Introduction

Conflict and peace in borderlands
Sharri Plonski and Oliver Walton

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Oliver Walton is a Lecturer in International Development at the University of Bath. His research focuses on the political economy of war-to-peace transitions, civil society, NGOs and NGO legitimacy. He is principal investigator for the PACCS-funded ‘Living on the Margins: The Role of Borderland Brokers in Post-War Transitions’ project and a co-investigator on the ‘Borderlands, Brokers and Peacebuilding’ project.

This fourth Accord Insight publication focuses on peacebuilding in borderlands – regions that straddle an international border. Building on Accord 22 (2011), Paix sans frontieres: building peace across borders, the publication develops understanding of how peace and transition processes incorporate borderland regions and the interests of communities living there – or, as is more often the case, how they neglect or exclude them.

Applying a ‘borderlands lens’ challenges some key assumptions that underscore current peacebuilding policy and practice: that power and order radiate outwards from the centre of the state; that border zones are resistant to national peacebuilding and statebuilding projects because of a lack of security, development or governance infrastructure; and that more development and greater state presence can therefore resolve challenges faced by borderland communities. Seven case studies of peacebuilding in borderlands are presented here – north-eastern Kenya (bordering Somalia and Ethiopia); Shan and Kachin states (Myanmar/China); Bab al-Hawa, Idlib (Syria/Turkey); the Tarai (Nepal/India); Medenine and Tataouine

BOX 1

Nepal’s Tarai borderland

The Tarai, or southern plains region of Nepal, shares an ‘open’ border with India, across which span dense webs of interaction between the communities living on both sides. Nepalis and Indians cross daily in order to buy everyday goods, work, and visit friends and relatives. People living on the Nepali side of the border watch Indian TV and use Indian currency and mobile phone networks. Political leaders and armed groups in the Tarai often rely on cross-border support. These cross-border connections have contributed to a perception among dominant groups from the central hill regions of Nepal that Madhesis and other ethnic groups from the plains have split allegiances and are not ‘true Nepalis’.

Nearly a decade after the end of the armed conflict, in August 2015 a wave of protests across the Tarai began against new constitutional proposals which emerged after a 2006 peace agreement between Maoist and government forces ignored their demands. In order to ratchet up pressure on Kathmandu, these groups, with the covert backing of the Indian government, imposed an ‘unofficial blockade’ at various border crossings along the Tarai, but centred on the town of Birgunj, where around 70 per cent of Nepal’s petroleum products are imported from India. For over four months, protestors enforced the closure and no goods were allowed to pass.

The blockade had rapid and spiralling ramifications for the Nepali economy, prompting shortages of cooking oil, fuel and medicines. Long queues of cars, trucks and motorcycles formed around the petrol stations of Kathmandu, and a thriving black market for petrol quickly developed. People stockpiled fuel in garages; others took to their bicycles. Although the protestors (and the Indian government) hoped the blockade would force political leaders in Kathmandu to cede to Madhesi demands, the blockade in fact provided a boost to nationalists who railed against Indian bullying and violation of Nepali sovereignty. Prime Minister KP Oli spoke about strengthening ties with China. Eventually an amendment was agreed which allowed India to save face but did little to address Madhesi demands.

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(Tunisia/Libya); Donbas (Ukraine/Russia); and Northern Ireland. These demonstrate how transition processes are very different when viewed from the margins – with important implications for peacebuilding policy and practice.

The Nepali blockade described in Box 1 vividly illustrates the central role of borders and borderlands in post-war transitions, how changes at the margins of the state can shape decision-making and power relations at the centre, and how transition dynamics are influenced by multiple actors from both sides of an international border.

Why borderlands?
The common assumption that borders refer to political partitions between recognised entities is challenged by the fact that they are often disputed, and that the formal lines used to delineate states and citizenship seldom map neatly onto the boundaries that define social, ethnic, linguistic and political groups. Boundaries, at their most basic, describe the informal lines drawn to differentiate between ‘us’ and ‘them’, or friend and foe. Formal borders overlap with a range of invisible or informal dividing lines. A frontier describes the pliable political space that emerges through conquest and territorial acquisition, which a border is meant to close down and settle. Yet in practice, frontier dynamics continue long after nation states define their territorial limits. Such dynamics are often central to the way borderlands are treated in national and international policy, in particular seeing borderlands as ‘exceptional’ zones that warrant ‘exceptional’ kinds of intervention.

A distinct set of conflict relations emerges in borderlands. State presence is often limited. Borderlands are commonly home to ethnic, linguistic and kinship groups that straddle the border, facilitating flows of trade and movements of people, and those living in borderlands may see the other side of the border as more significant than distant capitals and economic centres.

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Some borders are relatively open, porous and unregulated. Others are heavily securitised. And, as the description of the Tarai blockade above illustrates, soft borders can quickly harden. Borderlands can be contested spaces that become havens for resistance movements and where non-state actors clash with state institutions. They may experience persistent violence and sharp economic inequalities, but may also foster new modes of development, extraction and trade.

Borderlands are often either overlooked or viewed negatively in statebuilding and peacebuilding interventions, seen as lagging or ‘disruptive’ zones that threaten state integrity and development processes, and that are only noticeable when violence escalates. Despite growing interest in inclusive peacebuilding, responses to borderland instability tend to prioritise security, overlooking historical processes of marginalisation or complex cross-border political, economic and social interdependencies. Common approaches have
been centrally-driven, to pacify and regulate borderlands, seal them off, or negotiate deals with local power-holders that do little to empower borderland communities. In Myanmar, for example, local militias have been used to outsource violence and establish state authority over contested and ‘uncontrollable’ borderland areas. Yet, borderlands are not inherently marginal and perceiving border regions as constraints on rather than opportunities for peaceful change creates gaps in both understanding and practice. Their strategic location at the intersection of states means they can be important for accessing regional economic markets, facilitating trade flows and shaping diplomatic relations and national security. Case studies in this publication show how, for example, borderlands in Ukraine, Kenya, Myanmar and Northern Ireland have been key to enhancing the economic reach and potential of the state, and integral to national growth and development.

The Madhesi blockade on goods coming across the border from India featured in Box 1 above is a stark example of the economic risks of failure to address borderland grievances. The case studies more broadly show how border regions function in different ways in peace and transition processes: as strategic zones – for various armed actors in Syria; as buffer zones – the Tarai between Nepal and India; or zones of symbolic importance – as a bellwether for peace in Northern Ireland. Conflicts such as in Syria, Libya and Somalia traverse national boundaries, through trade routes, illicit economies, movement of weapons, armed groups and people, or ideologies.

Borderlands can become sites of regional and international power plays – as with Myanmar’s northern border regions for China, or the Donbas for Russia, the EU and Ukraine. Borderlands are also gendered zones, where specific identity groups may be included or excluded in times of crisis and stability, and structures and institutions are used to maintain such power relations. Borderland communities are not homogenous. Some borderland groups may benefit from tighter regulation of the border – for example the deals reached among armed groups to formalise the Syria–Turkey crossing point at Bab al-Hawa. Others will seek to promote freer movement of people and goods. These complex experiences of borders and borderlands produce multiple challenges for peacebuilding interventions to align with the needs of borderland communities.

Structure of the publication
The publication is organised in two sections. Section one begins with this introduction and addresses key concepts, explaining how analysis and practice shift when looking at peace transitions through a ‘borderlands lens’. In the subsequent article, Goodhand and Meehan present an analysis of ‘spatialised political settlements’, which explores the implications of borderlands for understanding how political settlements are negotiated and agreed. Political settlements analysis has become an influential policy tool over recent years and has been used to challenge the conventional view that effective peacebuilding is underpinned by good governance and establishing the ‘right institutions’. A borderlands perspective emphasises the important spatial dimensions of bargaining between political groups and draws attention
clans to become increasingly bound up with elite competition have shifted from localised tensions and competition between the centre, the article explores how conflicts in this region post-independence period through the early 2000s to today. 

The second section comprises seven case studies of peacebuilding practitioner on the challenges they face working on borderland issues in conflict contexts.

Peacebuilding practitioner, 'Working in contested borderland regions presents a number of practical challenges. Some are logistical – trying to gain access to securitised, politically closed borderland areas can have security risks and other obstacles, including difficulties in trying to bring people together and ensure representation when they may have travel restrictions or passport issues. We also have to navigate conflicting, contrasting and often officially sanctioned narratives about why or even if a border exists. It can be difficult to unravel the embedded, subjective accounts and histories in order to understand what the conflict dynamics are. 

We can also come under suspicion for being seen to challenge these accepted narratives. This information economy also mediates the ability to engage people in the process – what people feel safe or willing to say and in which environments. In the contexts where we operate, elites from the centre can feel threatened by our work, which questions their positions. They often interfere with progress on the ground, viewing peacebuilders with suspicion and hostility."

UK policymaker, 'Many conflicts have sub-national or cross-border dynamics, which make them complicated for policymakers to get to grips with – we are used to working with and through the state. Borderlands often suffer historical patterns of political and socio-economic marginalisation, but policy institutions and response mechanisms only 'see' the edges of state when they become a serious security threat – and are therefore reactive rather than preventive. There are lots of things we could and should be doing to prevent problems from arising in the first place. 

There is also a prevailing view that border security and management including barriers are the only remedy to borderland challenges, despite examples that these do not necessarily work and can even be counter-productive in many situations. Current policies developed as part of the dominant counter-terrorism agenda solidify this view. Another reason policy struggles to incorporate sub-national areas in political processes is that there is often nervousness about providing special measures for certain territories. This then results in generic decentralisation approaches, which can ignore the specific histories of exclusion in these areas.'

The section ends with an article by Yousuf, which draws out key lessons for peacebuilding policy and practice from the case studies. The article analyses particular risks associated with peace transitions in borderlands: of aggravating rather than alleviating violence and exclusion; of contributing to the fragmentation of local political leadership; and of stimulating negative narratives of borderland communities. Yousuf then draws out priorities for peacebuilding in borderlands, stressing that analysis must capture borderland dynamics, that space for peacebuilding in borderlands needs to be safeguarded, and that peacebuilding needs to create connections – between the centre and the periphery, within borderlands and across borders.

The second section comprises seven case studies of peacebuilding practice in borderlands. Abdi and Lind first examine the north-eastern Kenyan borderlands with Somalia, tracing the evolution of conflict and peacebuilding from the post-independence period through the early 2000s to today. Through a historical analysis of relations between the margins and the centre, the article explores how conflicts in this region have shifted from localised tensions and competition between clans to become increasingly bound up with elite competition for political power and territorial control, influenced by transnational flows of people and goods. It further looks at how peacebuilding approaches in the region have adapted to overcome new challenges to governance and security with the changing political economy, and the establishment of new county governments.

Meehan then provides an analysis of Myanmar’s north-western borderlands with China and Thailand, critically reflecting on the overly optimistic framing of Myanmar’s so-called ‘triple transition’. The article explores why a nationwide ceasefire has been so difficult to reach, and how peacebuilding, humanitarian and community development initiatives in Kachin State and northern Shan State continue to face huge challenges despite the country’s democratic transition and formal peace process. While statebuilding, development and peacebuilding have been instituted from the centre, this has in fact provoked new modes of violence in borderland areas as national and sub-national elites have sought to consolidate power there. Reflecting on the hybrid authorities and multiple international, national and local actors that must be navigated and appealed, the author suggests how international actors can re-orient their engagement with the peace process.

The third case study by Drevon and Kurabi offers an in-depth look at Syria’s Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey. Based on interviews conducted by the authors in Turkey and Syria,
the article focuses on the slow process of re-institutionalising and regulating the border-crossing at Bab al-Hawa, after the area’s liberation from the Syrian government, and as different armed groups with divergent interests vied for control. The article demonstrates that while greater regulation has facilitated trade flows, it has been underpinned by increased militarisation as the border gained strategic importance. This has undermined the voice of civil society and local populations in decision-making processes, while the link between military and political power has endured.

Goodhand, Walton, Karn and Jha then examine the political contestation and negotiation that emerged over constitutional reform in the Tarai region in Nepal’s southern borderland with India after the signing of the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The article focuses on the life histories of two ‘borderland brokers’, exploring the varied ways in which such figures can mediate relations between different groups, spaces and interests and how their motivations and networks affect post-war transition processes.

The fifth case study looks at Tunisia’s southern borderlands with Libya. Abdel Baky examines the legacies of under-development and marginalisation in the Medenine and Tataouine governorates from the perspective of communities living there. The article analyses the impact of changes in border governance – particularly in light of a developing national anti-terrorism discourse – on the livelihoods of borderland populations, youth aspirations and regional disparities between Tunisia’s coastline and its interior. Based on surveys and a range of peacebuilding interventions conducted by International Alert, an international non-governmental peacebuilding organisation, it reflects on how bottom-up approaches to strengthening governance in borderland areas can empower communities historically excluded from the national sphere.

In the sixth case study, Mirimanova describes developments in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine, bordering Russia. This contested region broke away from Ukrainian control in 2014 and with Russian military and financial assistance established two self-governing ‘republics’. The article explores the complex identities of the Donbas region and how the border became increasingly significant as tensions rose in Ukraine. It reflects on how cross-border interests have played out and national narratives have hardened to further isolate the region. Mirimanova asks why progress in the official peace process has been so slow and looks at what international actors and local NGOs have done to build peace at the grassroots level.

The final case study explores the re-emergence of the borderlands in Northern Ireland since the Brexit vote of 2016 and the anxieties that the referendum triggered among border communities contending with an uncertain future. Hayward describes the significance of European Union (EU) membership to the peace process, centred around the Belfast Agreement in 1998, and the challenges related to the border. Based on a study conducted by the author, the article looks at how local communities in the central Irish borderland region perceive the potential impact of Brexit on a still-fragile peace.

In addition to these written pieces, the concepts, geographic relations and human experiences that comprise borderland conflict and peace dynamics are brought to life through
for exploring the complex dynamics of borderland lives and communities. This Accord Insight adopts this approach with illustrated maps. There are acute challenges to accessing information on and in borderlands: such places may experience weak governance, heightened security measures or lack of infrastructure, and data may be unavailable, unreliable or difficult to collect. Innovative methodologies such as comic strips provide opportunities to uncover hard-to-access knowledge and data, incorporate multiple voices, including those that are often silenced, and facilitate greater understanding of the complex dynamics and personal stories of borderland communities living there.

PositiveNegatives – a non-profit organisation based at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London – combines ethnographic research with storytelling and illustration, adapting personal testimonies into art, education and advocacy materials. The charitable arm of PositiveNegatives, Why Comics? brings these stories and other contemporary humanitarian and social issues (such as racism, conflict, migration, trafficking and climate change) into classrooms around the world. This approach provides an effective means to present the experiences of those living in conflicted borderlands in new ways and to new audiences.

PositiveNegatives’ method is based on participation: comics are developed through a series of conversations with participants and are drawn by local artists wherever possible. For each project a research team member travels to interview the people behind each story. They spend time with each person, trying to collect detailed information not only about their life experiences but also about them as individuals and the way they interact with the world. The researcher also collects visual material – an extremely useful resource in the process of turning the real context into an illustrated narrative. Participants are also involved during the drafting process.

But why turn testimonies into comics? There are three factors that help answer this question. The first is an ethical concern around safety. The comic format protects the identities of the people interviewed, allowing them to speak freely about their experiences of different humanitarian or social issues. When working on the draft, the artist edits names and other identifying details to ensure participants remain anonymous. This way, they feel able to share their story without fear of negative consequences for themselves and their families. Secondly, a significant proportion of PositiveNegatives’ storytellers are from marginalised communities, including from border regions; they need their voices amplified but are not always in the position to do so under their own name. Third, the illustrative element adds visual depth to often overly-simplified and imposed narratives, enabling the reader to appreciate these personal narratives in their complexity. Illustrative storytelling increases accessibility, as visual narratives can transcend age, gender, cultural differences and literacy levels.

The storytelling approach can help capture lived experiences of conflict and peace, humanising narratives for audiences in a non-confrontational manner, and facilitating understanding of how conflict affects people in different ways. They are a rich medium to capture and reveal layers of memory, trauma and personal angst. Comics can also be presented in many media, including newspapers, magazines and online platforms, which opens up discussions to non-specialist audiences and the wider public.

All comics and animations produced by PositiveNegatives and Why Comics? are available for free on their websites: positivenegatives.org and whycomics.org

Illustrating borderlands

Elettra Pellanda
Senior Research and Education Consultant, PositiveNegatives

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Peacebuilding through a borderlands lens

This Accord Insight offers new ways of thinking about and working with borderland spaces, communities and conflicts. It highlights the specific challenges of building peace in borderland regions and advances discussion on how policy and practice can adapt to respond more effectively, for example by engaging with borderland groups that are often left out, and by recognising that some of the roots of problems at the margins may lie a long way from the border itself. Peacebuilding initiatives have different impacts and resonances in borderland regions, and they connect to other spaces and groups. They also help to navigate the diverse economic and development opportunities that emerge during transition processes, as well as the different interests that shape and obstruct them.

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This Accord Insight adopts this approach with illustrated maps. Working with a graphic artist, the editors sought new methods for exploring the complex dynamics of borderland lives and spaces. As the case studies clearly demonstrate, working in borderland regions requires engaging with historical and contemporary politics, elites and non-elites, and international alongside local and national actors. The illustrations help to understand what is happening inside borderlands and how they connect to other spaces and groups. They also help to navigate the diverse economic and development opportunities that emerge during transition processes, as well as the different interests that shape and obstruct them.
peace processes – if they do not consider the historical relations between centre and periphery. Different actors play important roles to navigate social networks and gender relations that exist within and beyond borderlands. A ‘borderlands lens’ offers some important lessons for peacebuilding practice and policy:

- It brings into focus the interaction of international, national and sub-national political settlements and the tensions between them – looking at the distinctive dynamics of borderlands, but also beyond these into the ways in which relations at the centre of states are shaped by and contingent upon relations in the margins, and vice versa.

- It draws attention to the brokers who help shape relations between levels – international, national and sub-national: the actual and potential junctures and dissonances between interests and groups; and the individuals who fill gaps and blind spots to ensure connections are built, needs are met and flows of goods and people continue.

- It changes how violence in borderlands is both understood and responded to. Multiple forms of structural and direct violence exist in borderlands, stemming as much from national efforts to control statebuilding, development and resource extraction in borderlands, as from non-state actors and dissident armed groups operating there.

- It looks beyond the state to better understand the relevance of cross-border relations to national politics, highlighting and helping to unpack the critical influence of international interventions, regional conflicts and global power relations in shaping local dynamics.

- It encourages a deeper examination of the impacts of policy on a range of communities in post-war contexts, paying attention to the inequalities that exist among borderland groups, and between such groups and decision-makers in capitals.

- It re-examines assumptions about the impact of interventions by central governments or international actors – especially the expectation that what works for the centre will work for the margins – pointing to the need for a historically nuanced approach to power, elite bargains, violence, governance and inequality.