

**Exploring the Vital Fluidity of Grassroots Peacebuilding: Liquid  
Forms of Community Organizations in Conflict-affected Societies in  
North and East Sri Lanka**

Summary

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## 論 文 題 目

### Dissertation Title

Exploring the Vital Fluidity of Grassroots Peacebuilding: Liquid Forms of Community Organizations in Conflict-affected Societies in North and East Sri Lanka

This research is titled “Exploring the vital fluidity of grassroots peacebuilding; liquid forms of community organizations in conflict-affected societies in north and east Sri Lanka”. Put differently, the research examines methods in which we can gain a deeper understanding of grassroots peacebuilding, particularly in contexts where it is perceived as less effective or difficult to observe. Eight chapters outline this dissertation. The beginning gives a succinct background of the research. Then, the theoretical background, the methods, and the background of the grassroots in Sri Lankan peacebuilding leading to the findings, discussion, and conclusion chapters. The study began by examining how peace is achieved in formal institutions such as governments, formal civil society organizations, and international organizations. Grassroots agency and resistance frequently remained hidden from the purview of powerful formal structures such as State, international organizations, and regional organizations. The shift from liberal to post-liberal critics offered new actors, spaces, and perspectives at the hybrid and local spheres to understand peacebuilding. This includes local individuals, including women, young people, and community leaders, and spaces such as religious and traditional institutions. The everyday notion has evolved recently to include more mundane actors and spaces that were formerly thought to be more vulnerable and centered on day-to-day struggles. However, the current theoretical framework does not fully explain how grassroots activists can work in ordinary but coordinated settings aiming at peacebuilding. Therefore, it is important to conduct further research on different organizational structures aimed at grassroots level.

The intricate nexus between grassroots involvement, conflict, and violence within the context of Sri Lanka’s deeply divided society constituted a nuanced subject of inquiry. Existing discourse predominantly revolves around the role of violence-centric entities and the contributions of NGOs and INGOs during wartime. Limited attention has been directed towards comprehending the everyday survival strategies at the grassroots level, along with their noteworthy contributions to community resilience and peacebuilding amidst the period of violence. This research underscores the conspicuous absence of scholarly focus on this facet within the Sri Lankan peacebuilding literature, positing it as a vital research lacuna. While NGOs and INGOs, bolstered by external donor support, have significantly supported grassroots survival, their engagement predominantly aligned with the perception of grassroots as ‘passive recipients’ of institutionalized peacemaking and broader peacebuilding endeavors orchestrated by the national and organized civil society. Consequently, this discussion highlights the nuanced dimensions of grassroots engagement within civil society organizations, particularly NGOs and INGOs. Consequently, at the end of the war, the institutionalization of peacebuilding lacked integration with grassroots initiatives. Notably, the framework employed to comprehend grassroots dynamics primarily relied on locally established NGOs. This choice may have been influenced by the prevailing understanding of peace dynamics during the conflict era, and even post-war, attempts to fathom grassroots peacebuilding initiatives continued to revolve around NGOs and CBOs established in the civil society centered in Colombo.

This research questions the emphasis on institutionalism which potentially hinders the recognition of ‘the navigation, adaptation, and evolution of grassroots peace activism. Accordingly, the research employed an in-depth interview analysis to explore firsthand experiences of grassroots activists in evolving peacebuilding organizations using the case study of Sri Lanka. The research aimed to explore the dynamics of the grassroots institutional framework and to create a rich and detailed description of the lived experiences of grassroots activists in peacebuilding, providing a deeper understanding of their motivations, challenges, successes, and the impact of their work on grassroots peacebuilding institutions. This knowledge can contribute to the development of more effective strategies and interventions in peacebuilding initiatives, as it offers insights directly from the perspective of those engaged in the grassroots level of peace work.

This research framework is presented to explore a novel category of grassroots activism Liquid Community Organizations (LCOs) as a lens through which to study grassroots activism. The framework is structured around two

interconnected dimensions: “Adaptable Organization Structure” and “Networking”. These dimensions provide a comprehensive analytical approach to understanding the effectiveness and dynamics of LCOs in the context of community-driven peacebuilding efforts. Thirty-six (36) diverse grassroots activists interviewed who had experience in grassroots level peace, reconciliation, and justice-related activism. Interviews were conducted in the areas covering the northern (Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Mullaitivu, and Vavuniya) and eastern (Ampara, Batticaloa, and Trincomalee) provinces. Online interviews were conducted with the use of Zoom and WhatsApp technologies from August 2021 to March 2023. The interviews and document analysis were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed using an iterative approach.

The findings display diverse organizational structures operating at the community level in the north and east provinces of Sri Lanka. The existence of such grassroots settings presupposes several vital elements essential for the effectiveness of their activities. These elements include active local engagement and participation of community members and grassroots activists who are intimately connected to the specific context. In this context happens in which they operate, the presence of complex dynamics that require a flexible and adaptive approach including cultural, social, economic, and political elements. Their activism spans a spectrum of activities, encompassing the sustenance of livelihoods, resolution of livelihood-related challenges, engagement in reconciliation practices, and collaborative efforts addressing everyday needs in conjunction with potential stakeholders. In addition, this context appears in a desire for local ownership and control over the peacebuilding process, a recognition of local knowledge and agency in creating grassroots solutions. Most notably, these activists are ordinary individuals without any formal societal titles confronting numerous daily challenges created during the war and escalated in the postwar period. Through their involvement in these organizations, where they extend assistance to the community, they undergo a transformative process, evolving into leaders within society. Their commitment to advocacy for peacebuilding and reconciliation is increasingly visible in the provisions of day-to-day challenges to conflict-affected individuals. Thus, these local initiatives have the potential to be local peacebuilding and community development with trust and social capital among locals. In this direction, a visible connection between the community and external partners will facilitate their work. Moreover, these advocates efficiently connect these local needs with agendas of the local authorities, and middle level civil society actors, leveraging greater resources to contribute to the overarching goal of peacebuilding. These organizations are currently classified as civil society organizations and/or community-based organizations. However, the above discussion explored that in addition to being community-based organizations, they are also community-led and community-oriented organizations. From the above findings on the functions, the research identified liquid organizations deal with everyday matters and the needs of the community. The researcher of this dissertation determines the similarities and differences among grassroots activists who participated in this research as a collective approaching peacebuilding, particularly in its reconciliation and justice. Through this discussion, we try to answer the research question of whether these organizations are a compatible framework at the grassroots level. Here, based on the experiences of grassroots activists, the research identifies that liquid community organizations are not mere everyday spaces or mundane activities. They are structures with dramatic, profound, and macro-political elements to it.

The assumption is that local communities are better at identifying their needs and developing appropriate institutional structures for peacebuilding. Then the exploration through LCOs develops this assumption by claiming that, with enough institutional fluidity and networking, communities possess the necessary capacity to carry out a wide range of both short- and long-term peacebuilding activities. The adaptability of the organizational structures, therefore, is crucial to advocate for the needs of the community while networking capacity to carry out filtered peacebuilding projects in collaboration with both local and national stakeholders. While organizational frameworks are predominantly oriented towards engaging with national and international actors and facilitating communication among them, the process of peace and reconciliation, at the grassroots level, does not exclusively commence within the confines of organizational frameworks. Rather peace and reconciliation happen beyond the purview of organizational boundaries.

According to the above discussion, this research does not outrightly dismiss the notion of peacebuilding by ‘middle level’ actors of civil society. However, the research accentuates a critical perspective regarding the classification of grassroots level activists within the broader category of CSs and NGOs. Such categorization has the potential to obscure the distinctive roles played by these activists, notably in terms of coordinating and advocating the grassroots community needs to the government of higher tiers of NGO and CSO entities. Nonetheless, when distinguishing their

function at the grassroots level, where these activists exert greater influence, the leverage they build on the community is significant as a future capacity for stable societies. However, the thesis, while focusing on the relational dimensions of community agency within LCOs, does not fully articulate the ways in which these organizations negotiate power structures within their operational environments. In addition, while the thesis emphasizes these organizations' resilience and adaptation, it cautions against romanticizing LCOs as infallible examples of community agency in peacebuilding.