lead to peacebuilding disaster in the CHT. On account of time constraints and lack of funding for fieldwork, this study is based on desk research that has produced a database on reported grassroots interventions of the last two years using two leading local newspapers. Based on the analysis of the dataset combined with the Geographic Information System (GIS) supported by relevant secondary literatures, it can be asserted that grassroots actors of the CHT were and are still now influential not only as human rights defenders and service providers but also as spoilers in the most conflict-affected *upazilas* of the CHT. This paper also argues that peacebuilding in the CHT is at risk from the recurrence of conflict due to a number of contextual factors.

Keywords: Grassroots Peacebuilding, Peacebuilding Intervention, Pro-peace Group, Spoiler, Sustainability of Peacebuilding

Introduction

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is the home of 11 distinct indigenous groups and composed of three hill districts of Bangladesh: Khagrachhari, Rangamati, and Bandarban. It is bordered by two countries: India on the north and east, and Myanmar on the south (Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, 1991). The region was autonomous with the special status of "excluded area" under the CHT

Regulations Act-1900", also called "the Hill Tracts Manual", which was the first legislation codified by the British colonial administration. This law not only shaped the political system of the CHT but also recognized the importance of transferring administrative and judicial powers to traditional administrative powers in governing local issues such as petty crime, family disputes, land disputes, and tax collection (Amnesty International, 2013; Chakma, 2010). The striking feature of this law is to restrict the purchase of land and settlement in the CHT by Bengalis without official permission from the local administration (Zahed, 2013, pp. 97 - 98).

The history of the CHT conflict dates back to the Pakistan period for a number of reasons. Firstly, the CHT, with 97% non-Muslim population, was ironically annexed with the Muslim-majority Pakistan as per the contentious report of the Radcliffe Boundary Commission in 1947 despite strong local opposition (Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, 1991; Chakma, 2010). Secondly, the government of Pakistan not only repealed the Chittagong Hill Tracts Frontier Police Regulations-1881 (Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, 1991, p.13), but even changed the status of the CHT from an "excluded area" to a "tribal area" in 1963 while granting legal permission to the Bengali population to settle in the region. Thirdly, the construction of the Kaptai Dam (1960) against the opinions of local people was the largest development-induced catastrophe that resulted in the displacement of approximately 100,000 indigenous people from the CHT (Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, 1991; Ali & Tsuchiya, 2002). Later, Bangladesh (previously East Pakistan) emerged as an independent political entity in 1971 bringing a new profile for the CHT conflict centered around a number of incompatible

issues related to citizenship, identity, and autonomy. This ethnic conflict manifested when the government of Bangladesh rejected the four points political demands of the indigenous people (autonomy with its own legislature, retention of the CHT Regulations Act-1900, continuation of circle chief's offices, and restriction on the influx of Bengalis from plains lands). This conflict escalated into a destructive stage when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, then Prime Minister of Bangladesh, called for indigenous people to assimilate into the mainstream, forgetting their identities and cultures (Haq & Hoque, 1990; Ahsan & Chakma 1989; Salam & Aktar 2014; Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, 1991). Furthermore, the constitution of Bangladesh adopted in 1972 denied the recognition of ethnic groups of Bangladesh in Article 6, which stipulates that "The people of Bangladesh will be known as Bengali". This deliberate identity crisis combined with deep-rooted frustration and grievances pushed the leadership of the CHT to form the Parbattya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS) in 1972 and its armed wing in 1976. While the government of Bangladesh first attempted to resolve this ethnic conflict through the use of military power, it was an entirely unfeasible method of conflict resolution (Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, 1991). After all, the violation of the like-over-like principle (Wimmer, 1997), deprivation of basic needs (Burton, 1990; Gurr, 1993), internal security dilemma (as cited in Brubaker & Laitin 1998), actual or perceived threatened identity (Northrup, 1989), political demand for autonomy (Taras & Ganguly, 2016), systematic discrimination and fear of extinction (Horowitz, 1990), and the lack of infrastructural power of the state in exercising its hegemony on the society (Mann as cited in Heir & Robinson, 2007) had given birth to the CHT conflict.

The major contribution of grassroots actors in the CHT conflict was to open the communication channel between the government and the PCJSS for the peaceful settlement of this decade-old conflict. The first negotiation between both parties took place in 1985 under the direct facilitation of the Liaison Committee (Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, 1991, p. 22). Moreover, another dominant grassroots actor, the Dialogue Committee, facilitated the second meeting between both parties in 1987. These grassroots peacebuilding initiatives eventually contributed to the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Accord, which was signed in 1997 by both parties after a series of incessant negotiation. It should be noted that the involvement of grassroots actors in peacebuilding in the CHT is not a post-Accord phenomenon, although the CHT Accord has brought a number of new and radical changes in the behavior and composition of grassroots actors who can be split into two dominant groups: spoilers and pro-peace groups. These two broadly defined grassroots groups in the CHT can also be categorized into nine different individual groups: ethnic groups, active citizens groups, local NGOs, women groups, journalist groups, religious groups, business groups, cultural groups, and transport groups. Interestingly, the majority of the influential grassroots actors have emerged in the region after the CHT Accord. This paper is an attempt to discover those grassroots actors and interventions which influence (negatively or positively) peacebuilding in the CHT while also identifying domestic and international factors that might lead to peacebuilding disaster in the region.

This paper is divided into five distinct parts. The first section will introduce the political history of the CHT conflict prior to the discussion on peacebuilding of the region. The second section

will illustrate the methodology that is used in this study. The third section provides an overview of the dominant thoughts of grassroots peacebuilding, while the fourth section discusses the key findings of this study. The final and fifth section concludes the entire paper with a brief summary of the discussion.

Methodology of the Study

This study is entirely based on desk research. The most important contribution of this research is the development of a database on (negative and positive) grassroots peacebuilding interventions of the last two years (10 October 2014 - 10 October 2016). Prior to the data collection phase, I have defined the grassroots intervention as a visible act or an event (e.g. strike, protest, demonstration, press release, press conference, advocacy workshop, and service delivery etc.) that influences peacebuilding in the CHT positively or negatively. Then, I have selected two easily accessible, well-circulated, and independent local online newspapers, *chtnews.com*[2] and *chtnews24.com*[3], for collecting data. I have categorized these grassroots interventions under seven specific grassroots peacebuilding interventions in line with the thesis of Paffenholz (2009). After this, I have organized data into the frequency distribution of grassroots interventions by district, types of grassroots actor, and seven specific categories of grassroots intervention with an aim to provide a rich description of grassroots peacebuilding in the CHT. In addition, I

[2] The website of this online newspaper is available at: http://chtnews.com/english/.

[3] The website of this online newspaper is available at: http://www.chtnews24.com/.

have used the geographic information system (GIS) to visualize why a few *upazilas*[4] have experienced the highest number of grassroots interventions compared to other upazilas. Finally, I have organized the findings of this study into a number of broader themes. But this paper cannot escape a number of limitations. Firstly, under-reporting on grassroots interventions can affect the quality of this paper since this study is based on the reports of two local online newspapers. Secondly, the time constraint was the main reason for selecting only these two local newspapers as the primary sources of data collection. Thirdly, it is still very difficult for me to provide an in-depth analysis on grassroots peacebuilding in the CHT based on the short time period of two years.

Grassroots Peacebuilding: Concept and Theory

The term 'peacebuilding' was originally coined in the academic literature by Johan Galtung in 1976, but it became a dominant discourse after the UN former Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali reiterated it in the *Agenda for Peace* in 1992. According to Boutros Boutros-Ghali, peacebuilding is conceived as a package of post-conflict interventions designed for avoiding a relapse into conflict (Cady, 2014). In other words, peacebuilding can be defined as the establishment of socio-economic structures conducive to preventing conflicts from arising and thus perpetuating peace (Shinoda, 2002: 33 as cited in Oda, 2007, p. 6). To put it more simply, peacebuilding not only breeds, but also sustains those processes and approaches required for a conflict-ridden society in the

[4] The term upazila is used in Bengali to denote sub-districts in Bangladesh.

period of transition from conflict to durable peace (Lederach, 1997 as cited in Cady 2014, p. 101).

There are two opposite dominant lines of scholarly literature: one is exclusively concentrated on the role of local actors in peacebuilding, whereas the other is confined to international peacebuilding (Hellmuller, 2014). Due to the central focus of this paper on grassroots peacebuilding, I have only conceptualized here what grassroots peacebuilding refers to. As the existing scholarly literature suggests, local peacebuilding is interchangeably used with 'grassroots peacebuilding', and 'peacebuilding from below'.

As Oda (2007, p. 8) has observed, grassroots peacebuilding is a practice by non-state actors who utilize various resources in transforming the hostile relationship of conflicting parties into a constructive relationship in addition to the establishment of a social structure favorable for promoting durable peace in the society. Bishop Cornelius Korir (2009) in his study titled, "Experiences of Community Peacebuilding in the North Rift Region of Kenya", has outlined 10 principles of grassroots peacebuilding: grassroots focus, fairness and neutrality, mediation and facilitation, inclusivity, trust and confidence-building, local ownership and empowerment, conscious raising, openness and creativity, accountability and transparency, and long-term commitment. Paffenholz (2009) has categorized peacebuilding interventions of grassroots actors into seven categories: protection, monitoring, advocacy, socialization, inter-group social cohesion, facilitation of inter-group dialogue, and service delivery. These grassroots peacebuilding initiatives can be undertaken under four distinct stages of conflict: war, armed conflict, peace negotiations, and post-conflict peacebuilding.

Nowadays, grassroots peacebuilding is mostly preferred to international peacebuilding. For instance, Brahimi's report recognizes the importance of extensive involvement of local actors in peacebuilding (Brahimi, 2000: paragraph 37, as cited in Oda, 2007, p. 7) owing to their context-specific knowledge and capacity of undertaking projects with less bureaucratic procedures and limited logistics (Hellmuller, 2014, pp. 6-9). Besides, peacebuilding cannot be sustainable without establishing local ownership over the entire process (McKeon, 2003). Therefore, many of documents of United Nations and its agencies (e.g. Agenda for Peace in 2000, No Exit Strategy in 2001, Responsibility to Protect in 2001, and Governance for Peace in 2012), along with a large volume of conference declarations (e.g. the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005, the Accra Agenda for Action in 2008, and the Busan Partnership Document in 2011), have emphasized local ownership of peacebuilding.

But grassroots peacebuilding is not also a risk-free project for a number of reasons. Firstly, it may produce tensions and violence in a post-conflict society, particularly in the absence of dispute resolution mechanisms. Secondly, it might favor the earlier dominant ethnic group(s) which may eventually turn into inter-group hostility. Thirdly, it is often found that local actors have a lack of governance capacity which creates opportunities for local elites to capture benefits of peacebuilding for their private gains. Fourthly, targeting beneficiaries is a tricky task in ethnically divided societies (Haider, 2009). Fifthly, they cannot reach all the affected families with adequate humanitarian assistance on account of their financial weakness. Last of all, the lack of trained manpower is positively associated with the ineffectiveness of grassroots actors in identifying demand-driven and context-specific

peacebuilding interventions (cited from Gawerc, 2006, p. 16).

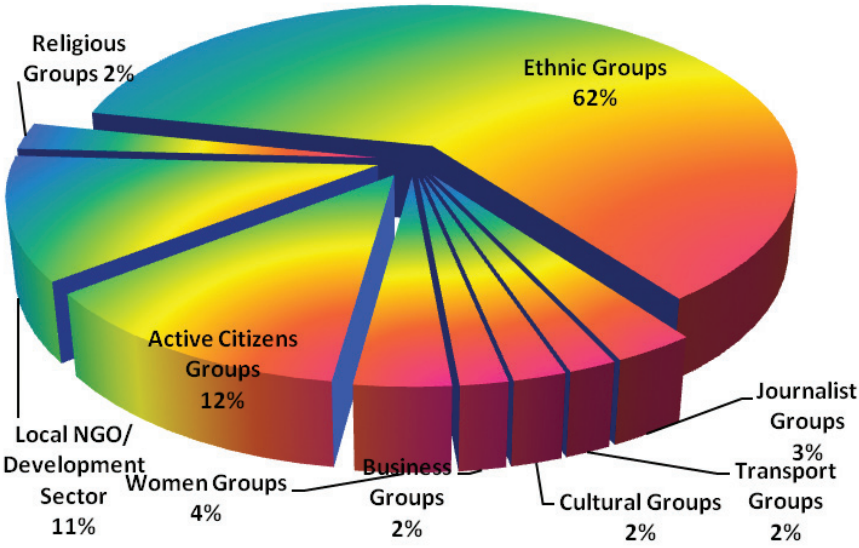
Findings and Discussion

Based on the analysis of the database and review of secondary literature, this study has reported several findings under the following broader themes.

(a) Variation of grassroots actors in structure, activity, and sphere of influence

This study has identified different grassroots actors (e.g. community-based organizations, and issue-based organizations) that work directly and indirectly on the peacebuilding process of the region. A few grassroots actors (e.g. the Liaison Committee, Kapaeeng Foundation, and the CHT Citizens Committee) are concentrated on advocacy, human rights, and conflict resolution, while many groups, such as the Tripura Students Forum (TSF), Bangladesh Marma Students Council (BMSC), Young Bawm Association (YBA), Tripura Kallyan Foundation (TKF), and Bangladesh Tanchangya Kallyan Sangstha (BTKS), are active in the areas of community service (see Graph-1).

Graph-1: Number of Grassroots Interventions by Types of Grassroots Actors

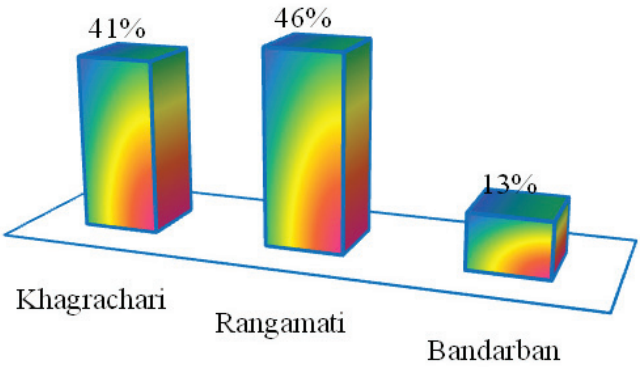


Graph-1 also reveals that all of the groups are not equally dominant in terms of their organizational strength and spheres of influence at the local level in the CHT. Ethno-political organizations are the most powerful groups at the local level in the CHT and these ethnic groups can be categorized into pro- and anti-Accord elements. For example, the organizations of Bengali settlers (e.g. Parbattya Bangali Chattra Parishad, Parbattya Gana Parishad, Parbattya Nagorik Parishad, Parbattya Bangali Ganamonch) have been working against the CHT Accord since 1997. Bengali settlers view the CHT Accord as a threat to their survival in the CHT while the UPDF marks the Accord as a betrayal of the PCJSS with community interests of indigenous people. It is to be noted that there is also a gender

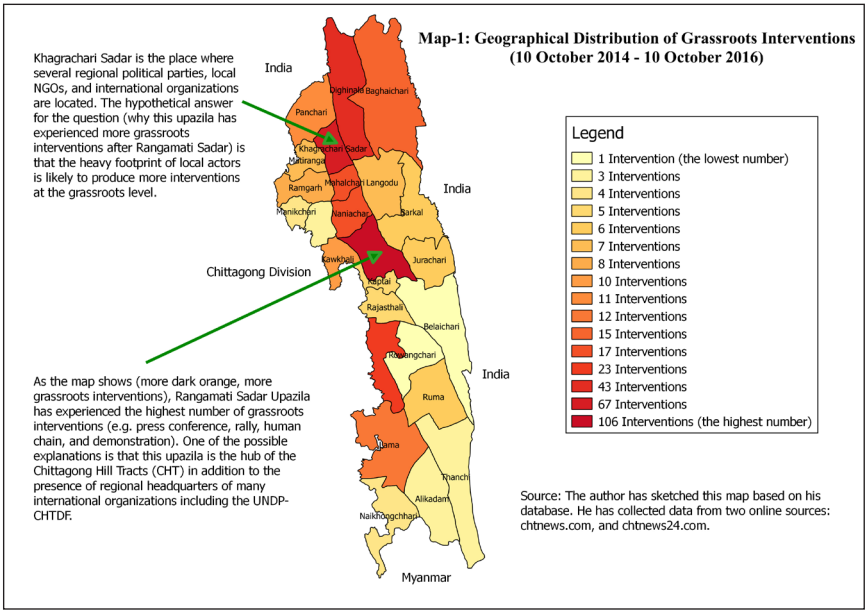
dimension in the grassroots peacebuilding in the CHT in the sense that women's groups are still vocal and active on the ground despite their 4 percent of the total grassroots interventions. On the other hand, religious groups have contributed to 2 percent of the whole pie of grassroots intervention in the CHT. This obviously implies that religious institutions have a less significant role in managing conflict and establishing peace in the CHT whereas they played a vital role in Guatemala in the area of trauma healing, conflict transformation, and networking building among local peacebuilders (Hart, 2005). Further, the business groups are found to protest against the extortion of non-state actors and communal violence since markets are shut down, shops are vandalized, and business transactions are severely affected by sporadic and organized violence.

Remarkably, there is a momentous variation in the grassroots interventions across the CHT as shown in Graph-2. Rangamati district (46 percent) and Khagrachhari district (41 percent) have experienced the highest levels of interventions with 87 percent of the total grassroots interventions, whereas Bandarban district has contributed.

Graph-2: Number of Grassroots Interventions by District



For better understanding, Map-1 visualizes two upazilas (Rangamati Sadar upazila and Khagrachhari Sadar upazila) which are affected by more grassroots interventions as compared to other upazilas in the CHT. The variation of grassroots interventions across these three hill districts might be (hypothetically) influenced by a number of socio-economic and political factors like literacy rate, poverty rate, presence of active grassroots actors, social capital, and the intensity of conflict, etc. Further research can explain why there is a difference in terms of grassroots peacebuilding interventions across the CHT.



(b) From facilitating peaceful resolution of the conflict to service delivery

The importance of grassroots peacebuilding in the CHT can be explained in the language of Barness (2006), who asserted that the changing nature of armed conflict (e.g. massacres, civilian causalities,

forced displacement, sexual violence, abduction of children, and environmental destruction, etc.) motivates grassroots actors to invest their full energy and creativity to find alternatives to violence. Grassroots actors contribute to peace processes through three types of power: (i) the 'power to resist' human rights abusers through the mass mobilization, (ii) the 'power to expose' human rights violations for delegitimizing the autocratic authority, and (iii) the 'power to persuade' both ordinary people and decision-makers in responding to structural causes of conflict constructively (Barness, 2006). For example, the Assam Shahitya Shaba (ASS), Assam Jatiyatabadi Yubo Chhattra Parishad (AJYCP), and People's Consultative Group (PCG) have brokered a series of peace negotiations between the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the (central and state) government of Assam. The Meira Paribas (MP), Kuki Women's Organization (KWO), Kuki Mothers' Association (KMA), Naga Women's Movement, Manipur (NWMM), and United Committee of Manipur (UCM) have played a key role in protecting human rights and civil liberties and in promoting the anti-Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) campaign in Manipur. The Baptist Church Council of Nagaland (BCCN) and Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) have worked as local human rights defenders and influential local peace actors in Nagaland. The Jamatiya Hoda (JH), Tripura Adimjati Sevak Sangha (TASS), and Borok Human Rights Group (BHRG) have been actively involved in anti-insurgency campaigns through seminars, workshops, and conferences on conflict resolution (Das, 2007; Borah, 2011, pp. 16 - 22). A similar case of grassroots peacebuilding has taken place in Mali where a small group of grassroots-level leaders constituted a facilitation group with an aim to assist reconciliation

and peace at the societal level. This group has organized thirty-seven local meetings bringing people of different sections of the society, such as ordinary citizens, traditional leaders, youth, local politicians, soldiers, and government officials, etc., to identify social problems and search for possible solutions to these common problems. Eventually these grassroots level peacebuilding initiatives have produced positive outcomes in reviving the devastated local economy, decreasing in the intensity of violence, and the increasing the effectiveness of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of ex-combatants (McKeon, 2013). The Initiative for International Dialogue (IID), a Mindanao-based NGO, formed a civilian-led grassroots mechanism in the Philippines for monitoring the ceasefire signed between the government of Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Analogous to this grassroots peacebuilding, some 20 local NGOs have constituted the Patani Peoples Peace Forum (PPPF) with an objective to promote peace in southern Thailand through the use of 'power to persuade'. In Timor-Leste, the central role of civil society groups was to transform conflict into tranquility through truth-telling and reconciliation programs (Iglesias, 2013). Grassroots actors had and have parallel influential roles in peacebuilding operations in Somalia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Mozambique. They have played an efficient role in mediating conflicts, protecting IDPs and refugees, advocating for human rights, and mobilizing the local community to cultivate a culture of peace (Klopp, 2004, pp. 13 - 14).

Interestingly, these cross-national cases of grassroots peacebuilding reflect the CHT where grassroots actors have played key roles from facilitating peaceful resolution of the conflict to

service delivery. For example, the liaison committee, composed of three influential local civil society leaders, facilitated the first meeting between both parties for the peaceful settlement of the conflict on 31 October 1985. This dialogue was also the first time both sides expressed a strong commitment for a peaceful resolution of the conflict (Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, 1991, p. 22). In addition, another civil society platform, called the Dialogue Committee and consisting of prominent local-level leaders, organized the second meeting after about two years. Since then, both parties continued with six rounds of dialogue without visible success owing to their rigid positions on several incompatible issues, such as the provision of autonomy, withdrawal of the military, and rehabilitation of Bengali settlers. Under this deadlock situation, the government restarted discussion with the Dialogue Committee, which sent a joint letter to the PCJSS to support continuing dialogue with the government. President Ershad and A. K. Khandakar, Minister of Planning and Chair of the NCCHT, continued the negotiations with the Dialogue Committee during the period of October-November 1988 over the issue of draft legislation for three Hill District Councils (Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, 1991, pp. 22 - 31). These grassroots initiatives not only opened the communication channel between both conflicting parties, but also eventually contributed to the CHT Accord (1997).

This study has identified seven areas of grassroots interventions using the framework of Paffenholz (see Graph-3 below).

First, grassroots actors attempt to protect human rights and the assets of individuals from arbitrary interventions by the state (Merkel & Lauth, 1998, p. 4; Schade, 2002, p. 10 as cited in Paffenholz &

Spurk, 2006, p.10). This type of grassroots intervention is visible in the CHT where state violence is obviously in existence along with the violence of non-state actors. It is noteworthy that a total of 3,911 acres of lands of the Chittagong Hill Tracts were grabbed in 2014 alone by state and non-state actors (e.g. Laden group, Pran group, and Bismillah group) in addition to 84,647 acres of land under illegal occupation. This land grabbing-induced insecurity has forced 210 indigenous families to migrate to Myanmar from Alikadam-Thanchi Hills in Bandarban district (the Dhaka Tribune, 28 February 2015). Under this critical situation, indigenous farmers and villagers have formed the Committee for Protection of Forest and Land in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CPFLCHT) to resist illegal and arbitrary occupation of land and forests owned by local communities. This social movement has been successful to unite local people against the contentious forestry program of the government (Halim and Roy, no date). For instance, the Digrhinala Land Protection Committee (DLPC) has protested against the land grabbing by BGB on 2 October 2015 to protect indigenous people from arbitrary state intervention (chtnew24.com, 2 October 2015 as cited in my database).

Second, a small number of international organizations (e.g. the Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission and Amnesty International) were involved in monitoring, reporting, and protesting against gross human rights abuses before the CHT Accord. Compared to the past, monitoring is very effective now at the grassroots level due to the emergence of human rights-based grassroots NGOs (e.g. Kapaeeng Foundation) and new local (electronic and print) media outlets. Let us consider some examples on how monitoring goes with protection and advocacy functions. Local businessmen demonstrated on 18

October 2015 to protest against looting and burning of shops during the clash between the Hill Students Council (PCP) and Chhattra League, the student wing of Awami League (chtnews24.com, 18 October 2015 as cited in my database). Another example from the gender perspective can be cited here. Three local women's groups – Women Resource Network (WRN), Adivasi Nari Network (ANN), and Durbar Network (DN) – observed a half-day road blockade on 27 January 2013 demanding an end to sexual violence in the region (bdnews24.com 27 January 2013).

Third, grassroots actors in the CHT are mainly involved with the function of advocacy on different issues such as women's rights, land dispute resolution, and implementation of the Accord, just to mention a few. As Graph-3 highlights, advocacy is the second highest area of contribution of grassroots peacebuilding in the CHT. On 18 January 2016, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Citizens Committee (CHTCC), Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum (BIPF), and Chittagong Hill Tracts Headmen Network (CHTHN) have jointly organized a 300 kilometer-long human chain to support the full implementation of the CHT Accord (Dhaka Tribune, 18 January 2016). The Strategic Action Society (SAS) and Ashika Manob Unnayan Kendra (AMUK) conducted a social campaign about legal assistance on 22 December 2015 (chtnews24.com, 22 December 2015 as cited in my database). The Progressive undertake a social campaign program on women empowerment on 31 March 2016 (chtnews24.com 31 March 2016 as cited in my database).

Fourth, institutions of socialization such as schools, cultural organizations, and families have not only intensified social and ethnic cleavages but even contributed to grassroots radicalization in many

conflict-ridden countries, such as Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, and Israel-Palestine (Paffenholz, 2009, p. 21). This finding of Paffenholz is relevant to the CHT where pro- and anti-peace accord organizations dominate local-level issues. The database of this study also clearly asserts that radicalization is taking place in the form of (negative) socialization in the CHT.

Fifth, Graph-3 shows that one of the lowest areas of grassroots interventions in the CHT is the absolute failure to cultivate inter-group social cohesion. A local grassroots peacebuilding actor named the Chittagong Hill Tracts Trust Builders Association (CHTTBA), the product of United National Development Programme Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Facility (UNDP-CHTDF) project, is working to build social capital but without visible minimal impact. We can also include many local NGOs in this category that have both indigenous and non-indigenous staffs as well as beneficiaries although they have no direct engagement or any inter-community social cohesion project. Finally, it can be claimed that land grabbing, communal violence, sexual violence, and social radicalization are the main barriers for facilitating inter-group cohesion at the local level in the CHT.

Sixth, grassroots actors have no significant role in facilitating inter-group dialogue at the local level due to the higher level of violence and active presence of spoilers. This is the less successful area of grassroots peacebuilding in the CHT. Graph-3 displays that only two facilitation initiatives have been undertaken by the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB) and Private Transport Owners' Association of Bandarban (PTOAB) during the period of 10 October 2014 - 10 October 2016. The former was an attempt to develop relations among different communities with

no visible impact, whereas the latter was the negotiation between the government and transport sector organizations on the issue of protection from violence for laborers working in the transport sector.

Seventh, the infant mortality rate of the CHT is higher than the national level (Hossain, 2013). The socio-economic baseline survey conducted by Barakat et al. (2009) found that 51 percent of respondents in the study have no formal education. The indigenous Khumi community ranked the highest in illiteracy (88.4 percent), followed by the Mro community (86.6 percent) and Khyang community (74.1 percent). Massive scale development interventions started in the underdeveloped CHT after the CHT Accord. Currently, a total number of 130 local and foreign NGOs are working in different development sectors such as education, sanitation, agriculture, and health, etc. (Tripura, 2016, p. 39). For instance, Save the Children, UK has been undertaking a multi-lingual education (MLE) project through a local NGO named Jabarang Kalyan Samiti to provide education to over 700 students in their mother tongue (the Daily Star, 8 July 2009). Another local NGO named Taungya has been working as a local partner of the community empowerment project of the UNDP-CHTDF since 2003 to empower CHT communities in governing their own affairs related to development, forest management, and welfare, etc.[5]

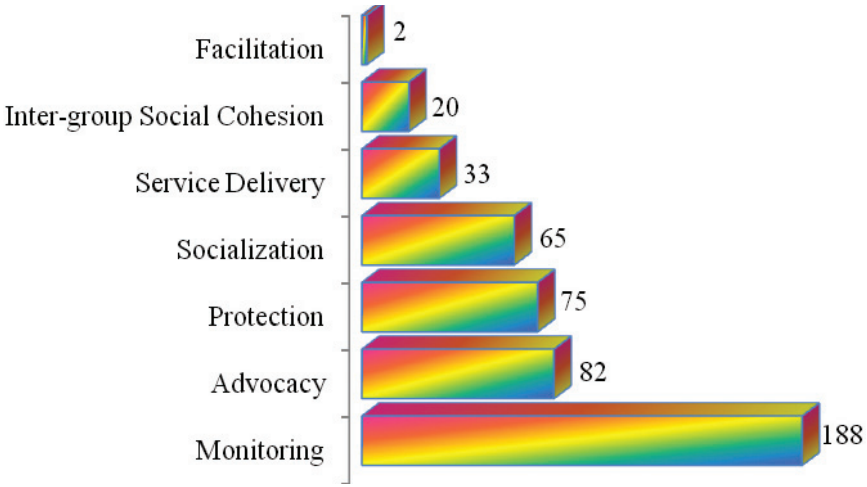
(c) Sharp rise of spoilers

The database of this study reports that 136 grassroots organizations have accounted for roughly 465 interventions (e.g. protests, strikes, demonstrations, press releases, workshops, seminars,

[5] This information is available at: http://www.taungya.org.bd/Activities.aspx.

and press conferences) in the last two years. It has been observed that monitoring of human rights violations (188) has ranked as the highest area of grassroots peacebuilding in the CHT, whereas the facilitation of inter-group dialogue has been the lowest area of contribution of local actors (see Graph-3).

Graph-3: Number of Grassroots Interventions by Function



What is the bottom line message of this graph? The more ineffective inter-group social cohesion and inter-group dialogue are, the more unproductive peacebuilding in the CHT is. Hence, this graph obviously suggests that the CHT is still a tension-prone region of Bangladesh despite the CHT Accord. Why is the CHT still violence-prone? It has been reported in different research projects that there are diverse groups that work at the local level in the post-Accord period, and that particularly ethnic and faith-based organizations are found to undermine the peace process as spoilers by creating more divisions and instability along ethnic, religious, and political lines (Das, 2007;

Carothers, 1999; Cady, 2014:100; Chazan, 1992, pp. 283 - 287). The analysis of my database also obviously indicates that the post-Accord period has brought a drastic change in the behavior and composition of grassroots actors. As Graph-1 shows, nine broad categories of grassroots actors have active presence in the region with strong local support. In other words, we can say that there is a sharp increase in the number of spoilers who are countering pro-peace groups including local NGOs and advocacy groups in the CHT.

(d) From domestic to international challenges of peacebuilding

The question of sustainable peacebuilding in the CHT is reliant on a cluster of contextual factors that are divided into two major groups – domestic (the role of non-state actors, state actors, and media, etc.) and international factors (the role of states and international organizations like the UN, etc.).

First, the question is how much space is offered to grassroots actors in the peace process? They are allowed to carry out limited functions in some countries while they are offered a large space to conduct different tasks ranging from advocacy and service delivery to the protection of civilians and monitoring negotiated peace agreements (Iglesias, 2013; Paffenholz, 2009). The support from the national level is crucial for grassroots peacebuilding to be sustained (McKeon, 2003). Ironically, grassroots actors are operating in the post-Accord society of the CHT under the rigid control of the security forces and the government. To describe it more easily, a local NGO needs a clearance certificate not only from the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs (MoCHTA), but even from the Directorate General of Forces Intelligences (DGFI), the intelligence

unit of the Bangladesh Military, in order to conduct its activities in the CHT. It can also be added that the government of Bangladesh has controversially marked six local NGOs notably, Taungya, Indigenous Multiplex Development Organization (IMDO), Jabarang Kalyan Samiti, Trinamul, Centre for Integrated Programme and Development (CIPD), and the Parbattya Chattagram NGO Forum, as involved in anti-government activities (Mohsin, 2003). This type of state practice is vital for the national security of Bangladesh, but it also makes it more difficult for grassroots actors to make contributions to the peace process.

Second, the more violence-prone the society is, the more vulnerable grassroots peacebuilding actors are (Paffenholz, 2009). When both the government as well as hard-line political groups oppose the humanitarian activities of grassroots actors for the sake of their narrow interests, it becomes very difficult for grassroots peacebuilding to be successful (cited from Gawerc, 2006, p. 16). The findings of previous studies are applicable to the case study of the CHT, where a total of 816 people were killed, 1,046 were injured and well above 1,500 were abducted in the post-Accord period. In addition, 25 incidents of communal violence and 235 gunfights between the security forces of Bangladesh and non-state armed actors occurred during this period (chtnews24.com, 1 December 2015 as cited in my database). Paradoxically, grassroots peace activists are targeted by both state and non-state actors. For instance, the PCJSS labeled a number of local level leaders as traitors of the government prior to the CHT Accord (CHTC, 1991, pp. 23 - 24). One of the front-line grassroots level leaders, whose name was Shantimoy Dewan and who participated in the Dialogue Committee, was killed in December 1988

in Rangamati. The government blamed the PCJSS for this murder case while the PCJSS also accused the government (Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, 1991).

Third, the constructive role of the media is positively associated with the success of grassroots peacebuilding since the media can publish and broadcast positive stories on the importance of grassroots peacebuilding (Paffenholz, 2009). But Freedom House reports the overall position of Bangladesh in the global ranking of freedom of the press as "Partly Free".[6] Along with this bad score of the freedom of the press, there is hidden pressure from the government and Bangladesh military on local journalists not to publish sensitive news related to the CHT. Further, most of the local media outlets often tend to produce biased news on the issues of the CHT due to their ethnic political affiliations. Nevertheless, the story of CHT peacebuilding is currently one of the top highlights of both local and national media.

Fourth, the behavior and composition of grassroots actors influence the outcome of peacebuilding, as it has been observed in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Northern Ireland. To describe it more simply, there are some grassroots actors who spoil the peace process when they view the peace process as a threat to their vital interests (Stedman, 1997; Paffenholz, 2009). This is significantly true for the CHT where grassroots actors have different contrasting agendas and also serve interests of different (pro- and anti-Accord) political groups. The database of this study also implies that the core interests

[6] The score of the freedom of the press of Bangladesh is available at: https://freedomhouse.org/country/bangladesh.

of pro-Accord groups (e.g. the PCJSS, PCP, and HWF) strongly clash with the vital interests of spoilers (e.g. the Parbattya Bangali Chattra Parishad, Parbattya Gana Parishad, and Parbattya Nagorik Parishad).

Fifth, in the view of Paffenholz (2009), external pressure, for instance the EU's political influence on the Kurdish conflict, plays a decisive role in implementing the peacebuilding agenda. In addition, external assistance is extremely needed due to the war-ravaged economy and failure of the government to provide essential services to conflict affected populations (e.g. IDPs and refugees). In the case of the CHT too, various countries (e.g. Japan, Australia, and Denmark etc.) and many international organizations (e.g. EU, UNDP, ADB, SIDA, USAID, NORAD, and FAO) (Gerharz, 2002) are working with a number of local NGOs (at present 52 registered local NGOs) on soft issues of the CHT (e.g. education, sanitation and health, etc.) in the post-Accord period (Mohsin, 2003). But this study expresses two cautious observations that international actors are consciously avoiding the hard issues of peacebuilding in the CHT (e.g. demilitarization, land dispute resolution, and election of local institutions). On the contrary, the donor-dependency of grassroots peacebuilding actors may lead to a crisis of ownership and sustainability of CHT peacebuilding.

Conclusion

Finally, it can be argued that grassroots peacebuilding has a long history in the CHT as a mechanism to reduce violence and establish peace, although it is conceptually a new social phenomenon since very little research has been conducted to explore this phenomenon in the CHT to date. This study has identified different

community-based and issue-based groups that work on peacebuilding in the CHT both directly and indirectly. These grassroots actors carry out multiple tasks ranging from facilitating the peaceful resolution of the conflict and monitoring human rights violations to delivering humanitarian aid and facilitating inter-group dialogue. They are theoretically supposed to influence the peacebuilding process positively but they are ironically paralyzed and fragmented along linguistic, ethnic, religious, and political lines due to the clash of their core interests as also happened in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Northern Ireland. Hence, it is sufficient to claim that the future of peacebuilding in the CHT is uncertain under this critical and painful reality. To describe it more simply, anti-Accord behavior of the state, the continuation of inter-group violence, the negative role of the media, the rise of spoilers, and the absence of external pressure are being assumed to lead to peacebuilding disaster in the CHT.

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