Local Peace Processes

September 2021

The British Academy

Dissolving the conflict mesh: opportunities and limits of local peace agreements

Jan Pospisil

As is reflected in this report, there is a growing consensus among scholars and practitioners working with and on local peace agreements that all three elements of their name are a problem. Most of the time, local peace agreements are not local, often not about peace, and every so often, do not even constitute an agreement. How then should we understand their relationship to national conflict and peace processes?

Hierarchies of conflict

International and national peacemaking efforts in intrastate conflict consider peace to happen hierarchically. The focus is on the national since the assumption holds that peace at the national level would allow liberal democratic statehood to emerge or prevail. A national peace settlement, so the argument continues, would eventually lead to a breakthrough of the state's monopoly of force and, consequently, to the transformation of all armed conflict. There is only one problem with this rationale. In most parts of the world, the governance of peace does not work from the international to the national to the local. Judging from history since the end of the Cold War, such a vision is not becoming more, but rather less likely.

The usual questions – reflected in this volume – regarding local peace agreements are whether they could contribute to, replace, or conversely, undermine a national peace process. The predominant thinking is that only a national peace process can offer a chance to comprehensively end a conflict. Local peace agreements, at best, can contribute. Yet, historical evidence is not entirely supportive of this assumption. Nominally successful peace processes in Latin America have seen the transformation of political violence into armed criminality. Also, the recent peace process in South Sudan has failed to improve everyday security in most parts of the country due to the still ongoing armed conflicts not directly related to the power struggle at the national level.

Armed conflict is hybrid and, often, interdependent between national and local forms of conflict.[1] Armed conflict, in its essence, is a total enterprise. It will always relate to and incorporate all processes it can get hold of, will try to utilise any support it can get because armed conflict is always essential and, to an extent, total. The sequential logic of conflict resolution might still work, but as an exception, not as a rule.[2] A glance at examples suggests that national peace processes cannot solve the whole conflict landscape, as in Colombia or South Sudan, nor can local peace agreements solve the national puzzle demonstrated by local peacemaking practices in Syria.

1 R. Mac Ginty (2011), *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).
2 C. Bell and K. Zulueta-Fülscher (2016), *Sequencing Peace Agreements and Constitutions in the Political Settlements Process* (Edinburgh, Stockholm: International IDEA).

The contrasting argument presented here is that the assumption of a hierarchy of conflict, with contestation at the national level on top, is misguided. The delineation of conflict based on a dimensional typology – international, regional, national, subnational, local – might help our overarching understanding, comparability, and help to make initial sense of surroundings. However, it does not help to understand and work towards resolving armed conflict. Due to its intrinsically absorbing and relating character, armed conflict cannot be neatly depicted and delineated into different levels of conflict. Rather, interconnected conflicts resemble a mesh and not any hierarchical ordering.

A mesh does not recognise hierarchy. It does not know that liberal thinking hopes to establish a national transitional framework as a pathway towards sustainable peace. Indeed, a mesh is not particularly receptive to approaches that aim to cut the proverbial Gordian knot of armed conflict, as comprehensive national peace processes aim to do. Peacemaking's thinking in levels, with the national level at the centre, cannot adequately deal with hybridisation and the complexity of a given conflict landscape. Traditional peace processes may establish some superficial order, which, in some cases, might be strong enough to maintain a longer-term truce. Nevertheless, in few places, South Africa and Nepal may serve as examples to an extent, do they bring a positive peace which can transform an armed conflict.

Taking hybridisation, interdependence, and complexity seriously as the three major components of a conflict mesh does not mean that all armed conflicts are the same. Some of these components might be more evident in some conflicts than others or might even be more systemically influential on conflict dynamics. Furthermore, these differentiations need to be read through geographical patterns. The Democratic Republic of Congo and the Philippines provide just two examples. Both cases have been, and partly still are, characterised by armed conflicts in some parts of the country that are hardly noticeable in others. Perhaps these cases, which are usually discussed as exceptions to a perceived common rule, are instead the most evident markers of how armed conflict unfolds and prevails.

Functionalities of local peace agreements

If there is no set hierarchy of conflict levels, there is also no directional and linear pathway through which to manage or transform them. Therefore, instead of asking what local peace agreements do for a national peace process or how they relate to national conflict, it is worth asking: how do they impact a conflict mesh? From a comparative assessment of the agreements in the PA-X local peace agreements database, we can heuristically distinguish between three broad types of functions that local agreements provide: connecting and strategising, managing and mitigating, and disconnecting.

Connecting and strategising: The connecting and strategising function demonstrates the difficulties of talking about positive peace when assessing local peace agreements. Regularly, such agreements are made between warring factions and to set up a truce between them. However, this alliance can be used to move towards peace, but, at the same time, to fight other parties in a complex conflict landscape. The often-cited Wunlit peace agreement in South Sudan falls into this category.[3] Other agreements link local conflict directly to a national peace process and attempt to 'clean up' a messy set of actors. As the contribution by Bell et al. has shown, in Nepal, for instance, the government signed agreements with over

3 M. Bradbury, J. Ryle, M. Medley and K. Sansculotte-Greenidge (2006), *Local Peace Processes in Sudan. A Baseline Study* (London: Rift Valley Institute).

twenty often small armed groups in the Terai to include them in a broader transition process. The strategising element of local peace agreements, in a sense, challenges their character as purely 'local' since, most of the time, it points towards ambitions that range beyond a single locality.

Managing and mitigating: The managing and mitigating function is commonly pursued by local ceasefire agreements reached for humanitarian or pragmatic reasons. Humanitarian actors may be involved as parties and mediators due to their aim to enable relief aid or the joined use of essential infrastructure. Agreements serving this functionality often represent the prototypical local agreement that manages seasonal conflict patterns in pastoral conflicts about grazing routes or escalated cycles of revenge attacks. But it could also be the owner of a dairy factory negotiating his access routes towards the city of Damascus, as Kaldor and Sassen report.[4] These agreements are often also pragmatic with regards to their peace component. For instance, a recent – non-written – local peace agreement between Nuer and Murle communities in the Jonglei region of South Sudan obligated both parties not to abduct women and children when undertaking cattle raids. The raids as such, however, were not banned. Both sides were aware that the Murle communities had lost so many cattle in recent flooding that they had no other choice but to raid, so the agreement aimed to keep the raids manageable and prevent possible revenge cycles.

Disconnecting: Finally, the disconnecting function is a rare but still fascinating occurrence. It represents the ideal function of local peace agreements. Such agreements aim to establish a spatially limited zone of positive peace in challenging and mostly violent surroundings, which might also be linked to humanitarian concerns.[5] Unfortunately, not a lot of examples exist for this practice. The peace zone movement has some history in the Philippines, where it can be traced back to the revolution against the Marcos regime in 1986. 'Zones of peace' were established in various parts of the country due to the efforts of a broad grassroots peace movement.[6] Even though only a few of them prevailed over the longer term, they demonstrate the possibility to break away and disconnect from a wider conflict setting. Similar endeavours have been undertaken in Colombia[7] and, although on a smaller scale, in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1990s.[8] In Pakistan and Somalia, tribes have been able to negotiate their non-involvement in a conflict setting, albeit commonly underpinned by their armed capabilities.

Dissolving conflict

The above functionalities have no clear common conflict resolution point of connection to formal peace negotiations at the national level. Local peace agreements show a pragmatic and unplanned landscape of peacemaking that dynamically responds to the ever-changing landscapes of the conflict mesh. The responsive nature of local peacemaking fundamentally contradicts the liberal idea of a planned order and peace as a product of good governance. This contradiction explains the broad discontent and still-prevalent scepticism about local peace agreements by international peacemaking policy. They cannot be easily scaled up or connected. Attempts to do so might even hamper their chances of, however limited, success. While some countries managed to coordinate and

4 M. Kaldor and S. Sassen (2020), 'Introduction: Global Insecurity and Urban Capabilities', in: Mary Kaldor and Saskia Sassen (eds), *Cities at War: Global Insecurity and Urban Resistance* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press), pp. 1-24.
5 H. Yamashita (2004), *Humanitarian Space and International Politics: The Creation of Safe Areas* (London: Routledge).
6 E. Garcia (1997), 'Filipino zones of peace', *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* Vol.9 No.2 pp. 221-224.
7 C. Mitchell and Sara Ramirez (2009), 'Local Peace Communities in Colombia: An Initial Comparison of Three Cases', in Virginia M. Bouvier (ed.) *Colombia: Building Peace in a Time of War* (Washington, DC: USIP) pp. 245-270.
8 C. Mitchell (2007), 'Comparing Sanctuary in the Former Yugoslavia and the Philippines', in Landon Hancock and Christopher Mitchell (eds), *Zones of Peace* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press), pp. 123-136.

efficiently support local peacemaking efforts, most notably, despite some challenges,[9] Kenya and its National Steering Committee on Peace Building and Conflict Management, in most instances, these processes happen without the involvement of the national level.

Despite being an ungoverned practice that is at odds with a structured, planned, sequenced pathway to peace, local peace agreements still contribute to war-to-peace transitions. Indeed, their contribution is substantial, less as a conflict resolution exercise and more as a re-ordering of the conflict mesh. Instead of resolving the conflict mesh, they contribute towards dissolving local conflict and therefore disintegrating the mesh. They practically undermine mobilisation for armed conflict, for instance, by preventing the scaling up of community conflicts towards the national level, the search for armament, the recruitment, or the professionalisation of militias and their integration into larger-scale fighting forces.

Even more importantly, local peace agreements can contribute to a shift in conflict logics. They offer a concrete and tangible perspective of managing disputes without resorting to armed violence. They may even develop or foster a nucleus of what Marika Theros and Mary Kaldor call 'civicness'.[10] While such a shift does not necessarily translate into sustainable frameworks of peace governance, it is the most critical achievement when peace needs to be realised in challenging surroundings.

9 E. Elfversson (2019), 'The Political Conditions for Local Peacemaking: A Comparative Study of Communal Conflict Resolution in Kenya', *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol.52 No.13 pp. 2061-2096.

10 M. Theros and M. Kaldor, 'The Logics of Public Authority: Understanding Power, Politics and Security in Afghanistan, 2002–2014', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, Vol.7 No.1.

The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences. We mobilise these disciplines to understand the world and shape a brighter future.

From artificial intelligence to climate change, from building prosperity to improving well-being – today's complex challenges can only be resolved by deepening our insight into people, cultures and societies.

We invest in researchers and projects across the UK and overseas, engage the public with fresh thinking and debates, and bring together scholars, government, business and civil society to influence policy for the benefit of everyone.

The British Academy
10–11 Carlton House Terrace
London SW1Y 5AH

Registered charity no. 233176

thebritishacademy.ac.uk
Twitter: @BritishAcademy_
Facebook: TheBritishAcademy

Published September 2021

ISBN 978-0-85672-668-2

To cite this report:
British Academy (2021), *Local Peace Processes,* The British Academy, London

DOI doi.org/10.5871conflict/9780856726682.001

Cover image by Christine Jerian via Getty Images

Design by Only

The British Academy