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International development assistance and the inclusivity paradox in fragile and conflict-affected states

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Abstract: The principle of inclusive development lies at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and in particular Goal 16, with its focus on inclusive societies backed by inclusive institutions. Yet despite its ubiquity across the SDGs, inclusivity not only remains ill-defined, but is both controversial and deeply political across many UN member states. This is particularly so in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS), where the idea of sharing power more broadly (as one key element of what inclusivity implies) may be accepted in principle by elite-level actors but is rarely embraced in practice. In more extreme cases—South Sudan and Haiti among them—political power structures are dominated by elites determined to keep politics, through violence if necessary, as exclusive as possible. Within this wider context, in this paper we reflect on the challenges of operationalizing inclusivity and consider the strategies and policies through which development actors are navigating the dilemmas of operationalizing inclusivity in FCAS contexts. Drawing in part on evidence presented in draft chapters for a forthcoming volume on SDG 16 co-edited by the authors, we suggest that absent a consistent focus on inclusivity practices, the inclusivity principle risks becoming yet another underperforming buzzword in the development lexicon.

Key words: Sustainable Development Goals, inclusion, peacebuilding, fragile and conflict-affected states, practice turn

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1   Introduction

Even the Taliban, it seems, understand the importance of inclusivity. Shortly after sweeping back into power in Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban's senior political leadership publicly committed itself to establishing an 'inclusive' government, one that would be 'responsible to everyone' (Al Jazeera 2021). While the government that did emerge was in fact far from inclusive— women were, to no one's surprise, among the most prominent of excluded groups— the fact that even the Taliban felt obliged to pay lip service to the inclusivity principle says something about its contemporary prominence as an emerging governance norm (Donais and McCandless 2017). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have, of course, both adopted and advanced inclusivity as central to good development practice; it is implicit in the wider SDG message of 'leaving no one behind', and the concept lies at the very heart of Goal 16, which emphasizes its centrality to both development and peace.

In this paper, we critically assess both the emergence and the promise of inclusivity (whether of politics, of institutions, or of peace processes) in the specific context of Goal 16 implementation in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS). Our primary focus is on what we consider to be the core paradox of Goal 16, which is that the very governments that are meant to be the key drivers of SDG implementation may have little substantive interest in inclusivity, and may in fact see it as threatening. While Afghanistan may be an extreme case, many if not most conflict-affected states also feature political power structures that are best described as 'oligarchies in the raw' (Kleinfeld 2018), with elite actors determined to keep politics, through violence if necessary, as exclusive as possible. Against this background, we examine the degree to which donor countries have started to push back against these realities (and these elites) through policies aimed explicitly at inclusivity promotion, as well as the risks and rewards of doing so.

An important additional factor complicating the broader SDG effort to transform inclusivity from an aspirational norm to the common sense of development and peacebuilding policy is the weakly-embedded nature of the norm itself. Despite a growing—if still far from robust—body of evidence linking inclusivity to positive development and peacebuilding outcomes, in an increasingly post-liberal climate not only is civic space under threat, but important international actors, notably China, are advancing alternative development pathways that de-emphasize inclusion in favour of strong government, social stability, and state-led economic development (Foot 2020). There is also, more generally, a growing disjuncture between the solidaristic principles underpinning the SDGs and actual political practices—at both domestic and global levels—as they exist at the midpoint of the SDG implementation period. From electoral manipulation in the US to the repression of China's Uighurs to vaccine nationalism, current global trends appear to augur a future that could very well be more exclusionary rather than less. While the SDGs' 'no one left behind' promise also includes a commitment to reaching the furthest behind first, such trends raise the prospect that ever larger swaths of humanity will be left ever further behind.

In brief, our argument is that inclusive politics is not a natural condition, especially in FCAS. States in general, we suggest, may not be naturally sympathetic towards more distributed and de-centralized forms of authority and decision-making, even if they *are* acutely sensitive to being told by outsiders how to arrange their domestic affairs. If a growing number of states, as the core implementing agents of the SDGs, are at best skeptical and at worst hostile to principles of inclusivity, it then follows that operationalizing the inclusivity agenda will require far more than appeals to the better angels of elite actors' natures; it will require active (if careful) pushing and prodding, from both above and below, in order to open up the kinds of political space for inclusive politics that Goal 16 envisions. For all the technocratic and quantitative leanings of the SDGs,

then, Goal 16 should be read as both highly normative and deeply political, as it gets to the very heart of the relationship between states and societies, and to the fundamental question of how (and for whom) states should act. Understanding inclusivity in this way—as a fiercely-contested norm-in-formation—can help us not only to better account for persistent gaps between the promise and the practice of inclusivity in the context of SDG implementation, but also to better comprehend the practical steps that may be required to advance the inclusivity agenda in substantive, meaningful ways.

2   Inclusivity in theory and in practice

It is tempting, at first glance, to dismiss inclusivity as just the latest manifestation of organized hypocrisy within the international system, dominated as it is by states seemingly untroubled by glaring inconsistencies between what they say and what they do (Krasner 1999). To be sure, inclusivity's empirical balance-sheet thus far is not particularly encouraging from the perspective of words/deeds coherence. Some two decades, for example, after UN Security Council Resolution 1325 launched the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda—premised explicitly on enhancing women's voice and agency on matters of peace and security—it is hard to disagree with Taylor and Baldwin's (2020) assessment that WPS achievements have to date been largely rhetorical (and increasingly under threat). Similar conclusions could be drawn concerning the more recent Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda, initiated in 2015 but yet to generate much substantive traction.

Taking a longer-term perspective, however, and focusing less on measurable *outcomes* and more on dynamic *processes*, it is possible to be somewhat more sanguine about the wider impacts of these prominent inclusion agendas. Whatever else they may have accomplished, both WPS and YPS have opened up space (however contingent) for legitimate contestation around the roles of women and youth respectively in processes directly affecting their lives; indeed, recent pushback against gender inclusion within UN fora may be read precisely as evidence of the extent to which gender inclusion advocates have successfully unsettled 'business as usual' within the UN system. This is so even if such contestation has yet to translate, for example, into greater gender parity within peace operations or among special representatives of the Secretary General.

It is from this perspective that we approach the study of inclusivity in the context of Goal 16. Inspired by a critical constructivist lens, which rejects too-tidy and overly-linear notions of norm life-cycles in favour of viewing norms as both contested by default and constituted through practice (Wiener 2007), we are particularly interested in the manner in which contestation over the inclusivity norm-in-formation shapes not only how the concept is understood and interpreted, but also the extent to which it is prioritized (or marginalized) relative to competing objectives emerging from the SDG agenda. For all the emphasis placed on the specific goals of the SDGs and how progress towards these goals might best be measured, we contend that in the case of amorphous and difficult-to-quantify goals such as inclusivity, an overriding focus on downstream *indicators* risks drawing attention away from careful analysis of ongoing *practices*. In other words, while it may ultimately be possible to measure with some degree of precision the 'inclusivity' of given institutions or societies, careful attention to specific practices—of development agencies, of NGO's, or of state institutions within conflict-affected states—remains essential to understanding the manner in which inclusivity is being or could yet be operationalized.

Following the recent practice turn in international relations scholarship, our inclination is also to view practices as 'ontologically primitive' (Cornut 2017) in the sense of producing both agents and structures through socially-meaningful patterns of action and interaction. Similarly, rather than focusing on the ways that norms shape practices (as well as identities and interests), following

earlier generations of liberal constructivists, our emphasis is on how practice shapes norms, which is indeed the basic insight of Wendt's well-known 'sovereignty is what states make of it' argument (Wendt 1992). Far from being ontologically stable, in other words, most norms—from sovereignty and non-interference and from human rights to the rule of law—take concrete shape only through the social interactions of specific actors in specific spaces, and always against a backdrop of an existing normative field, parts of which may need to be unsettled before an emerging norm can take root.

Read through the lens of the 2015 General Assembly Resolution that formalized the transition from the MDGs to the SDGs, it is no stretch to suggest that the latter could just as easily have been labelled the *Inclusive* Development Goals. The adjective appears no less than 40 times in the document (five more as a noun), and forms part of the headline language in five of the 17 goals (including Goal 16). *Inter alia*, the resolution refers to inclusion in the contexts of urbanization, industrialization, education, decision-making, and progress reviews, as well as in the more general context of *inclusive* societies and *inclusive* institutions. While the resolution's drafters clearly agreed that inclusivity *matters* to sustainable development, it is less clear that they agreed on what it actually *means*. While definitional ambiguity is a well-worn strategy in the context of complex multilateral negotiations, in the context of the SDGs inclusion appears as both omnipresent and enigmatic.

Definitions of inclusivity do of course exist. The joint World Bank/UN *Pathways to Peace* report of 2018 understands inclusion in general terms as 'the process of improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of people, disadvantaged on the basis of their identity, to take part in society' (World Bank Group/United Nations 2018: 96). Focusing on the narrower context of peacebuilding, an earlier report of the UN Secretary General (United Nations 2012) defined inclusivity as 'the extent and manner in which the views and needs of parties to conflict and other stakeholders are represented, heard and integrated into a peace process'. Indications about what the SDGs' architects might have meant by inclusion can also be read off the approved list of indicators, despite lingering tensions between how a concept is defined and how it is measured. Most telling here are indicators 16.7.1 and 16.7.2, both of which relate to sub-goal 16.7 on decision-making. The first refers to the principle of proportional representation of identity categories within public institutions, and the second to public perceptions (disaggregated by identity groups) regarding the inclusivity and responsiveness of public decision-making. Public institutions, in other words, should not only resemble the societies they serve in demographic terms, but should make and implement policy in ways perceived by the wider society as inclusive. Beyond the inherently subjective nature of 16.7.2 (decision-making is inclusive if citizens perceive it to be so),[1] more generally both existing definitions for inclusivity and instruments for measuring it point not only to a wide range of public and social functions that could and should be inclusive, but also to a plethora of cognate terms. The latter connect the notion of inclusion to, among other concepts, participation, engagement, representation, legitimacy, empowerment, distribution, voice, agency, consultation, democracy, and ownership.

While it seems safe to conclude from the previous discussion that inclusivity, despite its growing prominence, remains an essentially-contested concept, beyond definitional issues lie additional questions around how inclusivity came to be considered indispensable to good development practice, good governance, and sustainable peace. While the debate over top-down vs. bottom-up development strategies is long standing, and has tended be framed more around the merits (and downsides) of 'participatory development' (Cooke and Kothari 2001), inclusion in the context of war-to-peace transitions emerged more recently in the wake of widespread disillusionment with

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[1] See SDG16DI (2020) report on the further elaboration of this indicator.

liberal peacebuilding processes, and their tendency to be both externally-driven and excessively-focused on state-level institution-building. Starting with debates around local ownership, which drew attention to the concerning extent to which peacebuilding processes largely ignored 'the people' in whose name they were implemented (Chopra and Hohe 2004), a growing preoccupation with inclusive, participatory peacebuilding is now central to the so-called 'local turn' in peace and conflict studies. From the international policy perspective, beyond the WPS and YPS agendas mentioned previously, a key development in the shifting discourse from liberal to inclusive peacebuilding was the 2011 New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States, a product of the OECD-facilitated International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (IDPS). Driven by the so-called g7+ group of fragile and conflict-affected states (which now counts some 20 members), the New Deal was in many ways a re-assertion of sovereign control on the part of conflict-affected states, themselves disaffected by the poor outcomes (and neocolonial overtones) of donor-driven peacebuilding policies. Central to the 'deal', however, was a commitment that 'country-led and country-owned transitions out of fragility' would embrace inclusion, in the belief that 'constructive state-society relations, and the empowerment of women, youth and marginalised groups … are at the heart of successful peacebuilding and statebuilding.'[2]

In large part due to peacebuilding's non-inclusive history, however, the evidentiary base connecting inclusive processes with sustainable peace remains thin. It is of course inherently plausible to suggest that inclusion, as a general principle, can improve peacebuilding outcomes by ensuring that the interests of all relevant social groups receive due consideration, by deepening the pool of ideas and perspectives brought to bear on thorny transition problems, and by enhancing the legitimacy of both peace processes themselves and the central players behind them. Among others, Nilsson (2012) has found some statistical support for these arguments, showing that civil society inclusion, in either the crafting or the implementation of peace agreements, does indeed matter for the durability of post-settlement peace. There is also a growing body of evidence positively linking women's participation in peace processes with increases in both the durability and quality of peace, although the exact causal mechanisms involved continue to be a matter of debate (Krause et al. 2018).

Additional support for inclusion, although of a narrower variant, comes from the literature on the causes of war, much of which has focused on political and economic *exclusion* as drivers of armed conflict. Ted Robert Gurr (2000) argued two decades ago, for example, that the decline of ethnic warfare after the turbulent 1990s could be attributed largely to accommodationist policies of devolution, power-sharing and recognition of group rights. Charles Call (2012), similarly, has argued that the decisive factor in war-to-peace transitions is the extent to which postwar governments are *inclusive* of former opponents. Such accommodationist arguments for inclusion rest on a reasonably firm logical and empirical basis; simply put, armed groups given a stake in a new political order are less likely to resist, reject, or take up arms against it. The same logic doesn't, however, necessarily extend to other identity groups—women or the disabled, for example—for the simple reason that their continued exclusion, while unjust and unfair, is unlikely to lead to renewed warfare. There exists, therefore, two distinct inclusion projects, one focused on narrow elite pact-making and the other on broader social inclusion, that may be very much in tension with each other (Bell 2019: 11). As Alina Rocha Menocal (217: 562) has observed, while there is considerable evidence that '*over the long term*, states and societies with more open and inclusive institutions, both political and economic, are more resilient and tend to be better governed', it

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[2] The full text of the New Deal can be found at: https://www.pbsbdialogue.org/en/.

remains unclear how these same states and societies can transition from narrow to broad forms of inclusion.

3   Misaligned incentive structures in conflict contexts

Any serious discussion of SDG implementation must begin by acknowledging that the SDGs are largely owned and operated by states. At their core, the SDGs are voluntary commitments by governments, with individual countries 'expected to take ownership and establish a national framework for achieving the 17 goals' (Morton et al. 2017: 85). For all the language of partnerships—central, in fact, to Goal 17—the negotiation process which generated the SDGs enabled states to circumscribe the scope and scale of non-state involvement in both the articulation and the operationalization of the goals themselves. Debates around accountability are especially telling in this regard. As Kate Donald and Sally-Anne Way (2016) have noted, initial proposals around government accountability for implementation performance were significantly watered down over the course of negotiations. Not only did many states recoil at the prospect of being accountable to their peers, they were equally wary of the prospect of civil society actors being empowered to hold them to account on matters of implementation performance. While a global review mechanism did emerge, civil society involvement remains limited to reporting on their *own* activities rather than critiquing those of governments. By establishing a deliberately toothless accountability architecture, states have in essence let themselves off the hook, allowing their own Voluntary National Reviews to stand largely unchallenged as definitive 'state of implementation' statements, and throwing into question the depth of their commitment to constructive engagement with their own societies (Donald and Way 2016: 208–9).

Such broader tendencies—which clearly run against the broader spirit of inclusivity—are of course likely to be much more pronounced in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Whatever else they may represent, war-to-peace transitions involve fierce, extended, and often existential power struggles, with elite actors not only competing amongst each other for relative advantage in a largely rule-free environment, but also struggling to extend sovereign authority over national territory. In such contexts, power is generally understood in zero-sum terms: to share power is to lose power, and by extension control over outcomes, an obvious non-starter in circumstances where losing power can be fatal or, at the very least, costly in terms of foregone wealth accumulation opportunities. Such is the logic underpinning the behaviour of so-called 'oligarchies in the raw' (Kleinfeld 2018), exemplified in many ways by contemporary states such as Haiti or South Sudan, which feature weak institutions, absent social contracts, and predatory elites determined to maintain their elite status—and the wealth and security that come with it—at all costs. This is also the terrain that inclusion struggles, which are also ultimately about power (Bell 2019: 15), must navigate.

Clearly, not all fragile and conflict-affected states are governed by predatory oligarchs, and some—East Timor being one prominent example—possess relatively enlightened elites with reasonably progressive views on inclusivity. These remain, however, the exception rather than the norm. More generally, as Thania Paffenholz (2014: 72) has observed of the dynamics of inclusion within peace negotiations—a narrow if critical slice of the wider inclusion project—resistance by powerful elites to adding seats to negotiating tables is to be expected, and those who acquiesce generally do so not for normative or principled reasons, but because they see a strategic interest in doing do. Alex de Waal (2017: 174) has arrived at similar conclusions about the g7+; for most of these states, he suggests, commitments to civil society inclusion in transition processes amount to little more than window dressing, aimed primarily at keeping donor funds flowing. Elite incentive structures in FCAS are further complicated by the increasing prevalence of what Jan Pospisil (2019) terms

'formalized political unsettlement'. In contrast to comprehensive peace agreements, 'unsettlements'—Bosnia's Dayton Peace Accords provide one example—represent compromises that accommodate without resolving the radical disagreement between or among conflict parties, thus ensuring the continuation of conflict by non-military means. Inclusion, in such extended periods of transition, is therefore even less likely to emerge as a priority for any relevant conflict party, trapped as they are in an insecure, unstable interregnum between war and peace; this may in part account for the difference between the current era and the more 'accommodationist' period described by Gurr.

At the same time, emerging global trends since the SDGs launched have not exactly been supportive of the inclusivity ethos. Indeed, the impression that the world appears to be headed in the opposite direction is supported by more and more empirical data. Thinktanks such as Freedom House, which has now chronicled some 15 straight years of declines in its global freedom index, and the Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance, which has identified backsliding in democratic indicators across more than half of the world's existing democracies over the past decade, are now sounding the alarm about the widespread deterioration of state–society relations across both developed and developing states (Panetta 2021). If liberal democracy is under pressure and in retreat as the gold standard of governance, while both diplomacy and peace-making appear increasingly ineffectual (Tisdall 2021), this will almost inevitably ease the pressure on states transitioning from conflict to embrace more open, participatory forms of politics. Shifting global dynamics of aid and trade reinforce these trends: as the weight of Western economic support for both development and peacebuilding recedes, much of the slack is being taken up by China. Far from being fully invested in the inclusivity principle, China is more assertively holding up its own developmental path—centrally-controlled, top-down, and featuring panoptic levels of social control—as a viable alternative to liberal democracy's uneven track record across the developing world (CIVICUS 2021: 14). It is very much the case, therefore, that the global consensus, thin as it was, that enabled the emergence of the SDGs in 2015 has frayed in the intervening half-dozen years, with deleterious consequences for efforts to consolidate a global-level inclusivity norm.

4   Operationalizing inclusivity in fragile and conflict-affected contexts

Like viruses, norms need hosts—perhaps better understood for our purposes as agents—to carry, spread, and embed them within particular socio-political *milieux*. Just as neither democracy nor human rights could have become widespread absent the sustained and often single-minded actions of particular actors in particular places, so too are components of contemporary inclusion projects, WPS and YPS among them, fundamentally reliant on attracting a critical mass of human agents acting coherently and strategically as champions, proselytizers, and defenders. Indeed, this is perhaps *the* key point of intersection between practice theory and constructivism: the former supplements the latter's emphasis on norms, ideas, and identities by focusing specifically on the agency that underpins the very idea of reality as being socially *constructed* (Cornut 2018).

Against this background, the generalized absence of any explicit theory of change linking the emerging inclusivity norm with the agency or social practices required to further its consolidation is somewhat striking. Despite growing acceptance of the importance of inclusion to sustainable peace, in other words, the inclusivity toolkit remains sparse, especially given the empirical evidence that top-down, elite-driven inclusion is mostly a mirage. In the words of Andy Carl (2019: 97), then, 'finding better ways to build more inclusive, just and robust peace processes is an urgent and shared global challenge'.

At the present historical juncture, moving beyond abstract appeals also implies that inclusivity advocates must, with increasing urgency, respond to the deliberate and state-driven narrowing of civic space that is actively *disempowering* civil society actors. This is very much a global phenomenon, and a useful reminder that the SDGs—and the challenges of operationalizing them—apply to all UN member states. According to CIVICUS' most recent *State of Civil Society Report*, at the end of 2020 'some 87% of the world's population lived in countries with severe civic space restrictions' (CIVICUS 2021: 6). While the CIVICUS data isn't disaggregated, there does exist a clear correlation between narrowed civic space and state fragility (Carothers 2016: 3). Fully 12 of 20 members of the g7+ fall within the two worst categories of 'repressed' or 'closed', with only one— tiny Sao Tome and Principe—categorized as 'open'. Across the world's most conflict-affected continent, Africa's three 'open' countries stand in stark contrast with the 30 listed as either repressed or closed. The appeal to defence applies not only to existing fragile and conflict-affected states—where the struggle for inclusive politics appears to be retreating rather than advancing[3]— but also to those states (Egypt being one prominent example) at risk of tumbling into the ranks of those affected by fragility and conflict. In terms of words/deeds coherence, then, rhetorical promises to champion inclusive politics and inclusive institutions—contained both within the SDGs and the New Deal process—sit awkwardly alongside state actions that seem to push in precisely the opposite direction.

These broader trends towards reduced civic space and deteriorating state–society relations—which have ironically accelerated just as both inclusivity and the idea of 'the local' as a key locus of peacebuilding have come into fashion—have been exacerbated by COVID and the war in Ukraine. The unique global circumstances of the pandemic have provided would-be authoritarians with sufficient cover to further constrain freedoms of expression, association, and assembly, while at the same time relegating transparency, as is often the case in moments of crisis, to the back seat (CSPPS 2021: 12; Adeniran 2022: 19). COVID-related cuts to international aid, a widespread economic downturn, and food and fuel shortages provoked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine have also all hit poor countries particularly hard and are generating sharp increases in both poverty and precarity. Senit et al. note (2022: 116), for example, that on a global level the pandemic alone may have pushed some 120 million people back into poverty. Given these conditions, the ability and capacity of civil society actors in fragile and conflict-affected states to survive, let alone make meaningful contributions to peace processes, appears increasingly in doubt.

In practical terms, of course, combatting shrinking civic space and promoting inclusivity represent two sides of the same coin. As Hossain and Khurana (2019: 12) have pointed out, Goal 16 of the SDGs, with its overriding emphasis on the link between inclusive politics and sustainable peace, is in fact a close approximation of 'civic space'. While experience has tempered the stereotype of civil society, in conflict-affected environments or elsewhere, as a singularly progressive force for good (the mirror image of venal and corrupt political elites), it remains the case, as Thomas Carothers (2016: 3) has argued, that 'an active, diverse civil society is the key to empowering marginalized groups, creating multiple channels for citizen participation … [and] mediating diverse interests in a peaceful fashion'. It is difficult to imagine an inclusive peace, in other words, in the absence of an empowered civil society. In what follows, we briefly examine the experience of two donor countries, Sweden and Canada, and their efforts to incorporate inclusivity into their international development policies. While we find significant variations in emphasis between the two countries—Sweden has been much more vocal, for example, in raising the alarm about the dangers of shrinking civic space—we also find that in the specific context of FCAS, the SDGs in general,

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[3] See Annan et al. (2021) for one discussion of the interactions between shrinking civic space and 'peacebuilding from below' in Cameroon.

and Goal 16 in particular have not generated much in the way of new thinking or enhanced practice in terms of embedding inclusivity as a *sine qua non* of effective and sustainable peacebuilding. In this, our findings echo those of Senit et al. (2022), who found little evidence that the SDGs have yet had significant 'steering effects' in terms of altering either policy or discourse around the emerging inclusivity norm.

Sweden has been, in many ways, a first responder to the growing risks posed by what has been termed the associational counter-revolution (Rutzen 2015: 29). It moved, in 2009, towards a more pluralistic approach to development cooperation, one which prioritized both direct and indirect support to civil society in partner countries. In contrast to global trends—which still see only a small fraction of overall official development assistance directed towards non-state actors (Hadley and Kleinfeld 2016)—Sweden channels fully one third of its available development funding (around US$850 million annually) to and through civil society (Hussain and Khurana 2019: 24). SIDA, the Swedish International Development Agency, has long provided core funding to CIVICUS, the South Africa-based alliance of civil society organizations and activists, and more recently Sweden has lent both funding and diplomatic support to a range of initiatives, including the Lifeline Fund and the Civic Space Initiative, aimed at pushing back against shrinking civic space. In 2019, Sweden effectively doubled down on its commitment to the civic space issue by making the so-called Drive for Democracy a central tenet of Swedish foreign policy. In announcing the initiative, then-foreign minister Margot Wallström pointed to the troubling realities of a world in which 'more people are living in countries with authoritarian tendencies than in countries making democratic progress', and promised to stand up for democracy's defenders and institutions, including through greater involvement of women and young people.[4] Unsurprisingly, given its key role as International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (IDPS) co-chair from 2015 to 2018, Sweden has also made ownership, inclusion, and civil society support key pillars of its engagement with fragile and conflict-affected states, with a particular emphasis on the inclusion of women (Milante 2021: 65).

For nearly a decade and a half then, Sweden has been well out front on civic space/inclusivity questions and is seen by key partners as an exemplary donor: flexible, cooperative, risk-taking, and willing to make long-term commitments and to invest in core funding (Topsoe-Jensen et al. 2018: 44). Yet Sweden's experience also underlines limitations and tensions within conventional donor policies, however well-intentioned and well-funded. While development assistance funding matters, both in terms of keeping beleaguered civil society organizations afloat and in terms of capacitating networks and coalitions to mobilize and raise awareness around civic space issues, by itself such support does little to change policies within partner states, especially those determined to constrain civil society activism. One recent report prepared under the auspices of Sweden's Expert Group for Aid Studies (Nino-Zarazua et al. 2020: 23–24), for example, finds that while both international democracy assistance in general and Swedish aid in particular make 'modest yet positive contributions', such assistance has little impact under conditions of democratic backsliding. Milante et al. (2021: 70) strike a similar cautionary note in their study of Sweden's adoption of New Deal principles in FCAS contexts, noting that while Sweden has done much to champion inclusion and broad-based ownership (beyond government) across a range of partner countries, these are ultimately matters of domestic political will that are 'not easily affected by outsiders'. Beyond a certain point, injections of donor funding can also backfire, as when they generate resentment among recipient countries who see civil society actors as competitors for scarce funding or as sources of political opposition, or lead to accusations that local NGOs have

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been captured or co-opted in the service of questionable 'foreign interests'. While ministerial statements promise to put Sweden's mouth where its money is, by applying diplomatic pressure on governments of concern, such strategies also have limits in a context where donors historically have had little appetite for direct confrontations with recipient governments, and where diplomatic pressure, even when applied, has been inconsistent and poorly coordinated (Brechenmacher and Carothers 2019: 8).

One final observation on Sweden's civic space policy is that official policy documents are pitched almost entirely in global-level terms, meaning that beyond generic support for inclusive politics there is no specific strategy for the particular civic space challenges posed by fragile and conflict-affected states.[5] While we wouldn't want to read too much into this in the absence of additional research, this finding does point to an important strategic dilemma faced by donors working on this issue. On the one hand, the twin SDG mantras of 'leave no one behind/reach the furthest behind first' suggest that donors have a special obligation to focus on opening civic space in FCAS, where the challenges are particularly acute and where the 'furthest behind' are most likely to be found. On the other hand, if FCAS are likely to represent the highest-hanging fruit with respect to civic space restrictions, donors may also be tempted to devote limited funding to less challenging country contexts, where more established civil society partners exist, where their support may do more good, and where they may be able to demonstrate greater return on investment. While a newly-installed government might yet re-shuffle its development priorities, to its credit Sweden has to date remained engaged in some of the most challenging development contexts, including Afghanistan and Myanmar, where the near-term prospects for civic space improvements seem particularly grim.

If Sweden was a first responder in 2009, it was several more years until Canada took comparable steps in its development cooperation policy. Under the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, as David Black notes, the government's overall aid spending was no worse than that of its immediate predecessors but 'the government persistently signalled its intent to use aid more instrumentally, in support of what it saw as Canadian political and commercial interests' (Black 2022: 327). In particular, the focus appeared to be on linking development aid to support for projects in middle-income Countries of Focus (such as Colombia, Peru, and the Philippines) or other countries (such as Burkina Faso) where Canadian non-governmental organizations were working in collaboration with Canadian mining companies.

Potentially positive development aid initiatives, with substantial funding, such as the Muskoka Initiative on Maternal, Newborn and Child Health which included CA$1.1 billion in 'new' funding, involved cutting funding for existing programmes of poverty alleviation and were also framed with restrictions on support for women's sexual and reproductive health and rights (Black 2022: 328). At the same time (2007–08), as Black also points out, Canadian aid spending in support of its military mission in Afghanistan, at CA$270 million, became the largest programme in the history of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), reinforcing the view that Canadian development assistance had become both commercialized and securitized in focus and purpose.

The election of Justin Trudeau's Liberals in October 2015—coincidentally the same year that the SDGs were introduced—saw at least an initial rhetorical shift in the framing of Canadian development aid policy, echoing that of Sweden. Where Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallström in 2014 had introduced that country's Feminist Foreign Policy, the new Canadian government moved quickly to redesignate the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and

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[5] On the particularities of, and the particular challenges faced by, civil society in fragile and conflict-affected environments, see McCandless (2016).

Development as Global Affairs Canada (GAC), nominally signalling a change in outlook;[6] and then in 2017 introduced and outlined its own feminist foreign policy. The new policy framework found expression in a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (in line with the WPS agenda), the Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations, the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers, and most explicitly in the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP).

According to the FIAP, 'a feminist approach to international assistance recognizes that the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls require the transformation of social norms and power relations', and 'places gender equality at the centre of poverty eradication and peacebuilding efforts' (Global Affairs Canada 2017: 9). In contrast with Sweden, where a feminist foreign policy has been aligned with an explicit commitment to combatting civic space restrictions, the latter issue appears as secondary within official Canadian policy documents. Rather, for Canada the promotion of inclusivity is more explicitly linked to the promotion of gender equality. Within GAC, the designated lead on Canada's support for, and participation in, these new initiatives—including its work in FCAS and on the WPS agenda—is the Peace and Stabilization Operations Program (PSOPs), which replaced the Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force. PSOPs self-describes as seeking 'to engage women and girls, as well as men and boys, as agents of change in peace and security efforts' because the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women and girls 'is the best way to build a more peaceful, inclusive and prosperous world' (Government of Canada, undated). In that context, according to PSOPs, its work contributes to Canada's efforts to assist FCAS to achieve SDG 16 targets, and aligns with New Deal principles.

As much as these new (for Canada) policy frameworks and programmes made the right noises and signalled many of the right intentions, one external study in late 2021 offered constructive criticisms and suggestions for improvement (Bouka et al. 2021). For example, the study notes that while the recently established Equality Fund aims to provide local women's organizations with 'core, flexible and predictable' funding to pursue projects for mediation and peacebuilding, the FIAP nonetheless instrumentalizes women as agents of change whose inclusion and active participation leads to social and economic improvement. While this may be a useful argument to make to persuade otherwise reluctant (if not hostile) governments to be more open to their inclusion, such instrumentalization also may reinforce existing gender stereotypes at the same time as it detracts from advocating for equity, diversity, and inclusion as 'values worth pursuing in their own right'. Absent efforts to achieve wider transformative change, even such well-intended efforts are 'unlikely to offset, let alone change, hierarchical structures that contribute to the marginalization of women and other underrepresented or disadvantaged groups' (Bouka et al. 2021: 3). This may be especially so in the hard cases of FCAS.

Given its framing in a principled commitment to inclusion and empowerment, Canada's FIAP (and its less well-defined but overarching feminist foreign policy) might ironically also be faulted for not itself engaging deeply and extensively *enough* with a wide range of local stakeholders in those states and societies in which it supports programming. In the context of closures and downsizing of Canada's formal governmental diplomatic and consular representation globally, pushing the feminist foreign policy and FIAP in a top-down, outside-in manner may be perceived as paternalistic, Western-centric, and 'yet another Trojan horse for unwanted intervention' in the

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[6] In 2013 the Harper government had folded previously-independent CIDA into (and under) the newly-renamed Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development. Critics saw this as being another expression of the government's overall goal to focus Canadian development assistance in support of narrow commercial or other political interests and began colloquially pronouncing the new department's acronym (DFATD) as 'defeated'.

receiving states' domestic affairs (Bouka et. al. 2021: 4). Reminiscent of criticisms noted previously regarding Harper-era policies, Canada's FIAP also still operates in a government 'silo', largely disconnected from parallel government initiatives. For example, Canadian funding for women mediators in West Africa sits awkwardly alongside Canadian support for the extractive industry in the same region, with several companies involved in activities that both reduced food and economic security for rural women and 'distorted' the work of these same women mediators, with the result being 'the concurrent implementation of incompatible policies' (Bouka et al. 2021: 3).

Writing in 2019, *before* the twin global crises of COVID and Russia's aggression against Ukraine pushed the issue to the back burner, Saskia Brechenmacher and Thomas Carothers (2019) concluded that the international community was 'at least somewhat stuck' in terms of its repertoire of policies to support civil society engagement and inclusion in a more repressive era. Despite growing awareness of the scope and depth of the problem, and growing mobilization around it, the project of reversing civic space restrictions and advancing inclusive politics continues to be undermined by a lack of conceptual or strategic clarity around the issue, countervailing security and economic interests on the part of key donor countries (as noted above in the Canadian context), and ongoing bureaucratic inertia among aid agencies, manifest both in terms of a lack of innovation and a weak appetite for political risk (Brechenmacher and Carothers 2019). Beyond debates about whether to frame the problem narrowly in terms of civil society's 'room to manoeuvre' or more broadly in terms of democratic backsliding, donors also remain divided on questions of confrontation and conditionality. Such decisions are relatively straightforward when partner states cross clear red lines; Sweden, for example ceased all government-to-government support to Myanmar in response to that country's 2021 coup. More generally, however, aid conditionality remains largely out of favour within the donor community, to the extent that even modest conditionalities—such as linking security sector support with civil society assistance, 'so that governments must accept the latter if they wish to obtain the former' (Hadley and Kleinfeld 2016: 5)—remain largely off the table. As in the Canadian case, therefore, policies are overwhelming framed in the language of support for and empowerment of non-state actors, with relatively little emphasis on the politically sensitive if no less critical question of how to roll back domestic policies and regulations that are actively *disempowering* these same actors.

Ultimately, as in other cases of wicked international problems, the ongoing search for 'better ways' around inclusivity promotion, especially in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, is likely to yield few undiscovered insights or outright eureka moments. From Bosnia to Haiti to Cambodia, some three decades of direct experience with peacebuilding in the post-cold war era has underlined not only the very real difficulties in shifting conflict-affected societies along the continuum from negative to positive peace, but also the inherent limitations of the peacebuilding community's policy toolkit in the face of inertia and/or intransigence on the part of influential domestic actors. Given elite ambivalence or antipathy, it will continue to be the case that advancing inclusivity within conflict-affected states will require patient, persistent, and fully-engaged champions both within domestic civil society and among external interveners, and the coherent—if not fully coordinated—application of pressure from both bottom-up and outside-in in order to open up space for meaningful participatory politics as transition processes unfold.

5   Conclusion

As the recent literature on inclusion in the context of contemporary peace negotiations has demonstrated, expanding the range of interlocutors involved in negotiating processes is difficult, but not impossible. In certain circumstances, such as those which prevailed prior to Colombia's breakthrough agreement of 2016, the key parties to the conflict actively embrace broader societal

participation, even if in the Colombia case as elsewhere, such participation has tended to remain 'controlled and limited' (Segura and Mechoulan 2017: 1). Participation, in order words, does not necessarily translate into influence, suggesting that inclusion needs to be carefully assessed in terms of both quality and quantity (Aulin 2019). At the same time, given the reality that the gains of even inclusive peace negotiations often dissipate over the course of implementation (Paffenholz 2015: 3), and given broader global trends that appear to be limiting rather than expanding the space for inclusive politics, it seems increasingly clear that the struggle to bridge the gap between the promise and the practice of inclusivity will extend well beyond the timeframe of the SDGs.

At the heart of the matter, as Andreas Hirblinger and Dana Landau (2020: 315) have recently observed, is that 'calls for broad-based inclusion remain largely rhetorical and difficult to operationalize'. While an emerging inclusivity norm focuses important attention on many of the key issues that have long been at the core of contemporary peacebuilding—empowering the disempowered and the marginalized, renewing the social contract between state and citizen, and improving the accountability, responsiveness, and representativeness of key institutions of governance—it has so far offered little in the way of either new thinking or new practice for how these aspirations can meaningfully be advanced. Ultimately, if inclusion is to mean anything to those social actors and identity groups that have long been excluded in fragile and conflict-affected states, the SDG preoccupation with measurement will need to be accompanied by a careful re-think of how external actors engage with the politics of inclusion (Bell 2019: 15). Absent sustained attention to the mechanisms through which the politics of fragile states might be broadened, in other words, not only Goal 16 but all of the SDGs will continue to languish in precisely those countries that most desperately need them to succeed.

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