

K O F F I n f o S h e e t

KOFF's Country Roundtables: Experiences, Lessons, Potentials

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KOFF is currently in a process of internal reflection on and evaluation of its country roundtables with the aim of adapting them to future use with the help of the experiences and lessons drawn from the last 2½ years working with this instrument. It is argued here that these roundtables are a very useful, tested and also appreciated forum in the Swiss peace-building context and that KOFF in general is on track with this roundtable instrument. However, to make better use of the inherent potential, KOFF is developing options to make the roundtables more targeted, flexible, impact- and practiceoriented. This KOFF InfoSheet is not meant to present definitive results. It aims to give input to the national/international debate and to let the interested public take part in KOFF's learning processes and deliberations. In this sense, KOFF very much appreciates feedback and comments.

Overview and Rationale

KOFF was created in 2001 as a centre of excellence with the [mission](#) to help strengthen the conceptual and operational capacities of Swiss governmental and non-governmental organisations in the field of peace-building. It is financed by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) with the aim that KOFF fosters knowledge, promotes common understanding, and encourages the formation of networks and partnerships between governmental and non-governmental practitioners active in civilian peace-building. To this end KOFF works through information, training, advisory services and platform activities. As part of the platform activities, several KOFF roundtables were established. At the time of writing there exist country specific roundtables on Angola, Central Asia, Guatemala, Israel-Palestine, South-East Europe, Sri Lanka and Sudan as well as a topic specific roundtable on «gender and peace-building».

Guiding principles

Characteristic for a country roundtable is that the meetings are held in regular intervals (every three to four months). Participation is not restricted to KOFF member organisations, other interested organisations can also take part upon invitation by KOFF.

KOFF's work in general is guided by the following principles:

- KOFF activities generate added value.
- KOFF generates this added value by combining knowledge of methodology and processes and peace and conflict management expertise.
- KOFF sets geographical and thematic priorities for its activities.
- KOFF assigns priority to issues that are of interest to the civilian peace-building work of its members and/or relevant to the international discussion on peace-building. KOFF actively introduces these topics into the discussion process and responds to inquiries.

Annual planning

The objectives of the country roundtables are laid down in KOFF's annual planning of the platform sector and can be summarised as follows:

- They bring all relevant Swiss actors – both state and non-state actors – into a framework of exchange.
- They deepen their understanding of the conflict context, of their own role as well as of their strategic orientation through discussing topical issues relevant for peace-building.
- They create added value for the participants' practical work.
- KOFF facilitates strategic alliances in 1-3 countries.

Minimal criteria

KOFF's minimal criteria for establishing a roundtable for a certain country/region are, that:

- Both governmental and non-governmental organizations are involved in the respective country.
- The actors are interested in active cooperation and exchange of experiences.
- As many intervention levels as possible (tracks I, II, III) are covered or targeted by Swiss actors.

Different roundtable forms

KOFF country roundtables take place in a variety of forms. Some meetings focus on discussing Swiss actors' programmes, strategies and experiences. Others focus on topics of special interest or relevance to a country, with KOFF inviting experts to give an input on the subject. There are also country roundtable meetings held in which specific peace-building tools or approaches (like PCIA) and experiences with their application are discussed.

Roundtables are actively being used

Experiences with the Roundtable Instrument

What are the Achievements

The simplest and most relevant achievement is that there not only exists a need for a platform like the KOFF roundtables but that these platforms are also really made use of by DFA staff and by KOFF's 37 member organi-

Exchange of experiences is taking place

sations. The roundtables on average count between 10 to 30 participants and the relevant (governmental and non-governmental) Swiss actors for peace-building in the given country are indeed regularly present at the meetings, and participants expressed a clear interest to continuously take part in the roundtable meetings.

Participants' feedback (through questionnaires and personal communication) and a self-evaluation carried out by KOFF indicate that an exchange of experiences between the different actors is indeed taking place and that the discussions benefit the participants' practical work. In the evaluation, especially the NGO participants appreciated the roundtables as an opportunity to get into a regular exchange with the staff of the DFA's Political Divisions and SDC (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation).

Meetings on a regular basis

KOFF was able to establish a Swiss network where people from government and non-governmental organisations working in the same country/region know each other personally and meet on a regular basis. The feedback from the questionnaires shows strong support for holding the meetings in a 3 to 4 months interval. The existence of such networks can be seen as the crucial fundament on which further cooperation between the different organisations or with KOFF can take shape. Accompanying the roundtable meetings KOFF also compiled and regularly updated lists of Swiss actors, programmes and partners in the specific roundtable country/region in order to further facilitate contact and communication between the different Swiss actors.

Joint learning processes

Participants' feedback confirms that the roundtables did in fact create space for learning processes, be it with regard to understanding the conflict context, their own role as external actors or to deepen the knowledge of peace-building tools.

Creating synergies

KOFF country roundtables were able to create various synergy effects. Facilitating dialogue and instigating learning processes among Swiss actors etc. was already mentioned. Where KOFF invited international experts or representatives from local organisations, one-on-one meetings with roundtable participants or separate meetings at the DFA could also be enabled, which spurred further contact or cooperation.

KOFF neutrality and credibility

KOFF achieved a certain reputation of being «neutral ground» between the governmental and non-governmental actors. Together with a perceived easy access to both actor groups and its specific peace-building expertise this makes up for much of KOFF's added value for roundtable participants. Thus, KOFF plays a very specific role in the Swiss scene and is in its function not perceived as competitor for funds, reputation etc. by other organisations.

Link to and between desk level

Many participants are country desk officers in their respective organisations. This level is crucially important for all phases of project cycle management. KOFF establishes through the regular roundtable meetings a direct link to and between them here in Switzerland. This enables KOFF to feed its peace-building input directly into this level of hierarchy. Furthermore, it is possible for KOFF to «take the pulse» of this practice relevant level, to get to know the organisations' deliberations, problems and potentials.

Continuity

The continuous character of the roundtables allows a more in-depth discussion of given issues and enables specific follow-up.

Facilitating strategic alliances and joint initiatives

What are the Challenges

Apart from some smaller initiatives (e.g. joint mainstreaming activities) KOFF activities have so far not directly led to strategic partnerships, or alliances between actors on track I, II and III. One reason for this might be that the organisations are usually not prepared to discuss major strategic changes of their work. The heterogeneous background and mandates of the agencies and a certain competition among them additionally complicate the search for meaningful strategic partnerships or linkages. Also, thorough joint analyses would need time and resources which are often not available. On the other hand, the interest in discussing strategic issues and the awareness of the importance of integrating different approaches and actors, has increased noticeable over the past two years.

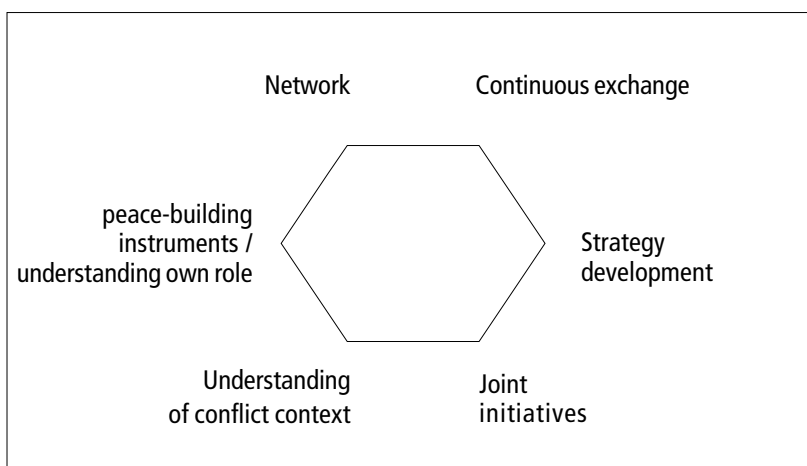
Setting of realistic goals

It has proven to be a difficult task to set specific but realistic goals for the respective KOFF country roundtables. An evaluation of the Canadian peacebuilding policy consultations and dialogues came to similar results. It mentions that the unclear purpose of the consultations led to varied expectations, which in turn created «ample opportunity for disappointment and hard feelings». (See: Peacebuilding Policy Consultations and Dialogues. A Study of the Canadian Experience. Prepared for: Canadian Peacebuilding Coordinating Committee, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Canadian International Development Agency, and International Development Research Centre. 2001.)

Several reasons account for this:

- The objectives for country roundtables are very broad and include a wide range of issues. This is appropriate to set a framework for the roundtable instrument, a sort list of possible activities that could take place in a country roundtable. But these aims are not prioritised in a way that they are helpful for specific planning and we lack a clear set of criteria to decide if we value a stable network higher in a specific roundtable than the facilitation of strategic alliances. Furthermore, the aims are not all complementary to each other (e.g. in the example of the following graph, putting more effort into achieving joint initiatives could go at the expense of continuous exchange with all potential participants).

Figure1:
Possible aims for a country specific KOFF roundtable



- The minimal criteria to set up a roundtable should be more elaborated to determine specific aims or the future direction of a roundtable.
- Every roundtable differs in many elements from another roundtable as they all take place in their specific settings. (Examples for such differing elements being e.g. conflict intensity and conflict phase, Swiss actors interests and history of involvement, needs that could be addressed by a roundtable, KOFF expertise etc.) Given KOFF's very limited staff/time resources it is time consuming and difficult to get an overview of the Swiss scene with regard to a specific country/region, its needs, actors etc. before the launch of a roundtable.
- Interests and needs of the different Swiss actors are and will remain very diverse. How can we integrate these different needs and activities into one roundtable framework?

Ownership

Although there is a clearly stated (and shown) interest in the roundtables ownership lies still too much with the KOFF organisers. The reasons for this are manifold: roundtables add to an already big workload of the participants; apart from a general wish to meet each other and to exchange ideas the interest and needs of the participants remain very specific; the goals of our roundtables may not be specific enough; coordination, cooperation and sharing of information still suffer to a certain extent from competition among organisations or rivalries between agencies.

Impact

Measure the concrete impact of a certain roundtable on peace-building practice by Swiss actors is a difficult thing to do.

Need for country expertise

Further General Findings and Considerations

Participants do not in all country roundtables expect KOFF to bring in extensive country expertise, as this expertise exists among the different country desk officers. But given the already stated lack of ownership for the roundtables among the participants, the bulk of conceptual and organisational work remains with the KOFF staff, thus, country expertise to a certain extent is nonetheless asked for. Besides this, country expertise has the further benefit of adding to the credibility of the KOFF organisers, and work is more fun as it is less confined to a mere task of coordination and organisation.

Need for reflections

It seems appropriate to always bear some critical reflections in mind concerning the instrument of a roundtable: How self-critical can discussions at a roundtable get when both donors, recipient organisation / implementing partners and outsiders are present at the meeting?

Tools vs. politics?

Is there a trend in the roundtables to focus too much on tools etc. and to, thus, de-politicise the issue of Switzerland's positive or negative role in peace-building (e.g. contradictions between Switzerland's foreign/peace policy, its foreign trade policy, and its financial markets' policy)?

Potentials and Outlook

Participants' feedback from the evaluation reinforce KOFF's own assessment, that country specific roundtables are a very useful and efficient tool for carrying out the task as laid out in KOFF's [guiding principles](#). The feed-

First Priority Roundtable

back is strongly positive and shows that KOFF in general is on track with its roundtables and that there are no fundamental changes needed. However, the networks created through our roundtables have an inherent potential KOFF should try to better make use of. On the one hand this could be done through a more regular sharing of lessons learned with organisations in other countries which are active in similar fields and roles like KOFF. On the other hand a necessary step on the way to better effectiveness seems to be a more flexible set-up and a more specific definition of the roundtable's aims. This could be achieved by introducing different roundtable categories.

Aim: accompany more intensively joint learning processes (to a specific topic) or specific participants' programme intervention, and/or getting to joint strategies / strategic alliances with regard to a certain country or conflict. This would most likely necessitate smaller working groups in which not all participants would take part. The „big“ roundtable could still be organised, but less frequently so and with less time invested.

To make such country roundtables even more effective with regard to KOFF's mandate, synergies should be made use of wherever useful and possible (especially with other swisspeace activities). KOFF could further strengthen:

- The link between roundtables to international peace-building processes or initiatives, e.g. by accompanying the Utilisation Phase of the [Reflecting on Peace Practice Project](#) in a specific country with the interested participants.
- The roundtable's link with and relevance for the field level, e.g. by trying to set up a roundtable in a specific country to a certain topic.

Second Priority Roundtable

Aim: establishing and maintaining a functioning network between the different Swiss actors for exchange and information sharing. The meetings would take place less frequently (e.g. twice a year), with KOFF stressing its networking and information hub activities.

Roundtable Watch List

Aim: collect and update information on Swiss actors active in these countries. No meetings are scheduled, but KOFF is able to initiate a roundtable (with little additional time needed) when requested by a number of Swiss actors or when events in the country/region require it.