

Peace in Action: Episode 5 – Accord

“Peace is hard, you know, it’s a difficult thing to do. It also involves amazing people showing enormous courage, creativity, conviction. So there’s a lot to learn from them.”

“Of course, when you’re in the middle a conflict and trying to grapple with how to change the dynamics, you can feel very alone. But when you start to read the experiences of others, you start identifying some commonalities. You realise that the struggles, the questions that you are asking are not unique.”

“I felt quite strongly that the world was changing around us and making peacemaking much harder, but that there were some core principles of mediation and peacebuilding and accumulated knowledge we, as a community had, which was still relevant and applicable, but needed to be updated and adapted to the world as it was.”

“I think the experience of local peacemakers was very much that AI and technology can be a powerful force for good in peace making.”

Welcome to the Peace in Action podcast from Conciliation Resources. I’m Jonathan Cohen, Executive Director of Conciliation Resources. In this series to mark our 30th anniversary, I’ll be talking with some of the people involved in the diverse work of peacebuilding around the world. We’ll hear stories from a range of guest speakers and uncover how dialogue and mediation support can help to create more peaceful societies and bridge divides.

Jonathan Cohen: 30 years ago, Conciliation Resources launched its flagship *Accord* publication, documenting lessons from peace processes. Joining me today are four colleagues who have played diverse and important roles in the evolution of *Accord*. I’m delighted to have with me: Zand Ramsbotham, who has edited the *Accord* series for the last 15 years in his role as Director of Research and Innovation at CR; Teresa Whitfield, who edited our most recent issue “Still Time To Talk,” on the adaptation and innovation in peace mediation, and Teresa, you bring years of experience from NGOs and the UN to bear in this discussion; Barney Afako, who has contributed to several *Accord* issues over the years, while working as a lawyer and mediator, advising on a number of peace agreements; and Helena Puig Larrauri, who is the co-founder of Build Up, where for more than a decade she has advised and supported UN agencies, multilateral organisations and NGOs on polarisation and digital tech in peacemaking.

Conciliation Resources is marking our 30 years of working in peace, building and supporting mediation. The Peace in Action series is looking at dialogue and peacemaking in its various forms, how it has shaped our experience of working alongside people who live with violent conflict, and the ways in which dialogue can bring about change. Today, we’re going to focus on our experience of learning from peace processes.

Accord has been a critical part of this learning process for us at Conciliation Resources, how we explore opportunities, how we try and avoid pitfalls in peace processes, and I'm delighted that the four of you with your wealth of experience can try and unpack this issue for us.

Perhaps I can start off with a quote from the one of the gurus of the peacebuilding world, Johan Galtung, who said many years ago that 'if *Accord* did not exist already, it would have to be invented'. Zand, as the leader of the *Accord* project, could you perhaps tell us a bit about how *Accord* came into being and why you think *Accord* needs to exist?

Zand Ramabotham: Thanks, Jonathan, yeah, I think the key thing for *Accord* is trying to understand how peace processes work. The key thing being the "how". I think that was the gap that was noticed 30 years ago when it started: the actual practice of doing peacemaking, and I think that's still a gap that *Accord* fills today.

Peace is hard. You know, it's a difficult thing to do. Peacemakers need skills, knowledge, perseverance, emotional intelligence, lots of different attributes. Peace processes, peace talks, get stuck, break down, go into reverse. Often, they're difficult experiences to go through. At the same time, peacemaking can and does succeed in helping to prevent or end armed conflict. It also involves amazing people showing enormous courage, creativity, conviction, so there's a lot to learn from them. At the time when *Accord* started, I think a lot of the publishing around peace wasn't really looking at the "how" we do it. So I think that's the niche that *Accord* filled.

JC: Maybe you could tell us, Zand, how the *Accord* actually came into being.

ZR: CR co-founder and the driving force behind *Accord*, Andy Carl, has talked of a moment of inspiration for starting the publication series for him. He's talked about a visit in the early 1990s to the Netherlands offices of the National Democratic Front, an opposition movement from the Philippines. And he describes going into their office and seeing on the shelves stacked files of information about peace processes. And he asked them, "Why have you got all this information?" And they said to him, "We need to learn this stuff. We know about fighting, we don't know so much about making peace." And I think he was struck by the need for that kind of information about how peace processes work, learning from people who really do it in order that people who want to do it can do it better. So, I think that was a really important part of the genesis of the whole series of trying to make sure we don't make the mistakes of the past and the practice can be better looking forward in the future.

JC: Thanks Zand. And can you actually remember the first time you picked up an *Accord* issue?

ZR: Absolutely, yeah. I can remember the first edition on Liberia in 1996 arriving in the department when I was studying. And it looked quite good. You know, looked a bit different. It was A4 size, and had a good cover, which was important to me in those days. But, yeah, I remember thinking, this is something a bit different. You know, it had contributions from people involved in the peace process in Liberia, local people and internationals. It had the text of the peace agreements, which were quite hard to find in those days, and had that in the publication. It had photos of what peacemaking looked like, and had maps of where it happened so and it

was describing what people were doing and how they actually did the business of making peace, which people really weren't doing in those days. So, it really struck me, this is really interesting and useful and different. Other publications along the way, before I was lucky enough to start working on *Accord*, arrived in similar kind of way: this is looking at something that is not happening elsewhere. So, it was quite a personal thing for me to see that happen and then to be working on it later on. You know, having been a fan when I was younger.

JC: And Teresa, you as a practitioner, what made you want to read *Accord*? What were you finding you were getting out of the publication, and what drove you to be involved?

Teresa Whitfield: I can't remember which *Accord* I read first, but I do remember them always being around and always looking forward to them. And I think, like many people who cross over from practitioner to the world of analysis and trying to understand our work, I was attracted by a couple of things. One, that the articles are really short, which is a good plus if you're really busy, and then I think the multiplicity of views and perspectives on a particular... whether it's a single conflict issue or a broader thematic *Accord* and *Accords* have done both. I remember very well using the *Accord* on engaging with armed groups. It was a particularly influential one, and publications on Afghanistan and individual conflicts. But the multiplicity of perspectives, I think, is really key, because any of us who are in this business know that, on one hand, you're there to support others, who's there to support the conflict, actors and parties who are trying to move away from violence towards sustainable, peaceful processes, and on the other by doing that, you're aware of them needing to understand and empathise and support many different perspectives, different sides, different parties in the conflict, different experiences, Whether it's as a member of an armed group or civilian populations who've been suffering from the violence.

So those things drew me to *Accord* as a consumer, and then later, when the opportunity arose for me to edit an *Accord*, the three of us, you Jonathan, you, Zand and I were at a Wilton Park conference, and it was a moment where people were really beginning to question the efficacy and point of peace mediation. And, you know, is mediation fit for purpose? And we were all struggling with these issues. And I was about to leave the UN, and at the UN, I'd been overseeing mediation support and policy and the political department engaging with lots of UN mediators in the field. And I felt quite strongly that the world was changing around us and making peacemaking much harder, but that there were some core principles of mediation and peacebuilding and accumulated knowledge we as a community had, which was still relevant and applicable but needed to be updated and adapted to the world as it was, which was getting increasingly difficult. And I also very much from the beginning, partly because of the work that I was overseeing at the UN, was really keen on integrating the world of digital tech and how changes in the digital realm were changing conflict and ... but how they were also providing us with new tools to respond to conflict. So, I jumped at the opportunity.

JC: And Barney, you contributed to *Accord* over the years, and as someone who's worked inside peace processes, both trying to write up your experience of seeing what changes, but

also think about some of the problems you're confronting and where you can gain lessons from, what did you find useful in in the *Accord* series?

Barney Afako: I contributed to my first *Accord* more than 20 years ago, in 2002 and it was a time when the conflict in northern Uganda was not going anywhere. Peacemaking didn't seem to be getting traction. And what was incredible about that *Accord* publication, was that we were able to describe what was going on with the peace process, or the lack of it. I remember my piece was about the amnesty and what local communities were doing to engage with processes of social reintegration of the LRA (Lords Resistance Army). So, *Accord* was not only recording successes, but the struggles, the real struggles of peacemakers in difficult contexts. And even for me, who had contributed a chapter, a lot of what was said and written by the other contributors, I was not completely aware of. So, it's the variety of voices that came through on a conflict that I thought I understood, was really quite striking. And all of us kept going back to that *Accord* series, because it was always a rich text from which to draw lessons and insights from the past and to prepare us for the future of peacemaking in northern Uganda. In fact, that article that I wrote is perhaps my most quoted article by far, and I've never been as successful as that first article. And the issue of the format that both Zand and Teresa you've mentioned is very important. *Accord* is highly readable. It's not just readable for students and academics, but peacemakers, practitioners. You can sit with *Accord* under a tree in northern Uganda, and it makes sense. It's accessible in that way. It gives you the history of the conflict sometimes in bullet points, sometimes copies of agreements and texts that you didn't know existed at that time, we could find in the *Accord*. So, it is. It is a classic of a format.

JC: Helena?

Helena Puig Larrauri: I really love how you've all talked about the accessibility and the format of the *Accord* being a key draw into the publication. And one of the things that I think is quite exciting, that we're working on right now together right, is bringing yet another format of the *Accord* into existence that I hope will have the same impact that it had on you, Zand, when you said that, when it landed on your desk, it was a bit different. We were working together right, to build an AI agent that will make it possible for you to interrogate the *Accord* through an interface that can bring together all of this learning. I think that's incredible, because I think for a lot of mediators and peace builders now, you know, they go to maybe to a search engine, so to Google, or they go to Chat GPT to ask about the maps, and the agreements, and the knowledge, but that knowledge isn't curated. The *Accord* is deeply curated over 30 years. And if we put an AI agent on top of it that can make sense of it, I think it's going to be, you know, yet something else when and when it lands in somebody's inbox, they're going to say, 'Wow, this is really something quite different', and I think that's a very important tool to bring for mediators and peacemakers.

JC: Now, it's interesting to see the evolution, because when we started the *Accord*, when Andy got it going, the idea that you'd put it on the internet as an accessible, free source for anyone to be able to read, and that we would print the full text of peace agreements, because you couldn't

find them in those days, was quite novel. What you're saying is that now that the internet... you can find anything anywhere, but you can't necessarily easily interpret it and understand what you're finding. So, the effort now is to think, "Well, how do we curate it in a way that makes it more usable for the consumer."

HPL: And trustworthy. You know, you can trust what is in the *Accord*. And so when you chat with the *Accord* through an AI interface, you can trust it much more than when you ask Chat GPT what this agreement was, or how you would compare different agreements, and I think that having a trusted source for mediators that is AI-enabled will be yet another game changer with the *Accord* series.

TW: I look forward to playing with it already, having struggled with Chat GPT, which is always most useful if you actually know the material really well, and becomes more scary when you don't know the material really well. I do think, though, that the process... I mean, I found editing *Accord*, and perhaps, like a word of caution to Helena, who's in the midst of it now. Editing *Accord* is fun, really stimulating, but it's really hard, precisely because of the challenge of ending up with many short articles and the editing process with Zand was - I learned a lot from it - but it's quite rigorous and quite difficult. On the plus side, I really enjoyed, not just grappling with the substance, and like any editorial project where you're kind of using it to help refine your own thoughts, but the collaborative nature of *Accord* is really stimulating. I think, in the *Accord* I edited, there were about 35 authors from all over the world, and then another 15 or so people who are on the advisory board or peer reviews, some more engaged than others, but over a period of 18 months, a kind of constant conversation with many of them, individual editing processes around matched up with workshops and things, so that the cumulative process of that engagement with that variety of people, all of whom know an enormous amount about their particular area of expertise is really stimulating. And I think it what then turns each accord into public education, into a sort of conversation, hopefully, a conversation with some guidance and trust-based analysis within it, but that diversity is part of the process as well as the product. Which is, which is a very rich experience.

JC: And many of the authors aren't necessarily natural authors. They're not people who are used to writing for publications and actually accompanying them through articulating experiences of being at the heart of a peace process or a conflict before the peace processes has been essential to the evolution of the *Accord*.

But another dimension of it that I'd like to explore with you is that at the heart of the process has always been this notion that it's worthwhile to document experiences and to learn from what others have done in peace processes. Are there elements that you've seen through the publication of what, 30 *Accords* now some of it, most of which have looked at specific context case studies, but some of which have looked at themes, and more often than not, now we look at thematic issues rather than specific countries? How do you find the *Accord* helps learning from processes to inform how people might act in their own peace processes?

ZR: Well, I think Teresa already referred to “Engaging Armed Groups” as a kind of milestone edition in the series. And again, I wasn't working on *Accord* at that time, but I do remember seeing it because I was in another job I was doing at the time, looking for information on how you actually talk to armed groups. And the only real useful stuff I could find was that *Accord* publication. Of course, CR and *Accord* weren't the only people doing engaging... actually engaging with armed groups at the time. So, it wasn't a new area of peacemaking that we were pioneering, but I do think that the *Accord* project on engaging armed groups helped to move that whole process forward and establish how you talk to armed groups as an area of proper practice for peacemaking with some messages attached to it. And I think that has happened with a couple of other issues as well. Around in the 2000s as well, *Accord* published an edition on public participation in peace processes. So really broadening the ways to broaden the process out from just the armed groups and the kind of senior leaderships of those kind of actors to really engaging a much wider range of different types of people and community in a process. Again, that was something that was happening, but I felt like the *Accord* publication was a milestone in establishing that as a real, proper area of peacemaking practice, and also contributed for people to understand what does that look like. You know, how do you actually do that? Is that a national dialogue process? Or What have people done in different contexts? It really feels like the digital publication that we're doing now with Helena is going to be one of those kind of moments.

JC: And that question of learning from other processes. Barney, you've worked on a diversity of peace processes. Have there been times when you've actually said, ‘if I look refer back to an *Accord*, and I think about how a different process experienced this issue, I might gain some insight that will help me nudge the current process forward?’

BA: One of the things about *Accord*, at least the issues that deal with a specific context, is the storytelling. Because when you're in the middle of a conflict and try to grapple with how to change the dynamics you are, you can feel very alone, that everything looks bleak and difficult and intractable, but when you start to read the experiences of others, perhaps in similar, even dissimilar contexts, you start identifying some commonalities. You realise that the struggles, the questions that you are asking are not unique to yourself. The answers might be different, but the processes of engagement, of collaboration that emerge from *Accord* are as important as you know, the concrete lessons learned from them. So I think storytelling has been you know one important style, if you like, of *Accord* that has resonated and that has ensured its popularity as a go to publication.

But indeed also on the thematic areas - if you want to grapple with you know, whether it's engaging armed groups or you need to think about you know innovation and adaptation, then you can always go to *Accord*, and you will find, you know, several chapters, maybe not all of them, but there will be something that speaks to your situation and helps you, you know through your reflection and thinking.

TW: It's important also to stop this being an entirely an infomercial for *Accord*, which is a bit of a risk. Important to recognise, obviously, the evolution of *Accord* has been happening alongside an evolution of the wider peacemaking mediation field, in which many... there's been an acknowledgement of some of the stuff that *Accord* does by cross-learning from different processes, which you can see through different peace processes. I worked a conflict which has been addressed in several *Accords*, in tangential ways, though not a single volume, as the Basque conflict, the end of ETA's violence in the Basque region in Spain. And while working on that, it was really, really interesting to trace the direct learning from that process back through Northern Ireland to South Africa, and there were various patterns of evolution of cross learning across processes. CR has done a lot of work, at one point, was doing a lot of work between the Philippines and Colombia, and so *Accord* has been within this ecosystem of the field as a whole, becoming much more aware about the benefits of learning. And obviously it's been facilitated by communications and the digital revolution and all sorts of things, which have made it far easier for people with a thirst for the kind of knowledge they might find in *Accord* or elsewhere, or a wish to be in contact with other people to do so. So, I think we've seen that in the evolution of this period which *Accord* and CR has been part of and contributing to wider processes of lessons learning across the board.

But I also think we have to acknowledge... and one of the things, obviously, the genesis of the *Accord* I edited, was acknowledging was quite how hard things are now, and the *Accord* came out in early '24 and things have only got harder. Some of the things that we pointed to in that *Accord* about the move towards transactional peacemaking, the trying to work out how the world operates in a world of, on the one hand, multipolarity, and on the other hand, great power competition and erosion of the normative base of much of the work we're doing. These things have got only harder since then. But I was quite pleased, before coming to the studio, I was flicking through the *Accord* volume and thinking, how much of this is completely irrelevant two years later, because the world feels it's changed so much, and lots of it stands.

And I think one of the one of the aspects and the advantages of the very rigorous process of editing and review and peer review and all that stuff that the *Accord* goes through is trying to come up with, with things that will ... they have the benefits of immediacy, because *Accord's* production schedule is wonderfully quick and sharp compared to an academic publication, but then trying to maintain the balance of something that stands the test of time has been important.

JC: Zand, did you want to come in?

ZR: Yeah, I was going to refer back to the AI agent, which Helena mentioned, that we're developing at the moment. I think that's going to be really helpful in looking at a theme across different contexts, for example. So, you'll be able to say, 'what does demobilisation look like in a particular kind of challenge', and then the AI agent will help you to look across different contexts. Across the whole series. That seems like a really exciting part of what the AI agent will bring.

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JC: How's the AI agent going to work?

HPL: So, we're going to have two actually. One is going to be web-based, and what it is, the best way to think about it is: you have all of the *Accord* publications inside it and then you have a chat window, much like a ChatGPT window, which you prompt with a question. The agent itself will have some suggestions of prompts you might want to ask. So, it's kind of like a guide to exploring the *Accord*, but all of the answers will come only from the *Accord* back catalogue. So, if you ask it about, I don't know 'what has been the evolution of transactional mediation?', then it will only pull answers from the *Accord* publications itself. Interestingly, that agent also has the possibility of listening to your answers as a podcast, so none of us may be needed for the next podcast series! Of course, it'll be a very different quality, but I think that's interesting. It will work in 52 or 53 different languages. I can't remember exactly.

There will also be a WhatsApp version, which I think is important because of who reads the *Accord*, as Zand was saying earlier. You know, this is a publication that is read by a very wide variety of people with different access to technology. So, you will be able to interrogate the *Accord* using WhatsApp directly through an automated conversation with a WhatsApp channel, essentially. That will have some limitations to what you can ask and what you get back. But again, it will only refer to the *Accord* back catalogue for your answers.

JC: Again, as I said earlier, I'm intrigued and very much looking forward to trying this out. And the test of it will be whether, Barney, you spoke earlier about reading an *Accord* under a tree in northern Uganda. Whether people who are actually living through their conflicts can turn to the *Accord* and find it as the AI agent, and find the AI agent able to help them in thinking through their real-life problems, and how accessible that would be. I mean, as someone who's carried copies, notwithstanding it being online, carried copies of *Accord* around the world to give to people, it's always been a fantastic calling card to be able to go in and meet someone working either in a government or in a multilateral role as a mediator or in an armed group, and actually give them a copy of *Accord* and sit down and start talking to them. Instead of us having to do the talking, we'll now have the AI agent able to do it for us.

TW: People really like the hard copies. Even now I found with the last *Accord*, we had a discussion about whether it would just exist online and be on hard copies, and I really pushed for it to be in hard copies. And I found handing it out people were, because of *Accord*'s reputation and because it looks nice, they are quite heavy, but people like it. So I would, I would think, hope it would continue.

HPL: I think it's absolutely an "as well as," and not an "instead of." So, it will be yet another way that you can explore the *Accord*, which I think is, you know, as with many things, with technology and AI, is the way to approach this, even in peace processes, right? Technology is never a replacement for mediation processes or for mediators. It's an "as well as" so I think having a hybrid product that is both a hard copy that you take into government meetings, that you hand out to people, you know, in different contexts, but also saying, you know, "Look, if you

want to look at some of the other editions that I'm not carrying in my suitcase, then here's a WhatsApp number that you can connect with." I think that's going to be a real addition.

JC: Yeah, make it much more accessible.

ZR: Your suitcase doesn't get any lighter for a long time to come yet, Jonathan!

JC: My osteopath, will have something to say about that!

BA: And I really like the idea of a podcast. I can imagine somebody being able to listen to the responses in their own language under a tree. I mean, that is really excellent, and it makes me think that *Accord* is really like a written podcast for the variety of voices that it tries to capture the part of the storytelling that emerges from its articles. So, I think it's a natural transition into in the podcast territory, while keeping, scripting what is a really fabulous formatted publication.

HPL: I really love the way you described that, Barney. It's so funny, because for me, that's an analogy to also the way that technology and AI is beginning to show up in peace processes. Which is that, you know, in some ways, it's this opportunity for inclusion and for bridging and for bringing more voices, you know, and we see that with everything from people being able to listen to podcasts, but increasingly with people being able to consult... to be consulted in very simple ways, and very openly, through a peace process using voice technology that then can be very quickly interpreted, right? So some of the I think the more exciting developments in peace processes are around that, around inclusion and bridging and finding new ways for consensus using AI and technology. So it's almost like it's a reflection of that in the way the *Accord* works.

JC: It's interesting how we've been looking back at the *Accord*, but already starting to look forward at what the next phase of the *Accord* can offer through the use of technology in the last *Accord*, Helena, you touched on some of the challenges and some of the problems as well that technology and AI present for peacemaking. I wonder if you could share a bit more on that, because I think we see the benefits that could come, but we need to be very mindful of the problems that accompany it.

HPL: Yeah, I think that's absolutely right. And I think Zand, when you were speaking earlier about the essence of the *Accord*, you were talking about how it explores how peace processes work, like how they actually work. And I think one of the things that we began to touch on in the *Accord* "Still Time to Talk" that Teresa edited, was how technology is changing the nature of peace processes. And I think if I had to summarise that, I would say that the way that algorithms operate and curate the information that people consume is leading to a sort of fragmentation of consensus, and that has had an impact on democracies. It's had an impact on elections. We see that very clearly. I think it's also having an impact on social cohesion, and we explored some of that in the *Accord*. And I think that, writ large, what we see is sort of a narrative threat that shows up in a lot of conflicts. There was an excellent article in that *Accord* talking about how this showed up in Nigeria specifically, but we've seen that in Kenya. We see that in Sudan right now, the narratives on social media driving a lot of the violence or amplifying a lot of the violence. I think that's only going to get worse with artificial intelligence. And I think that's partly

because we think about special intelligence as epistemic technology. We think of it as producing knowledge. So then suddenly we all think that we are the holders of the truth. And in a conflict situation, if every conflict party thinks that it's the holder of the truth, they get even more stuck in positions. And this kind of moment where you think a conflict is intractable, that Barney was referring to before becomes even more intractable, because nobody will shift. So, I think this kind of narrative threat is something that we're going to be grappling with even more. So the opportunity is inclusion and bridging and finding ways to find consensus. But there's also a very real threat.

JC: It's interesting you use the word intractable. I've always had a bit of a bug bear with the word intractable, because I think there's peacebuilders, and as people who support and engage in mediation, our job is to try and find traction and to try and find crevices we can cling on to as we climb up the rock face of a peace process to try and nudge things forward. And I wonder how we grapple with that in a world in which there are too many aspirations for quick fixes and easy solutions, and you both mentioned transactional processes, which has become such a buzzword. Now, peace processes have always had transactional dimensions to them, but it feels particularly acute at the moment when there's a desire to get a quick fix or a ceasefire, but not a lot of thought in the long term dedication that's needed to both get agreements signed, but agreements that are reflective of what societies need, and then to think about how you move forward from those. So how does reflecting on experiences from other processes challenge us to actually rethink what that means in the current era of pressure on mediation?

TW: I think the questions that we're being faced to ask at the moment are very difficult and very profound, and we don't have answers right now. I think the move away from more structured processes, the move away from the sort of multilateral lead in peace processes, whether it was the UN or the African Union or the some of the regional organisations elsewhere, enabled for a more structured sense of process, and the kind of classic tools of mediation in terms of preparation and process design and consideration, which led to processes that were better prepared for then formal processes of inclusion, including for inclusion. You know, if you have a formally set up table, it's possible to think - if the will is there - about, how can you ensure that other communities have a say in discussion on what happens? And it makes it easier to think about implementation and sustainability of the peace effort. Not that things always worked. It's an incredibly difficult business. We all know how hard it is to sustain even when you have a peace agreement. At the moment, with an emphasis on different kinds of mediators, often state-led, we've seen power mediation led from the top, and the rather peculiar phenomenon of Trump's take on peacemaking, which claiming an awful lot, even as some of the agreements he's claiming to be falling apart, as he claims to have breached peace. But it's not, it's not just Trump, there's a kind of emphasis on quick fix, state-led, often mediation and peacemaking, negotiation, and can be far removed both from, on the one hand, what's happening at the local level that: so connecting the state-led transactional, kind of quick deal peacemaking with the enormous amount of work that's going on at a local level for peace, driven by the communities themselves, who are suffering the consequence of conflict, and on the other hand, separated

from mechanisms and structures for implementation, which is worrying. Because we all know that an agreement is, in itself, a kind of, questionable value. The value is what can be implemented and what can be taken forward, rather than the big moment - we've signed the agreement. And I think we're in the process of trying to learn to bridge that gap, and we're not there yet.

BA: And I think *Accord* telling the story of that learning process rather than outcomes, is going to be important to describe how at the local level, communities, leaders are engaging with questions of polarisation and new conflicts that are often transboundary, transnational. I think that if you look anywhere in all of the conflicts that you're going to find local peacebuilders making the best sense of their situation. I think about Sudan, where after the revolution, you had resistance committees taking charge of humanitarian issues when, when all of the other humanitarians had fled. So that that agency and the capacity to mobilise to respond to conflict, I think it's going to have to be a focus of what we try to describe and let the lessons emerge gradually and not force the lessons. Tell the story of resilience and adaptation and innovation at those levels. And I think then eventually we'll start seeing the kind of patterns with the help of AI and others to be able to respond better to the current fractures.

JC: Barney, I like the way you talked about how AI has that power at various junctures in the way we look at peace processes. And Helena, maybe you could tell us a bit about how we're actually trying to look at that in the current *Accord* project.

HPL: So the current *Accord* project is going to look very squarely at digital peacemaking. So picking up some of the opportunities and challenges that we explored in the previous edition, and sort of expanding on them, looking really at what is the impact of technology and AI on conflict dynamics, some of what we discussed earlier about narrative threat, fragmented consensus, but also looking at proactive uses of technology by mediators and peacebuilders. So, I think those two lines of inquiry are going to be really interesting to get further into and to really understand how they need to be navigated. There's a third line of inquiry in the *Accord* that I think is very important, which is really thinking about what is the space for mediators and peacebuilders to comment on and inform the design and governance of technology and artificial intelligence? And I think this is a critical issue for mediation, because I think it is going to not only continue to define the way that conflict unfolds, but also increasingly define the way that struggles for power globally are structured. So that's what I hope the *Accord* will do. And I think the reason the *Accord* is such a good vehicle for this is that, as with many other issues, it's going to bridge in voices that are not typically heard in mediation publications, people that maybe don't think of themselves as being part of the mediation and peacebuilding world, but that are having an impact on these critical issues. And also it's going to elevate the voices of people working already at the local level on many of these issues, and doing some of the really kind of cutting-edge work. So I think it's going to be, yeah, a really interesting exploration.

JC: And are you finding that you're able to bring in people who are working at multiple layers and levels of peace processes to share their experience? Because I think what's always been interesting is to look at the actual experience of people, as well as some of the opportunities that new technologies or new ideas provide, but to get people to tell the story of what they've already been doing.

HPL: Yeah, so, I mean, I think, I think that's one thing that is that is interesting is that there is actually a lot of work happening already out there that is not written up as with much of the work in our field. So, you know, I don't want to give away too much of the publication coming, but I think, you know, there's going to be a few really great in-depth examples of how online processes have bridged to offline processes. So how you have these hybrid peace processes. They'll definitely be one that looks at Palestine and Israel, that I think will be a really interesting example to kind of explore positive uses of technology. But in terms of the impact of technology on conflict, there will also be some that really look at how social media has exacerbated division in many contexts. Probably one on Sudan. We'll see where else, maybe in Somalia. So, I think this is something that, you know, we're going to get some really concrete examples that will help, I think, understand different perspectives on this issue.

JC: That's really encouraging to hear, because I think we're all very conscious that the current era is one in which, as Teresa you said earlier, peacemaking and mediation feels under duress. What we've been thinking about here is the way in which it's possible to draw lessons from experience of peacemaking to make processes better, to make the process of peace more likely to be achieved. If you take a step back and reflect on some of the key lessons that you've observed through the process of learning from peace processes - of which *Accord* has been one constituent part - what would you share as critical lessons for you, for the field, but also for you personally?

BA: I think the idea that peace is about communities that are most impacted by the conflict and that they need to be involved in shaping a new future. I think that is critical. And increasingly, as peacemaking becomes more and more transactional at that sort of top, high level, it's going to be important to maintain that solidarity with affected communities and make sure that their agency, which they often don't lack, is able to come through, and that you can support them in working together even across national borders. Many of our conflicts today, I look at Africa and the Sahel. It's not just about Northern Nigeria. It's about Cameroon, it's about Mali and all of the other countries that are affected. And what I've been thinking about more and more is how we can facilitate some of those encounters, because they are also constrained by bureaucracies of migration and visas. How do you engage each other when you are affected by the same kind of challenges? And I'll finish with this story that a few years back, I was privileged to be in a meeting between Zimbabweans and Venezuelans, and they'd come together, because both countries are facing challenges about very strong, one would say, repressive governments that they have to work within as citizens. And it was incredible how much commonality that they had, but the simple act of sitting down over three days and sharing stories left both groups energised to go back and not give up on strategising to find their own answers. *Accord* is one such bridge.

It's a text bridge, and with AI, it's going to become even more alive and active and accessible. So, it's important that we continue to provide those opportunities in real time, digitally, for communities to engage each other as they grapple with conflict, and the lessons that emerge from that will keep informing our practice.

HPL: I want to pull on the on the thread that you put down Barney, about the importance of local experiences. I sometimes have the privilege of teaching digital peacemaking sessions to track one mediators, and very often, the first question out the gate that I get is, "Can you make it go away?" In the sense of, you know, we were quite comfortable when we could just close the door and have a closed-door meeting, and there was no kind of way that other voices were getting in in these ways that we can't control. And yet, when we speak with local peacemakers, we get quite the opposite. We get: "Can you help us redesign it? Can you help us make it better? Can you help us change the way that it works so that it's not as disrupted or fragmented and so it helps to actually bridge and build consensus?" I think the experience of local peacemakers is very much that AI and technology can be a powerful force for good in peacemaking. And I think that that's a message that we can kind of elevate through the *Accord* and put forward to people who are still feeling a little sceptical of it. So that's my hope is that there's a sort of a moral and a political imperative to making sure we use technology in the right ways and peace processes, and that the *Accord* can be part of communicating that.

ZR: I think for me, from working on *Accord*, but also listening to amazing peacemakers and thinking about it for all these years, something that really stands out is again picking up on something Barney said, is the whole idea of agency in peacemaking, that peace doesn't just happen on its own. People work hard to make it happen, and that happens at a local level, at national level, international level. There's people putting effort and thought and skill into making peace happen, and that needs to be respected, acknowledged and supported where appropriate. So local peacemakers need support, you know, and they need to be understood, and they need to be acknowledged for their contribution. But also, foreign ministries have people working on peacemaking, and they're important, you know, and they need to be supported, even with technology. Helena, as you were just describing, it's the people and how they work with technology that's the important thing. So it's just a reminder, really, to me, often of it's the people who do the peacemaking who are really important, and they're... for someone who's worked on *Accord* like I have for a long time, it's their stories and their experiences that we try to capture

TW: Even though I was pretty gloomy earlier on about what's happening at a kind of track one state-led level, I do think maybe, looking forward to the next year, you always try to look at things which have which give hope for the future. I think this is a moment where lots of powerful actors, as well as the obviously, the communities we've been talking about, are talking and thinking about peace processes and about negotiations and about solutions. We may not like the way it's being approached, particularly the kind of violation of very basic things like consulting and taking into consideration the views of the conflict parties themselves, but it is also a huge opportunity for peacemaking. The amount of conflict and the amount of polarisation

and difference, but also the level of discussion around peacemaking and negotiation, means that adds up to the basis of hope for a more peaceful future. And some of these things are being more effective. And I also feel more strongly than you know, when I began the conversation around the *Accord* I edited in 2022, that the question of: "Is the accumulated knowledge that we as a community and an international, global now community, because there we've there are so many actors across the world who have enormous capacity on peacemaking, peacebuilding, is this relevant and useful for the future?" I feel we can answer that with a with a kind of resounding "Yes." It's a question of how it's applied and how it's brought forward, but applying the lessons of what we've learned from the things that have worked, and also from the many things that haven't worked over the past decades that we see within the *Accord* volume actually has never felt more urgent or necessary to move us from the rather gloomy place we are to what we hope will be a better place in the future.

JC: I think that's a powerful message on which to end. Barney, Zand, Helena, Teresa, thank you ever so much for sharing your experiences of how we digest learning from peace processes.

TW: Thank you.

BA: Thank you.

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