

Introduction

Pioneering peace pathways

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This *Accord* publication incubated during an exceptional period in international peace and security. Given the dramatic start to 2020 it could not be more apt. Covid-19 has shaken up the business model of mediation and peace process support. As this edition goes to press in August 2020 there has been an ‘innovation explosion’ in the space of a few months with significant parts of peace processes moving online. The embrace of technology that otherwise might have taken many years to realise is one fascinating development. A stark focus on tackling violence has also been spurred by the UN-led global ceasefire campaign, alongside communication and collaboration between some conflict parties to halt spread of Covid-19. How long these positive features will last remains to be seen. Conversely, the pandemic has provided further opportunity for authoritarian governments, and many armed groups and gangs, to tighten their grip on populations and impose extensive restrictions in the name of public health, exacerbating repressive public security and the reach of militarism. In other contexts, it has created a security vacuum for communities pre-exposed to violence and who otherwise had some degree of public security provision which is now redirected to enforcing Covid lockdowns and physical distancing.

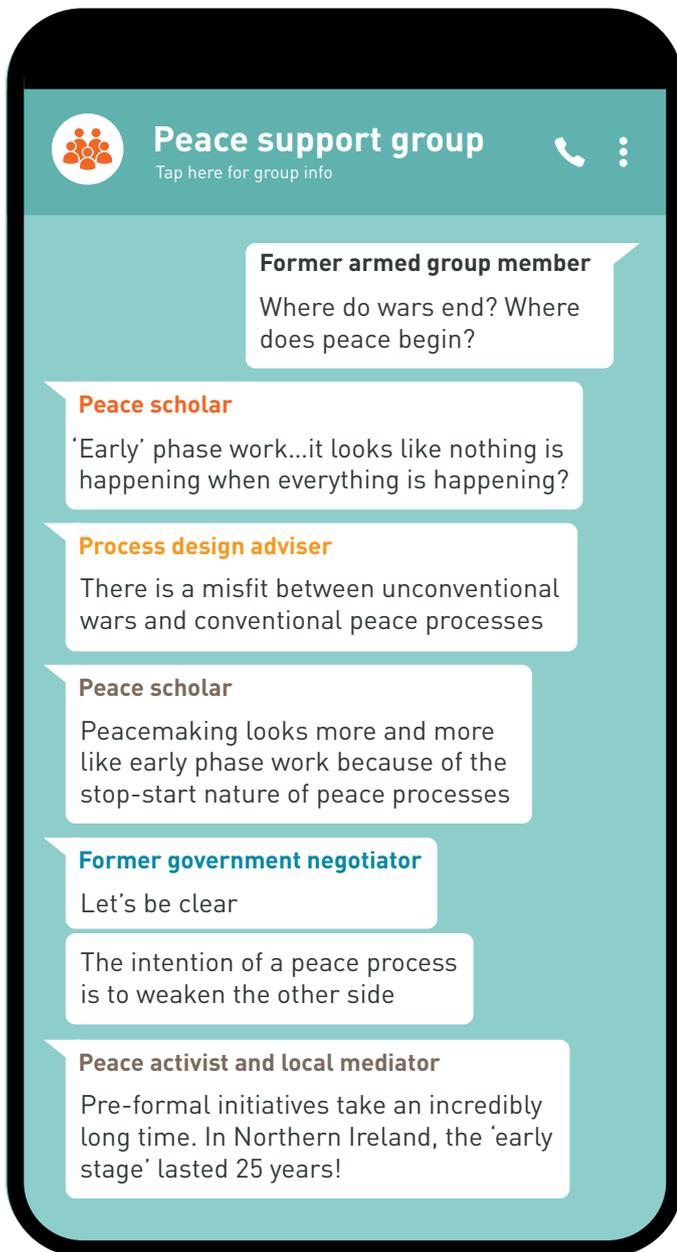
Early and pre-formal phases of peace processes

What does it mean when we say that *Accord 29* concentrates on ‘early’ and ‘pre-formal’ phases of peace processes? It means initiatives spanning years, often decades, to engage conflicting parties – typically armed groups, resistance movements, state militaries

and governments – in dialogue and negotiated political settlements. These are not neat phases. Instead they are decidedly non-linear and exemplify the ‘messiness’ of efforts to move to dialogue and the fine balancing act before formal discussion, mediation or facilitation takes hold or gets back on track after stalling. The terms are not perfect. ‘Early’ is in fact invariably ‘too late’ because violent conflict and repression is often well established and contesting perspectives deeply entrenched.

“ ‘Early’ is in fact invariably ‘too late.’ ”

The articles variously touch on the necessary ‘ingredients’ to forge peace dialogue, and how early peace efforts set the course for subsequent phases, establishing path dependencies regarding inclusion, accountability and transparency that can be hard to change. Not all early phase efforts will result in formal peace processes and agreements. Some efforts are less tangible or visible, but no less crucial for ordinary people trapped in zones of conflict: opening routes to market, enabling access to health services, bringing more women into governance and decision-making systems, and creating an ‘enabling environment’ for peace. Sensitivities over disclosure of information on some processes profiled in this publication underscore the difficulties with focusing on early or formative dialogue, which remains under-researched and poorly understood.



This messaging-style discussion is a nod to the focus on information technology in this *Accord*. The quotes are drawn from discussions in 2019 convened by Conciliation Resources to reflect on the pre-formal phases of peace processes.

Peacemaking and global politics

Contemporary peacemaking is impeded by tense and increasingly toxic geopolitics, proxy wars, ‘nested conflicts’, and information warfare. Populist nationalist governments are proliferating concurrent to shrinking space for nonviolent movements and civil political mobilisation. Peace processes are becoming more elusive, more complex, and certainly more compartmentalised as they lurch back and forth with multiple collapse points. Despite international efforts over successive decades to secure semi-sequential phases, the non-linear, ‘messy’ and fragmented nature of contemporary peace processes represents a distinctive challenge.

In the few processes that reach agreements, these rarely result in smooth implementation. Rather, they appear

to open a hornet’s nest of new negotiations. ‘Grand bargain’ processes have largely been consigned to a bygone era, replaced by stasis, posturing, exclusion and dysfunction. This roiling complexity demands innovation, collaborative cooperation, risk-taking and flexibility. Yet policy and legal frameworks around the globe are tightening in pursuit of anti-terrorism agendas and militarised public security – which, in many settings, are increasingly privatised. Furthermore, multilateral institutions continue to weaken and are often insufficiently agile for pre-formal peace processes, and non-government entities (NGOs, private sector actors) abound in the peace support space, demanding unprecedented levels of coordination. Positively, peace organisations and movements are looking for fresh ways to kick-start and nurture dialogue, and work smarter, more effectively. This *Accord* aims to contribute by looking at the volatile contemporary conflict context alongside peacemaking practice and innovation, and how more established methods and principles can be enhanced.

“ We needed to know who ‘us’ is. ”

Embracing diversity

Accord 29 builds on Conciliation Resources’ *Accord Spotlight* publication of September 2019 (see further reading), which provided a launch pad for further exploration. To ‘walk the talk’ on inclusion editorially, we issued a multilingual call to create opportunities for newer analysts to contribute and accompanied some less experienced authors to help document their insights. A wide array of peer reviewers also helped to hone ideas. Themes and country-specific content are cross-referenced across articles.

Who is this *Accord* relevant for? Diverse audiences should find it useful: from members of armed groups, to diplomats, donors, mediators, analysts, and journalists. We have tried to make it accessible, avoiding jargon where we could. Regardless of your background, role or location, we hope there are insights and ‘little gems’ across the publication that resonate with your experiences and interests.

Structure of the publication

The edition is organised around three elements:

Part 1 – Setting the scene

Part 2 – Perspectives on peacemaking practice and case studies

Part 3 – Testing new approaches

Each part is described further below.

Part 1. Setting the scene

Part 1 looks at key trends and developments in early peacemaking: 'actors and factors'; incentives and disincentives to continue fighting or engage in dialogue; how asymmetries between and within conflict parties affect their pathways to peace talks; the potential of nonviolent movements to prepare the ground for peacemaking; and funding trends of third-party peace process support.

These scene-setting articles provide a stock-take of the increasingly hostile context in which contemporary peacemaking is trying to progress. Arguably, peacemaking has struggled to keep pace with developments in warfare and geopolitics. Systems and policies are slow to adapt to this fast-moving landscape, though adjustments to Covid-19 do suggest faster learning curves are possible. The articles catalogue tensions and asymmetries in the early and pre-formal phases and the peace pathways that are starting to be laid down.

Actors and factors

Sophie Haspeslagh, independent analyst, and **Andrei Gomez-Suarez**, co-founder of Rodeemos el Diálogo, explore the factors that have propelled belligerents in **Colombia** to the negotiating table, what kept them there and, at times, made them step away. Navigating asymmetries is a core feature of early phase peace processes. The authors note that governments, not just armed groups, lack preparedness for peacemaking and negotiation. Conflict parties seldom speak with 'one voice' as hawks and doves jostle for primacy and relevance, and both state and non-state parties benefit from mediation support to build 'pro-peace' internal coherence ('We needed to know who "us" is', as a Colombian government official once remarked to me). The authors also explore peacemaking 'drag factors' such as the limiting effects of proscription regimes.

“ Peace support organisations undertake winding journeys with armed groups to encourage dialogue and negotiation preparedness. ”

International peacemaking has historically privileged militarised – primarily male – actors. But this is changing with a growing focus on the power of **nonviolent movements**. **Jonathan Pinckney**, research lead for the Program on Nonviolent Action at the United States Institute for Peace, argues that such movements are often best placed to pressure armed actors to prepare

the ground for a peace process. Breadth of connections with communities, political parties, business groups, student and youth movements, and feminist constituencies can give them greater social and political legitimacy and leverage. Yet these actors are frequently marginalised by both conflict parties wary of widening negotiations, and some peacemakers who may underestimate their potential. Pinckney acknowledges the increasing personal risks involved for nonviolent activists but suggests that peace support entities can change their analysis and approach to better include them.

Alexander Ramsbotham, *Accord* Director at Conciliation Resources, drills down into the journeys out of violence taken by some opposition groups and their perceptions of negotiations. Drawing on discussions with members of past and current **armed opposition groups**, the article links with others in this *Accord* looking at the Basque Country and Myanmar, focusing on two sticky areas (among many) that such groups struggle with: moving beyond security arrangements to political dialogue; and managing internal cohesion as dialogue and its attendant demands and compromises kick in. The article concludes with a vital reminder that peace support organisations undertake winding journeys with a host of conflict parties, including non-state armed opposition groups, to encourage dialogue and negotiation preparedness. This can be convoluted and hard to quantify but worth the investment in providing essential advice, fresh ideas and a myriad of support to transition to negotiation mode.

Funding shifts and peacemaking practice

Sebastian Kratzer from the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and I look at the context in which private diplomacy and peace process support organisations are operating and how they are funded. These bodies have proliferated in the past 20 years alongside dramatic changes in the nature and efficacy of peacemaking. **Funding trends** have an impact on the means and effectiveness of independent peace support. We explore some of the perceptions, priorities and grievances of practitioners and donors alike. We identify recurring concerns, particularly around projectisation and an over- or misdirected emphasis on tangible results: how these can have a deleterious impact on pre-formal peace initiatives when discretion is paramount, and the need for flexibility to navigate the hurdles described above. We suggest some practical steps that could be taken to overcome obstacles cognisant of the constraints many donors are operating within.

Part 2. Perspectives on peacemaking practice

This section reflects on current peace practice and some of the more effective ways to initiate

peacemaking in contemporary armed conflict. Perennial themes explored include the quest for collaborative coordination – playing to peacemakers’ respective strengths and weaknesses; and how different international approaches to peace support affect local civil society – positively and negatively. It includes analyses of formative peacemaking in Southern Thailand, Afghanistan, the Somali Regional State (Ethiopia), South Sudan and Myanmar. Articles on Myanmar and Afghanistan profile ‘insider mediators’ (or ‘peace whisperers’) – people from conflict-affected countries or associated with conflict parties who can play often unsung roles to bridge divides and foster dialogue in pre-formal phases, and who often go on to undertake key roles in more formal phases.

“ Effective insider mediators combine social, cultural, and political insights seemingly magically. ”

The section also looks at the contribution of peace secretariats in an era of peace process relapse and collapse. It further explores different approaches in early peacemaking, including: accompaniment and ‘critical friendships’, and the ability to speak hard truths to conflict parties and civil society; reframing stuck conflict narratives and logic in order to cultivate connections between antagonists or revitalise stymied peace processes; and ‘widening the tent’ through inclusion of civil society, young people, religious and ethnic minorities, and of course, half the population – women. A thematic analysis of self-determination and peacemaking accompanies contextual case studies where self-determination is a central focus in addition to the articles on Southern Thailand, Myanmar and the Somali Regional State. A dedicated focus on the theme unpacks misconceptions and problematic assumptions and provides suggestions on how international actors can more effectively support parties and communities in conflicts with self-determination at their core.

Insider mediation

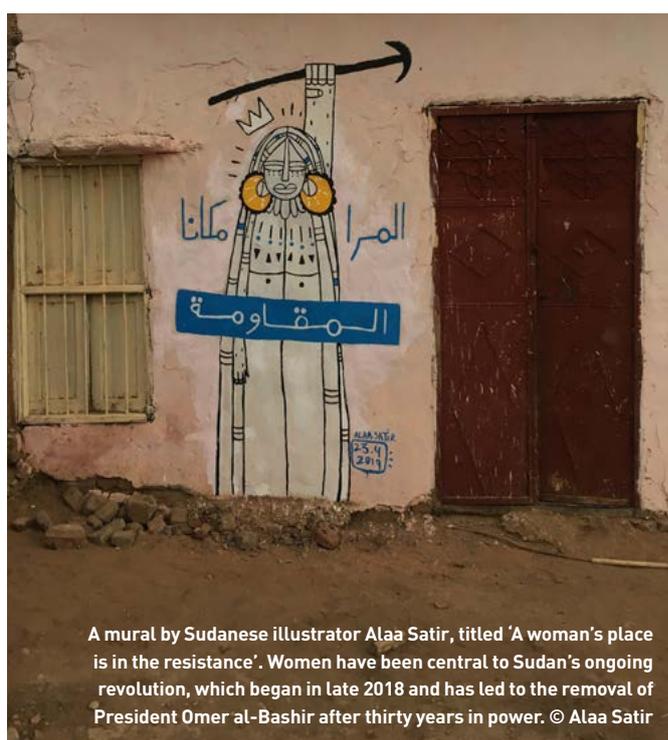
Ja Nan Lahtaw, Director of the Nyein (Shalom) Foundation, pauses to take account of her unique facilitation position in **peacemaking in Myanmar**. Lahtaw poses personal reflections from a protracted conflict with multiple levels and layers, and part of a multi-pronged, tumultuous political and economic transition that has followed six decades of authoritarianism. We come to see that effective insider mediators combine social, cultural, and political insights seemingly magically, and use charisma and personality type to navigate uncertain spaces. The article also explores gender variations in

facilitation and mediation, and the qualitative differences that some women bring to peacemaking, informed by their own experiences of marginalisation.

Khalilullah Safi, an independent peace activist and analyst, recounts his experiences of trying to ‘join the dots’, and of missed opportunities in **supporting pathways to peace in Afghanistan**. Safi has been an informal broker between the UN and the Taliban, using his networks with government, armed opposition, and the international community to help prise open opportunities for peacemaking. Safi provides the reader with food for thought on the potential of local, ‘bottom up’ peace initiatives, and the elasticity and synergies necessary to connect initiatives at different levels. The article prompts reflection on how to best realise multi-level approaches, particularly in contexts that eschew formal international mediation.

Institutional peace process support

Independent consultant **Ulrike Hopp-Nishanka** examines how peace secretariats can help sustain fluid dialogue tracks in peacemaking efforts. **Peace secretariats** typically feature in more formal phases of peace processes. Yet given how many processes are cyclical and prone to collapse, peace infrastructure is a core investment by the international community in process continuity, and potentially has a much greater informal role to play in fostering connections for peace. Secretariats can be part of conflict prevention and resolution efforts, but work best with consistent empowerment through workable mandates, adequate resourcing, and personnel with diverse skill sets who can spot and seize opportunities to connect people.



A mural by Sudanese illustrator Alaa Satir, titled ‘A woman’s place is in the resistance’. Women have been central to Sudan’s ongoing revolution, which began in late 2018 and has led to the removal of President Omer al-Bashir after thirty years in power. © Alaa Satir

Self-determination in the modern era

Self-determination lies at the heart of many conflicts, and the desire for autonomy, self-governance or independence is a central concern for case studies in this *Accord* on Myanmar, Southern Thailand and the Somali Regional State. **John Packer**, Professor of International Conflict Resolution at the University of Ottawa and **Sally Holt**, Conciliation Resources' Editorial and Research Manager, identify five persistent peacemaking challenges related to self-determination: managing fears and anxiety that self-determination always leads to secession; fostering understanding of the balance of rights and claims; navigating terminology and status mine-fields; encouraging greater representation and inclusivity; and leveraging, or otherwise, the influence of the 'neighbourhood' of states. They argue for enhancing knowledge about self-determination among conflict parties, insider mediators and influencers at national and sub-national levels, as well as the need for astute, informed, and inclusive political analysis.

Peace process accompaniment

Alex Shoebridge, Oxfam Peacebuilding Advisor, reflects on abiding tensions in providing **support to civil society in early peacemaking in South Sudan**. Coordination, intentionality, context and conflict sensitivity, and unintended consequences loom large. Conflict insensitive support can displace essential national and sub-national expertise and leadership. Much smarter and strategic division of labour can maximise collective strengths and mitigate such local displacement. The article identifies some weak areas of international support to implement normative agendas such as Women, Peace and Security. Carefully diversifying beyond urban centres and those well versed in UN-INGO-donor discourse is highlighted in the article. The author advocates shifting funding beyond activity or project level, providing longer time horizons and unearmarked funding flexibility to enable local civil society to maximise opportunities and adapt to shifting circumstances.

A case study of peacemaking in the **Somali Regional State in Ethiopia** by **Aden Abdi**, Horn of Africa Programme Manager at Conciliation Resources, details the glacial and painstaking work to secure a negotiated solution to the protracted conflict in the region with CR's support to the main armed group and the Kenyan facilitation team. This little known, and frankly rare, success story helps us to understand some of the necessary elements in accompanying conflict parties to get to the negotiating table, and to keep coming back: time, patience, presence and relationships. These foundations helped the Ogaden National Liberation Front to embrace the large dose of serendipity that came with a sudden change of federal government, and a comparatively younger reform-oriented

leader assuming power in Ethiopia in 2018. With stark asymmetry between the conflict parties, the article plots out the style of accompaniment required, the creation of dialogue spaces, and support to engage the diaspora and constituencies to build support for a negotiated settlement. Effective accompaniment here included an adaptive resource stream, confidence to offer and deliver timely support to conflict parties on demand, and willingness to keep working under the political and media radar.

“ **Peace processes increasingly turn in dramatic directions on a tweet or a Facebook post, a development we can no longer ignore.** ”

Finally, in this section, **Maho Nakayama** and **Akiko Horiba** from the Asia Peace Initiatives Department in the Sasakawa Peace Foundation give their perspectives on international peace process support in **Southern Thailand** from the viewpoint of a philanthropic donor that also engages as a practitioner. Their work mixes funding of third parties, alongside efforts to encourage the Thai government and military and an elusive armed group to commit to sustained dialogue and consider inclusive processes and outcomes. The article draws to a close with thoughts about complementarity from international actors and how this might be maximised in the years ahead as more entities become interested in playing a role.

Part 3. Testing new approaches and ideas

Part 3 turns to emerging strategies and innovative practice to advance conflict prevention, resolution, and management. These are imperfect 'works in progress'. This section covers some big themes: advances in digital and information technology; operationalising inclusion; ecosystem and non-linear thinking for peace and policymaking; young people claiming space in conflict-affected contexts; and alternatives to contentious issues in peace processes such as disarmament and demobilisation.

Social media and information technology

Digital innovations abound in peace and security. These have been accelerated latterly by the Covid-19 pandemic, and some are more promising than others. Technology can be a positive tool to better understand relationships and influence, and conflict and peace scenarios. Articles on social media and digital analysis here variously touch on associated risks: of confidentiality and security, creating new hierarchies – the 'digital divide' and access to the internet, class, language – and the reinforcement of pre-existing 'analogue' biases such as those relating to gender, age and location.

Information technology is certainly affecting the long-standing practice of 'constructive ambiguity' in peace processes. Articles on this theme alert us to the fact that social media and technology is changing this and that peace processes can turn in dramatic directions on a tweet or a Facebook post, a development we can no longer ignore.

Katrin Wittig, post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Cambridge, and **Sausan Ghosheh**, communications specialist, explore the role of **social media in early peacemaking**. Both authors previously contributed to the development of the 2019 UN Secretary-General's 'Toolkit on Digital Technologies and Mediation in Armed Conflict'. Exacerbated by fake news and populist manipulation of media, information warfare is a major feature of contemporary armed conflict. Social media has transformed the tools available to conflict parties, civil society, third parties and the public to both lend support to, and tear down peace efforts. It can also compound information leaks, and perpetuate bias, assumptions, hate speech, and mis- and disinformation. Peace practitioners need to harness the potential of social media to expand inclusion and shift narratives in favour of dialogue, while finding ways to mitigate risks.

Moving beyond static approaches to political analysis through use of inclusive digital methods and data visualisation is the focus of **Andreas T Hirblinger** from the Graduate Institute in Geneva, and **Maude Morrison** and **Helena Puig Larrauri**, Deputy Director and Director of Build Up. They argue the case for more dynamic **digital approaches to political analysis**, pointing to its potential to better understand relationships, influence and scenarios, and to identify entry points to future dialogue – for example involving more different groups. This touches on the perennial challenge of political analysis in peacemaking: is it comprehensive? Is it inclusive? Is it used? Too much analysis remains patchy and inconsistent for a number of reasons: as a result of being 'projectised' – generated once for a funding proposal; due to concerns about confidentiality and leakage, particularly if the analysis includes scenarios; or because of time lags between *needing* and *receiving* analysis. The writers urge that new digital approaches to analysis need to integrate human and machine capacities, guarantee diverse human oversight, and produce outputs of direct benefit to a given peace process.

Digging deeper on inclusion

A decisive feature of the past two decades has been the realisation of inclusion as a core peacemaking objective. Two articles in this section focus on four core questions for inclusion: who, when, how and why? Inclusion presents tough conceptual choices and practical hurdles for incipient peacemaking. It is far from a settled norm. Inclusion initiatives also result in unintended consequences and dilemmas.

Analysts of Middle Eastern politics **Aviva M. Stein** and **Adam H. Beek** reflect on an experiment to create an **inclusive governance system in north-east Syria**, concurrent to the horror of the Syrian civil war. This article up-ends the notion that pathways to peace are always associated with a formal peace process. The governance system established in Rojava has committed to a radical approach since 2014 to establish 'democratic confederalism' with an emphasis on dismantling gender inequality. The analysis highlights the potential of women's inclusion in early phases of institution building and policy implementation at all levels of local governance. However, it also exposes some of the contradictions that have arisen in realising one group's inclusive ideology in a multi-ethnic context, and in practice its application has raised accusations of ethnic and other bias among some communities.

Young people are making positive contributions in advancing digital peacemaking and peacebuilding. **Irena Grizelj**, co-author of 'We are Here,' the UN global policy paper on youth participation in peace processes, **Michael Frank Alar**, consultant specialising in peace processes in the Philippines and **Ayak Chol Deng Alak**, Research Head at the Strategic Defence and Security Review Board in South Sudan, offer an assessment of where young women and men are frequently found 'outside the room' of conventional peacemaking, and how they create alternative avenues to exert influence, including through using information technology to affect peace processes in South Sudan, the Philippines and elsewhere.

Unconventional approaches

This section shifts to profiling third-party risk-taking and innovation to secure disarmament and demobilisation in the Basque Country, a conflict prevention-resolution-management ecosystem to address political crisis triggered by elections in Kenya, and an incremental community-based 'camel walk for peace' that all unsettle preconceptions of neat peace process phases. These articles provide much-needed food for thought about the shape of peace processes and how international, regional, and national and sub-national actors can interact and play to their strengths.

Vlad Corbu, Chief Programme Manager at the Dialogue Advisory Group, provides a clear-eyed account of its steadfast contribution to ending a long-running conflict in the **Basque Country** in the heart of Europe. He dives into the innovative ways in which Euskadi Ta Askatasuna unilaterally disarmed and demobilised, sustaining momentum for peacemaking with dignity, and which was accepted by many states, although excluding Spain. Corbu details a thought-provoking example of what nimble, low-key, and unofficial third-party peace support can achieve in a limited operating environment – especially important given the scale of global failures in disarmament, and that so many contexts are allergic to official international involvement. The article illustrates the high-risk nature of contemporary peace support and the critical need for bespoke approaches and agility to ride out immense media scrutiny, navigate proscription regimes and legal constraints, and provide buffers between state and non-state actors. It also highlights the impact that sub-national regional governments can have when national authorities are absent or resistant.

Three practitioner-scholars describe a **violence prevention ‘ecosystem’ in Kenya** to stem election-triggered crises through a non-linear and multi-layered process that is a departure from the well-known multi-track hierarchy. It profiles indefinite process phases with cyclical bouts of negotiation to prevent political violence, and the need for continuous renegotiation of formal and informal governance at different levels. The article provides a timely overview and practical options ahead of the forthcoming general election in 2022. Authors **Prisca Kamungi**, Kenyan National Steering Committee on Peacebuilding and Conflict Management, **Florence N. Mpaayei**, Hekima Institute of Peace Studies and International Relations–Kenya, and **Thania Paffenholz**, Director of InclusivePeace explore initiatives seeking to link informal, formal, vertical and horizontal dialogue spaces, and the role of civil society in trying to delegitimise violence and create a web of alternative approaches and credibility.

Moving to northern Kenya, **Malih J.N. Ole Kaunga**, Director of local human rights organisation IMPACT Trust, and **Tim Bunke**, manager of Weltfriedensdienst Kenyan Civil Peace Service Programme, recount an **annual peace trek with a difference**. The Camel Caravan exemplifies the value of taking the long view – in both time and space – and the peace potential of regular encounters between ethnic groups sharing a vital and threatened river system. This annual walk helps break down barriers, bringing communities together to showcase their cultures. In the process they endorse a shared approach to managing a natural resource under threat. It is a subtle yet powerful example of informal local spaces enabling formal and state-acknowledged political agreements.

Conclusion

The conditions for peace and what makes it ‘stick’ are unpredictable, context dependent and subject to variation and disruption. A rapid change of leadership; a disaster or global pandemic that causes people to stop in their tracks and question their approach; a powerful tweet that dislodges stuck conflict narratives: all such shocks can derail nascent peace efforts. But they can also provide the necessary jolt to change course away from violence or reinvigorate a moribund peace process. The question is, who is ready to seize the initiative?

This *Accord* edition concludes with a set of suggestions responding to the recurring concerns across the publication, so that peacemakers can be better prepared to grasp opportunities when they arise. Regardless of your vantage point and on behalf of the Editorial Team and authors, we hope this edition piques your interest in the many paths, avenues, cul de sacs and side streets necessary to forge dialogue to end violent conflict.