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## Inclusive Peace Processes Are Key to Ending Violent Conflict

### Summary

- The number of armed conflicts reached a post–Cold War peak in 2015, exacting a terrible death toll and forcing millions to flee.
- One key to reaching a sustainable peace is inclusivity, which can knit together a frayed social fabric and give all groups a stake in transforming their country.
- Conflicts have many levels, and peacebuilders need to create paths between them, creating opportunities for involvement and linking issues and groups.
- Various peacebuilding strands of issues or activities—such as building trust and consulting with affected groups—can be woven together to strengthen a peace process.
- Enabling marginalized groups to influence the content of a peace process increases the chances of a sustainable peace.
- Peacebuilders are sharpening their understanding of how to achieve inclusivity but knowledge gaps remain. Multidisciplinary efforts are required.

### Introduction

Violent conflict has taken a heavy toll in recent years. Surging refugee flows and internal displacements have presented international policymakers and practitioners with stark challenges.<sup>1</sup> Any effective long-term strategy to tackle these problems must prioritize processes that not only produce agreements but also bring sustainable peace. The chances of such an outcome are greatly enhanced by an inclusive process.

### Why Does Inclusion Matter?

More armed conflicts—both state-based (fifty) and nonstate (seventy)—broke out in 2015 than any other year in the previous twenty-five years.<sup>2</sup> The death toll totaled an appalling 118,000, down from 2014 but still the third highest since the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. Most of these deaths are occurring in societies not only scarred by protracted violence but also torn by deep divisions.

In countries ravaged by war, social cohesion is typically threadbare. Populations are divided along multiple fault lines, with some communities denied access to social, political, or economic power because of how they identify themselves and are identified by others. These identities, which typically overlap, can include age, gender, race, ethnicity, and culture or language as well

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as physical, economic, and social status. Fragmentation and competing identities within a society, coupled with real or perceived exclusion, can fuel violence and undermine peacebuilding efforts.

Building more sustainable peace depends on healing the wounds and defusing the underlying tensions that have pulled apart the social fabric of a country. An effective peace process can be the tool with which to knit together that frayed fabric and generate enduring stability.

It is not enough to bring the armed actors to the negotiating table. To be effective, the process needs to give all groups in a society the opportunity to be heard and to have their concerns addressed. This in turn ensures that those most affected—in terms both of fighting on the front lines and of bearing the brunt of the consequences—are actively involved and have a stake in their country's transformation. An inclusive peace is likely to be a sustainable one.

But what constitutes inclusive participation, and how can peacemakers and peacebuilders achieve it in their own, very different societies?

## Multiple Levels, Multiple Strands

Conflicts have multiple levels, and thus many paths “must be pursued in the efforts to attain peace,” explains Jonathan Cohen of Conciliation Resources. Those levels can be defined in a variety of ways—politically, socially, geographically, thematically, organizationally, and so forth—and peacemakers and peacebuilders need to determine the most efficient paths into and between them. Each level consists of subparts (political parties, identity groups, issues unique to regions within a country, ranks within a government bureaucracy, or armed group) that peacebuilders should assess as they draw up their plans. Achieving inclusivity requires identifying key stakeholders across these areas, creating opportunities for meaningful involvement, and linking relevant issues and opposing groups.

For instance, the peace process in Northern Ireland involved efforts to mediate and facilitate not only at the highest political levels but also at lower ones and within civil society. Indeed, especially in the initial stages of the peace process, most activity occurred at the civil society level. Mari Fitzduff of Brandeis University estimates that 60 percent of that success was due to civil society's capacity to mediate, educate, brainstorm new ideas, and bring members of antagonistic communities together. Peacebuilders worked hard to develop this capacity: civil society leaders “can go where politicians cannot go,” and “civil society provided opportunities that were unthreatening to bring political and paramilitary parties together.”

Nonetheless, building peace is not possible without engaging those with the power and authority to foster legitimacy for the process and ensure that outcomes are translated into institutional change. Although Fitzduff emphasizes that “civil society can do a lot of the difficult work that political and military parties cannot do themselves,” she also points out that “people-to-people talks, by themselves, will rarely develop into the kinds of conversations you need in terms of developing an actual peace process....There is little point in developing just relationships if you're not prepared to also develop structures. People become very suspicious if they think you just want to be friends and not address existing inequalities.”

Moreover, those inequalities need to be addressed across international, national, provincial, municipal, community, and even individual levels. As evidenced in Iraq, localized efforts to facilitate reconciliation in the aftermath of conflict require community- or tribal-based consultations, which can also help bolster the durability of a national peace agreement.<sup>3</sup> Michael Shieler of Search for Common Ground emphasizes the need to localize peacebuilding efforts, affirming that “most violent conflicts are deeply personal,” even those that engulf an entire country.

Conflicts and peace processes that seek to resolve them also have multiple strands—that is, issues or activities. Common peacebuilding strands include building trust between opposing parties, generating public support, and consulting with affected communities. If interwoven intentionally and skillfully, with a keen understanding of the conflict environment, these strands can significantly strengthen a peace process.

In Nepal, for example, after a peace agreement ending a ten-year civil war was signed, a critical period when further violence could have derailed implementation of the peace process, the Justice and Security Dialogue program at USIP brought the police and local communities together to build trust, dispel prejudices, and develop joint responses to common concerns.<sup>4</sup> Police-community relationships were improved, paving the way for justice, security, and rule of law reforms that helped solidify the nascent peace and prevent violence. In the district of Morang, in southeast Nepal, the number of violent youth demonstrations fell by 80 percent after youth were engaged in the program. Today, ten years later—and two years after locals assumed complete control of the program—many of the partnerships and initiatives continue to have a sustained positive impact. The Nepal program has become a model for efforts in Burkina Faso, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Tunisia, and Yemen.

Similarly, in the Philippines, local nongovernmental organizations worked to engage women in the Mindanao peace process by consulting with women in conflict-affected areas and raising social awareness. This outreach resulted in seventy-two consultations with approximately 2,750 women from diverse backgrounds throughout the Bangsamoro and helped extract important insights, foster intercommunal dialogue, and address common challenges and concerns.<sup>5</sup> The consultations also led to a Women's Summit of three hundred Muslim, indigenous, and Christian women and a set of recommendations they presented to the Bangsamoro Transition Commission for the new Basic Law, a regional constitution for Bangsamoro.<sup>6</sup>

Given the multiple actors and levels and the complexity of interweaving multiple strands, clarity of objectives is essential, as is a realistic timeline. The goals of peace processes should be identified “and made clear from the start,” argues Doga Eralp of the School of International Service at American University. “Too often,” Elizabeth Murray of USIP's Africa team observes, “national dialogues will result in dozens, hundreds, and even thousands of recommendations without a clear plan of how they can be implemented through law and policy.” But, Murray adds, it is essential that key recommendations be translated into action and that the public see implementation occurring.

## Build Partnerships and Broaden Participation—but Not Blindly

Ensuring transparency and creating channels for public participation can help legitimize the process. For example, Murray notes that national dialogue processes “can garner more legitimacy when [public] participation is included at an earlier stage.”<sup>7</sup> The importance of this participation lies in the public's ability to “contribute to the national discourse and dialogue about the change of their society,” Shipler explains. Peacebuilders should facilitate participation by creating channels—such as through social media or radio shows—through which the public can contribute to the national discourse on how to change their society.

Cohen explains the importance of understanding and responding to diverse constituencies and constructing partnerships across communities; doing so, he says, is essential if peacebuilders are to address root causes and develop relationships that can push the boundaries of conflict lines. “All stakeholder groups affected by conflict conditions in the country [must] have a seat at the table,” Murray observes. The participation of groups with a direct stake in either the continuation or the termination of conflict will create opportunities to foster trust and cooperation. Murray cites the

challenges in South Sudan's National Dialogue, where the government's centralized control of the process and a lack of meaningful public participation led to a discredited process and opposition group boycotts.

More specifically, engaging historically excluded or marginalized groups, exemplified by the positive engagement of women in Colombia's peace process, is vital to fostering inclusion.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, increasing evidence suggests that not only including women but also enabling them to have an influential role increases the likelihood of reaching and implementing a peace agreement.<sup>9</sup>

Last, the timing and manner of inclusion requires forethought. Depending on how they think a peace process will affect their interests, both powerholders and marginalized groups may try to act as spoilers. To minimize this potential, those managing the process need to carefully choose whom to involve, their degree of involvement, and the timing of each participation.

## Conclusion

Conflict in divided societies is complex and has no single solution. Peace processes are vital tools but cannot on their own achieve sustainable peace. The international community should not only help develop an agreement and shape a process but also grapple with longer-term challenges of building national identity, transforming entrenched systems, and improving poor governance. As Fitzduff argues, societywide efforts to create or transform institutions and power structures and to strengthen rule of law and justice and security are required to address inequalities and other drivers of conflict.

A variety of definitional and structural knowledge gaps remain around the process of inclusive participation. What do we mean, beyond formal negotiations, by the term *peace processes*? How do we weave together levels and strands of peacebuilding activity? How can we deal with dilemmas in the politics of inclusion (such as when the inclusion of one group creates a backlash or brings a process to a halt)? What mechanisms have been used, and how effective have they been?

Addressing these knowledge gaps using a multidisciplinary approach will help develop innovative tools and good practices for practitioners and policymakers working on the design and implementation of inclusive peace processes.

## Notes

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## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief draws from discussions at a 2017 public forum, “Building Inclusive, Stronger Peace Processes: Here’s How,” held at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). The event was part of the Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum, a consortium of organizations that have worked since 1999 to share ideas across disciplines to improve the ability to manage conflicts and prevent violence. Colette Rausch is associate vice president, Global Practice and Innovation at USIP, where Tina Luu is a program assistant.

[www.c-r.org/downloads/803%20CR%20Womens%20agenda%20Bangsmoro%20ready%20for%20web02.pdf](http://www.c-r.org/downloads/803%20CR%20Womens%20agenda%20Bangsmoro%20ready%20for%20web02.pdf).

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