

Remarks to CSPPS meeting in Addis Ababa

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By Ben Miller

Hello everyone. I'm Ben Miller, a Principal at CDA Collaborative Learning.

I would like to thank the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding for the opportunity to speak with you today on the occasion of the launch of the paper "Ready to Engage: The private sector in fragile and conflict-affected settings."

The paper aims to establish a foundation for, and I quote, "implementing the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding's Peace Vision, in particular the goal of supporting a peace-promoting private sector." I personally find the paper to be very strong, and I am confident that others will find it useful, so I'm quite pleased that it is "going public", so to speak.

The paper echoes the findings of CDA's work with and on the private sector in fragile and conflict-affected states: our experience indicates that cross sector partnerships and collaborations are one of several pre-conditions that make it possible for private sector activities to have positive impacts on conflict and fragility. There are several reasons for this, but the most important one is role complementarity. In most peacebuilding scenarios, a range of things need to happen that a company or chamber of commerce can't do, shouldn't do, or won't do. An implication of this is that entities other than companies have to know how to engage and work constructively with companies.

CDA's experience also suggests that the most meaningful opportunities for engaging the private sector in peace efforts are at the operational level or, to put it a different way, in the field. This is where companies have development and peace impacts, relationships with communities, particularly challenging government interlocutors or regulations, and where they have to implement policies and standards with respect to good practices and human rights. Another reason to be happy about the launch of the paper, then, is its focus on practical and operational tools and analysis.

With that said, I would want to add to the overall message of the paper a note of caution. The caution relates to current discussions of the private sector in fragile and conflict-affected states. Some of the discussion in this area, including some of the writing that is referenced and discussed in the paper, gives the impression that engagement with the private sector is easy or straightforward. In fact, it is not. Not even a little bit.

To support the aims of the paper, then, I thought I would share with you three simple observations based on missteps that CDA has seen CSOs making in their efforts to engage the

private sector. I share these observations in the hope is that they will be of some use in advancing the work of the Platform.

First, it is essential to distinguish in your own analysis between the roles and powers of the state and those of the company. I would have imagined that this is a rather obvious point. But we see a significant number of CSOs engaging companies to ask them to stop doing things that are legally required of them, or blaming them for things that the state does. For the purposes of engaging companies for positive social change, it is critical to have these distinctions right.

Second, CSOs would do well to recognize that, if they want companies to buy-in to their initiatives, they should include companies in the process of designing those initiatives. In this, companies are exactly like any other group of actors. CDA has seen a number of otherwise promising initiatives fail because companies were invited into them only after the analysis and design processes were finished.

Finally, two points about money. The first is a complaint that we often hear from companies; the second is a finding of our work on effective private sector peace efforts.

The first point relates to independence. In many peacebuilding scenarios, there are critical roles that can only be played by parties that are independent of companies. CSOs are often good candidates for these roles. Yet for a company to pay those organizations is self-defeating because it takes away, and is seen to take away, their independence. In many, if not most cases, it is better to source funding elsewhere.

The second relates other forms of capital, namely social and political capital. Companies sometimes have these in abundance, and they can be priceless peacebuilding resources. For instance, companies often have networks among actors that are key to peace, convening power among a range of important actors, and the capacity to confer legitimacy on groups that are otherwise marginalized and ensure that their concerns reach parties who can address them. For peacebuilding purposes, it is short-sighted to overlook companies' non-financial resources.

I will stop there. Thank you for your attention, and if these issues are of interest to you, I would urge you read the paper.