Syrian higher education and social capital in times of conflict

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of higher education (HE) in fostering social capital as a means of building a sustainable peace in Syria. We draw on a qualitative study in Northeast Syria to argue that the HE sector is currently playing a negative to weak role in developing social capital as it is highly politicised and suffers from outdated curricula and unsuitable teaching approaches.

Key Words

Higher education
Syrian crisis
Social capital
Conflict and peace

Introduction

The focus of this study is to understand the extent to which universities in Syria (particularly Northeast Syria), might contribute to the development of social capital within the country. It explores the role of campus practices and activities in developing civic participation, social trust and shared values where these dimensions have been significantly eroded due to an extended period of conflict. As Ismail *et al*. (2017: 6) have shown, 'the composite social capital index (SCI) in Syria declined by about 30 percent during the crisis' and 'the community trust component contributed to the overall decline of SCI by 58 percent whereas the contributions of the values component and the networks component were at the rates of 22 percent and 20 percent, respectively'. Due to contested political positions of conflicting groups and social divisions fuelled by the ongoing conflict, community trust has been lost in Syria.

It has been asserted that universities have a social mission and a role in developing the values and attitudes of young people. Pherali and Lewis (2019: 4) point out that 'by promoting the messages about consequences of violence, addressing the social, political and economic inequalities and engaging constructively in identity politics, HE can support sustainable peacebuilding'. At the same time, however, one could ask how far such a mission might conflict with or compromise the university's primary roles of academic teaching and research.

The war in Syria has been ongoing since 2011. The scale of the destruction has been physically and socially huge and the conflict has divided the

society along ethnic, religious, tribal and regional lines. While peace agreements may eventually be made, evidence suggests that about half of countries emerging from conflict return to war within 10 years (Castillo, 2008). However, as Pherali and Lewis (2017: 13) suggest, HE 'can act as a catalyst for peacebuilding by addressing the drivers of conflict'. It is likely that the post-war situation in Syria, when and if it is achieved, will be fragile and therefore it is crucial to invest in processes directed towards a sustainable peace that are rooted in bottom-up approaches which depend on the wider participation of diverse social, cultural and religious groups. Such participation requires the existence of minimum social capital, especially bridging social capital, in addition to bonding social capital (Putnam, 1993 cited in Millican, 2008). Social capital is defined as being 'the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a "credential" which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word' (Bourdieu, 1986: 21). It entails strengthening trust, common values and civic participation and plays an important part in building bridges of communication and trust between former adversaries and preventing a relapse into war (Cox, 2009).

There are a number of studies dealing with the relationship between HE and social capital, including teaching approaches, curriculum and extra-curricular activities (see Prentice, 2011; Melkumyan *et al*., 2015; Ahrari *et al*., 2016; Schweisfurth *et al*., 2018). However, most of these studies were carried out in the context of stable or peaceful states. Few have examined the possibilities of developing HE in countries in or emerging from civil war to promote social capital in the context of positive peacebuilding, which Galtung (1969) differentiated from 'negative peace', as being the absence of structural violence and the presence of social justice and development. An approach to address this gap is presented by Pherali and Lewis (2019), who outline a global strategy for HE to contribute to peacebuilding.

Social capital, unlike physical or financial capital, is an intangible asset that can be strengthened through collective action, public participation, and civil and community perspectives on citizenship (Grootaert and van Bastelaer, 2001; Millican, 2008). HE can play an important role in enhancing social capital by increasing community trust, civic engagement, common values and community linkages (Putnam, 1993) through curricula, the culture of educational institutions, the integrity of students and faculty, and effective arbitration procedures (Woodrooffe, 2011).

There is clear evidence that HE can increase societal trust, a willingness to accept differences, and achievement of intercultural familiarity and tolerance (Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova, 2015; Huang *et al*., 2011; Nahas, 2010). HE can also play a role in enhancing civic engagement by involving students directly in community issues on the basis of reciprocity and mutual benefit. Service learning or community engagement programmes can provide the basis for building an active sense of citizenship, as well as developing leadership skills and networking abilities (Schweisfurth *et al*., 2018). This can be true even in a post-conflict context, as evidenced by a study carried out at Džemal Bijedić University in Bosnia (Millican, 2008). At the same time, it should also be recognised that HE can play a negative role 'either promoting messages of violence and division or those of peace' (Milton and Barakat, 2016: 413).

Methodology

This research was conducted in Al-Hasaka province, a region in the Northeast of Syria characterised by ethnic and religious diversity. The Syrian regime has continued to maintain control over some areas, especially in the Al-Hasaka city centre and the airport, while the Free Syrian Army controlled most areas of the province during 2012–2013. Armed Islamist groups, such as, the Al-Nusra Front, and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, sometimes called Daesh or IS/ISIS) have emerged to control large peripheral areas of the city. The area later came under the control of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)[1], with the support of the US-led international coalition against ISIL.

[1]SDF is an alliance of Kurdish People's Protection Units with Arab, Assyrian and other militias.

University	Academic Staff	Administrative Staff	Students
Public	7	1	5
Private	2		
Unaccredited	2		

Table 1: Sample of Interviewees

There are three types of higher education institutions in Al-Hasaka province: public accredited, private accredited and unaccredited. At the time of writing, this area had not seen active fighting for more than five years, and thus provides an example of an early stage of what post-conflict Syria might look like. The research was conducted during the academic year 2018–2019 and the sample included academics (11), students (5) and administrative staff (1) from three types of universities (Table 1). The interviews were coded by assigning numbers to interviewees, their universities and occupation: academic (1), administrative staff (2) and student (3). Public university (1), private university (2), unaccredited university (3). The final number is the order of the interviewee. Thus 1-1-2 denotes academic staff member, number two from a public university.

A qualitative approach was used to gain the views of students, academics and university managers concerning how and whether HE might be used to help develop social capital in Syria and to reach a deeper understanding of them in their current context. Due to the security issues involved in conducting face-to-face interviews, individual interviews were undertaken via Skype or WhatsApp. A set of questions was compiled and piloted. In general, there was no familiarity with social capital terms that linked underlying themes together. The questions covered the relationships between HE curricula, teaching approaches and campus and social capital dimensions such as: promoting participation, empowering women, social trust, participating in decision-making and promoting shared values. These dimensions of social capital were extracted from Ismail *et al*. (2017) and were considered as guiding themes for this study.

The researchers were aware of the security concerns of participants and their fear about being interviewed. Thus, after receiving informed consent, each participant was assigned a numerical code indicating their university and position. Data was saved anonymously in a password protected Dropbox.

The study also faced challenges concerning the lack of clarity around the concepts used in the interviews and the technical difficulties of interviewing from a distance. Whilst participants chose the time and method of interview to avoid any security risks, the interviewers also needed to spend some time explaining the concept of social capital, providing examples, and otherwise engaging with the participants.

Findings

Drawing on Ismail *et al*. (2017), responses were analysed according to five themes: participation in volunteering; the contribution of students to decision-making at the university; the participation of women in society; common values/conviviality and social trust.

Participation in volunteering activities

The curriculum and the teaching process seem to have little or no role in encouraging such activities, even, as one academic claimed: 'curricula and teaching methods discourage participation in such activities' (1-1-6). Similarly, the activities on campus implemented by the student union usually had a weak role in motivating participation and were sometimes perceived negatively as being activities intended to mobilise students in supporting the political regime.

Most comments suggested that there was the potential, but currently universities play a weak role in promoting volunteering activities. This weakness was attributed to a number of factors such as, the lack of awareness about volunteering, as well as security-administrative obstacles that seriously impeded volunteerism in its true sense, including attempts for it to be co-opted for the political goals of the regime. In addition, the financial situation of university 'staff and students further inhibited volunteering, as students are forced to devote most of their free time working to generate income' (1-3-2).

There was almost unanimous agreement on the possibility of activating the role of the university in volunteering, and many suggestions on how to go about this, such as the introduction of courses dedicated to increasing public awareness of the importance of such activities, removing political interference, strengthening the role and independence of student organisations and developing teaching methods and curricula that encourage participation in volunteering activities.

The contribution of students in decision-making at the university

The interviews revealed that curricula and teaching methods currently played no role in encouraging student participation in decision-making in any of the three types of universities. However, there was evidence of different forms of participation of students in the university councils, but all those interviewed pointed out the lack effectiveness in such roles. An academic pointed out that 'the presence of students in such councils is ineffective (1-1-5), resulting in students' 'distrust of their representatives in the student union and limiting the role of the latter to marginal issues such as, the preparation of exam programmes' (1-1-7).

The weakness here is attributed to several factors, such as the absence of participatory approach to decision-making at university level due to its appropriation by the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ba'ath Party's national leadership, limiting the role of universities in this regard to simply receiving orders. Some indicate that there is participation of students in the Boards of Colleges and University Councils, but this is reported to be minimal and according to participants, 'a token gesture'.

Participation of women

The participation of women in public affairs, including at universities, is an indicator of social capital. We found a diversity of opinions in the interviews conducted with sample members. Most participants referred to a high level of women's participation in HE. Some academics suggested that the university admissions system favoured women.

> The nature of university activities and the nature of the university enrolment system provides equal opportunities for both genders. (1-1-3)

> The University is interested in celebrating International Women's Day. (1-1-8)

The majority of those interviewed attributed the strong presence of women in the key realisms of Syrian society in terms of the high level of women's participation in education, especially in Al-Hasaka province.

> The role of higher education is good in activating the participation of women due to the high level of women's education in the city of Al-Hasaka, which allowed them to play an acceptable social role. (2-1-2)

The ongoing war was also perceived to have had a positive impact on women's participation in HE with an 'increase in the number of female students, female staff and teachers due to migration and military operations, which consumed a large proportion of young men' (2-1-1).

Common values: Tolerance and conviviality

The responses indicated a difference in the evaluation of how their university might promote values of tolerance and conviviality between different groups. These included the view that 'curricula and teaching ways support values of tolerance and conviviality', but these were attributed to individual initiatives of teachers (1-3-3). In addition, the nature of universities as a space for meeting and interaction between students from different backgrounds can also make a positive difference. The enrolment system of one of the universities does not distinguish between the ethnic and religious elements of Syrian society and so 'it managed to attract students from all religions and races' (1-1-3).

The positive role of the university in this respect could be due to 'the nature of the region which is characterised by diversity and a tribal and rural character' (1-1-2), and the presence of various social interest groups at universities and HE's continuity during wartime conditions; for example, 'when the attempt was made to close the university [Al-Furat University], all defended the continuation of the university' (1-2-1). However, the weakness and even negative aspect of this institution's role lies in the dominance of one-party politics on universities and the politicisation of campus activities.

Many also found the contribution of curricula and teaching methods to be weak or even negative, for example believing that the course on 'National Socialist Culture promotes suspicion and hatred among different groups' (1-1-6). There were many suggestions on how to enhance a university's role in this area such as, organising seminars and offering courses on the importance of common values; hosting external, influential figures in this field at the university events; and independence in designing the curricula and teaching methods to foster values of conviviality.

Community trust

The vast majority of participants reported that the role of the university was weak in building community trust. It has already been shown that the curricula are outdated and not positively concerned with building community trust. Further comments included:

> There is an absence of this culture [trust building] from the curriculum components. (2-1-2)

There were also references to the negative role of some elements of the curricula, such as the course on the National Socialist Culture:

> The educational process is an incentive and does not go towards building values or trust… The relationships that arise between students are very weak. (2-1-1)

One of the negative factors in the current situation is the politicisation of the university, which is subject to the government's directions. An academic pointed out that:

The university plays a naive role in this field. It allows friendship between different groups, but it does not give security, and this is the result of the culture of society and the political power that governs and does not guarantee safety among members of society and the lack in delivering confidence between different groups. (1-1-6)

Another academic confirmed this opinion, referring to the 'the university being politically utilised for the regime' (1-1-3).

There is one striking factor that plays a positive role. The ethnic and religious diversity of Al-Hasaka and the presence of multiplicity of authorities which necessitate the building of certain forms of trust in order to maintain the provision of higher education. As one informant pointed out:

> Political polarisation in Al-Hasaka requires the building of bridges of trust between different groups to ensure the continuity of the education process. (1-2-1)

Conclusion

There was a general consciousness about the lack of public awareness about social capital, its dimensions and the role it could play in peacebuilding. In this context, indicators of a satisfactory or acceptable role for HE in developing social capital referred to the extent of the participation of women and the development of common values. The high participation of women was unsurprising given the high level of general social and educational development in the Syrian society prior to the crisis, in addition to the conditions of civil war, where males tend to be recruited into the armed forces and armed groups. This may have created more opportunities for women in all spheres, including HE, although this is not necessarily as a result of a concerted effort within the HE sector.

In addition, it was felt that common values were generally enhanced in HE, which could be due to the fact that universities attract students from diverse backgrounds and offer a space for interaction (although there is marginal political discrimination in enrolment by giving preference to those who are members of the Revolutionary Youth Union, an organisation for young people affiliated to the

governing Ba'ath Party in Syria). The role of curricula was found to be the weakest in enhancing these values, followed by teaching methods, while other campus activities tend to make some contributions towards building positive networks.

In relation to the other dimensions of social capital (such as participation in volunteering activities, common trust and the contribution of students in decision-making), HE played a very weak and negative role in enhancing them. The main cause of this weak and negative role is politicisation and political corruption which confines decisions to the political interests of the ruling regime and effectively reshapes the student union as an institution of the regime. This is similar to the finding that 'the Soviet political regime assumed that the notion of "public" in education was synonymous to that of the centralized state' (Melkumyan *et al*., 2015: 224).

Indicators are that the role of the university in building social capital in unaccredited and private universities is stronger than in public universities. This may have been because of strong government control over public universities.

The diverse community of Al-Hasaka province supports the continuity of HE, which illustrates its potential in building trust and nurturing social capital among the university stakeholders. However, these abilities need to be further supported in ways that concentrate on mitigating political constraints that prevent the development of the sector as a whole. The experience of other similar contexts that have suffered from civil wars indicates the possible benefits of HE in developing social capital and enhancing sustainable peace as evidenced by Millican (2008) and Nahas (2010). This could be the case in Syria, but it would entail protecting HE from political interference and emphasising the importance of academic freedom. Academic staff would need to be retrained in new teaching approaches, such as service learning or student community engagement, that can contribute to developing social capital (Millican, 2008). The curriculum would need to be substantially reviewed, to remove courses and elements that are harmful to strengthening social capital (Nahas, 2010). Graduates could be encouraged to become culturally literate in Syrian society and its diversity, for example, by speaking at least three local languages, or passing a special examination relating to the Syrian culture.

HE can be both a means of exclusion and discrimination, as well as a way for (re)building social cohesion and sustainable peace. It is up to national authorities, Syrian academics, students and international partners to prioritise the latter.

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