

Peace efforts in Cyprus must involve civil society if there is to be any chance of success where so many others have failed.

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Over the course of five decades, numerous efforts have been undertaken to solve the Cyprus Problem. All have failed. [James Ker-Lindsay](#) argues that there is a good case to be made for civil society to play a greater role in the peace process, and that such a bottom-up approach, drawing on a variety of stakeholders, might have more chance of meeting with success than previous efforts.



It has been fashionable for a long time in certain Cypriot circles to blame the failure to resolve the Cyprus problem on outsiders and their interference. Time and time again, one would hear Cypriots from both communities complain that if only the two sides could sit down with one another, free from external pressure, they would be able to solve the differences between them and bring about the reunification of the island. Few seasoned outsiders ever really believed it.

Nevertheless, following the failure of a major UN initiative to reunite the island, in 2004, the UN decided that a new approach was indeed needed. Therefore, when new talks started, in 2008, it was announced that the process would be wholly Cypriot owned. The UN would not serve as mediators, as such. Instead, a team of officials, led by Alexander Downer, the former foreign minister of Australia, would serve as facilitators. (To emphasise this point, Downer pointedly refused to take up full-time residence on the island.) Unlike previous efforts, the UN would not come up with any proposals, let alone a blueprint for a comprehensive settlement. Rather, it would help the two sides – working in various technical committees and working groups – to reach their own solutions. At the same time, any talk of specific time frames was rejected. The discussions would take as long as the two sides needed.



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At first, there was a sense of cautious optimism that this new approach might just succeed. After all, the two leaders were known to be moderate and pro-unification in their outlook. Moreover, they both came from similar political backgrounds. However, any idea that this would pave the way for a solution was soon dispelled. Within months it became clear that the discussions had run into trouble. Trivial issues dominated. Four years later, the talks are all but over. Just last month, the UN Secretary-General appeared to acknowledge that the latest efforts to reunite the island had foundered. And with this decision, the argument that a Cypriot led process can ever achieve results seems to have been convincingly defeated.

Or has it? Recently, a group of leading civil society activists from both communities [came to London](#) to present some of their visions of how a locally owned process may yet provide a solution to the division of the island. At a [meeting](#) held here at the LSE on May 16th 2012, they explained that the problem with the various peace initiatives in the past was that they failed to engage with society at large. Even the most recent process was not truly Cypriot-led. All that had happened was that the leaders of the two communities had been brought together to discuss a settlement. Neither they, nor the international community, really sought to involve the wider public in the efforts to resolve the problem.

As was pointed out, this failure to engage with civil society has a number of important, and negative, effects on peace efforts.

For a start, it means that key voices and perspectives are entirely neglected in settlement efforts. As a result, any proposals put on the table will be far more limited in their appeal than they might otherwise have been. Important opportunities to craft an agreement that can appeal to, and secure the support of, core sections of society, such as [women and the young](#), are being missed. The input of the [business community](#), and various other [non-governmental organisations](#), is also vital.

Perhaps more importantly, the failure to engage with civil society in the process leading up to an agreement means that society at large will be ill-prepared for any eventual 'agreement'. In the meantime, the information vacuum is inevitably filled by hardliners and rejectionists who are more than happy to play on the fears and concerns that Cypriots have about a range of issues, such as security and governance. This means that by the time an agreement is presented irreparable damage has usually been done. It is only by giving people an opportunity to understand, and shape, ideas being discussed that they will ever feel confident about voting for them.

As was pointed out, contrary to the growing international perceptions the people of Cyprus do still want a settlement. Indeed, [polls](#) have shown that over 70 per cent want to see the island reunified – although a mere 15 per cent believe that it will actually happen. The problem is that they have never been given a real opportunity to discuss the issues at stake, and air their fears and concerns, let alone have an input into specific elements of a settlement.

Having comprehensively exhausted the elite focused approach to conflict resolution in Cyprus, it does seem time to radically rethink the ways in which we try to resolve the Cyprus Problem – a point also made by Kudret Ozersay, the special representative of the Turkish Cypriot leader, during his [recent talk](#) at the LSE. This is not to say that the idea that the UN can simply depart and leave the Cypriots to resolve their problem is a feasible route. It is certainly not. Rather, a truly Cypriot-led process needs to be far more inclusive than has hitherto been the case. As the presentations made by the seven speakers served to show, the case for involving civil society in any future effort to resolve the Cyprus issue is certainly compelling. After all, everything else has been tried – and failed.

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