Peacebuilding in borderlands: a view from the margins
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As a practice-based peacebuilding organisation, Conciliation Resources has long supported peacebuilding work in border regions that are deeply affected by conflict and often neglected, securitised or misgoverned. From east and central Africa to the Caucasus and Kashmir, peacebuilding in borderlands involves going against the grain of official narratives about why violence persists, supporting the agendas of people who have been marginalised by one state and instrumentalised by another, and sustaining relationships across psychological and physical divides.

The case studies presented in this fourth Accord Insight highlight the distinct challenges facing borderland communities affected by violent conflict and how policy and practice can be re-oriented to better respond to these. While political borders are essentially artificial, dividing local populations with historic social, familial, linguistic, cultural and economic ties, they have very material effects. Customs posts, military checkpoints, licit and illicit trade, markets, migration, and refugee flows that gather around border areas impact on the political, social and economic life of borderland communities affected by violent conflict and how policy and practice can be re-oriented to better respond to these.

Understanding peace and transition processes in borderlands

National transition processes that ignore borderlands or attempt to absorb or pacify them risk aggravating violence and exclusion.
The consolidation of national-level political settlements encourages an over-emphasis on short-term stabilisation in borderlands, which can experience ‘selective integration’ while remaining excluded from commitments to rights or the rule of law.

Efforts to support local governance in borderlands risk fragmenting political leadership and exacerbating conflict.
Strategies by central governments to cede key political, administrative or security functions to local non-state institutions have often contributed to the fragmentation of local political leadership in regions with historical experiences of state exclusion.

Peace and transition processes can prompt negative narratives of borderland communities that reinforce their exclusion.
Constructed and reconstructed over many years, divisive narratives typically focus on cultural, religious and political differences and an assumed lack of commitment to national ideals and identity.

Priorities for peacebuilding in borderlands

Ensure conflict and peacebuilding analysis captures borderland dynamics. Analysis should include how different groups in borderlands experience national transition processes, looking out for common pitfalls such as the potential for elite capture or failure to build on existing peacebuilding capacities and mechanisms.

Make space for peacebuilding in borderlands: navigating constraints, identifying entry points and working with brokers.
International actors can support peacebuilding in borderlands by mediating between local organisations and national governments to facilitate the development of mutual options for progress. Local brokers can help navigate murky borderland politics and identify who is best placed to advance particular agendas with different powerholders.

Connect peacebuilding at the centre, in borderlands and across borders. Influencing change at the centre can require alliances with national media, political parties and civil society, and with international NGOs. Supporting mobilisation locally requires maintaining legitimacy and relevance with different local constituencies amid shifting dynamics and competing agendas.
populations, often violently. The publication focuses on conflict-affected borderland regions and how they are affected by national-level war-to-peace transitions. But it is important to acknowledge the diversity of borderlands: not all are politically marginal or conflictual; some are more economically or geopolitically significant than others; and their relationship with the centre can shift, often rapidly.

The introductory articles in this publication argue that a ‘borderland lens’ is crucial to understanding how historical development processes affect contemporary conflict and peacebuilding. There is often a failure to acknowledge that statebuilding at the centre has been built on exclusion, violence and resource extraction in the periphery. The case studies illustrate the risks to national peacebuilding of failing to address political, social and economic exclusion in borderland regions. They point to the importance of relations between central authorities and those living at the edges of states; of the networks, negotiations and agreements among multiple actors both within and between borderlands; of the brokers who help shape these various relationships; of the violent and non-violent contestation in borderlands; and of the impact of different forms of intervention. The publication is concerned with different excluded groups. It has not been possible to provide a comprehensive gendered analysis of borderlands, which is an area that remains in need of further exploration.

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This article draws out lessons for international actors supporting post-war transitions in borderlands, grouped under two headings: (1) understanding peace and transition processes in borderlands – how borderland communities experience these processes differently and the challenges for building peace and stability in border regions; and (2) prospects for peacebuilding in borderlands – how peacebuilding initiatives can better respond to these challenges. It emphasises the need for interventions that bring the margins into national level peacebuilding processes and are responsive to cross-border dynamics.

Understanding peace and transition processes in borderlands

National transition processes that ignore borderlands or attempt to absorb or pacify them risk aggravating violence and exclusion

Peace and transition processes often prioritise the consolidation of national-level political settlements. This encourages an over-emphasis on short-term stabilisation in borderland regions. Post-conflict borderlands can experience selective integration – into systems, infrastructure, and flows of trade, resources, capital, for instance – while remaining excluded from the kinds of rights or rule of law enjoyed by those living more centrally. For example, democratic transitions in Myanmar and Tunisia that have been celebrated globally for bringing an end to longstanding autocratic regimes have yielded little benefit for some borderland communities and have even brought further securitisation and militarisation.

‘Given the precariousness of state finances, stability was vital in order to accelerate resource extraction from the country’s resource-rich borderland regions and expand formal cross-border trade.’

Myanmar case study

National transitions can therefore lead to a series of trade-offs or contradictions in relation to borderlands: negotiations or ceasefire arrangements at the centre versus coercion and securitisation at the margins; political reform agreed in the capital versus political fragmentation at the periphery; or economic benefits for central elites versus disruption of local economic ties. For example, from 2011 the Tunisian government sought to pacify economically deprived areas bordering Libya by tolerating informal cross-border trade, the backbone of the local economy. But after a rise in armed attacks in the region, border security was strengthened, leading to more insecure livelihoods and steep drops in local incomes.

Decentralisation is a key feature of many peace negotiations to secure or integrate conflict-affected borderlands into national transition processes. The case studies in this Accord Insight illustrate tensions that can be associated with it. Strategies need to look beyond technical choices between different forms of devolution and focus much more on how these reforms intersect with the local political economy in decentralised areas. Decentralisation may provide potential avenues to improve economic opportunities, bring services closer to people, and include borderland communities in decision-making. However, it is often captured by elites and may be primarily concerned with expanding central state power and bureaucracy into borderland areas where state legitimacy is contested – making instability more likely.

The introduction of devolved government structures in north-eastern Kenya in 2013 occurred alongside significant socio-economic changes, including larger-scale regional and cross-border investment and trade. This raised the stakes for local clans contesting territory and access to resources in the area, with devolved offices providing another opportunity for them to secure their interests. Clan divisions have since sharpened and inter-clan conflict has increased, with localised power-sharing arrangements used to divide up political offices. This has benefitted some clans more than others, emphasised elite deals rather than broader accountability and inclusion, and undermined existing clan-based conflict resolution mechanisms.

Post-conflict transitions can set in motion a new set of conflict dynamics in borderland regions. For example, in Myanmar increased resource extraction in some border regions has led to land dispossession and widespread displacement. Peace processes tend to focus on the cessation of large-scale violence through centralised processes of demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration, and formal security sector reform. This can leave little appetite to address emerging and
complex forms of violence. International actors supporting such processes are therefore often ill-equipped to develop effective conflict prevention interventions in borderland regions, particularly where the argument for safeguarding national security and economic growth is compelling. Interventions should challenge simplistic narratives of how violence emerges and is sustained, and be aware of the winners and losers from peace and transition processes, including how different forms of integration may produce new forms of exclusion.

Efforts to support local governance and conflict resolution in borderlands risk fragmenting political leadership and exacerbating conflict

Different forms of state and non-state authority operate in borderlands to provide resources and security or resolve conflicts. The challenges that central governments face in asserting authority in peripheral regions often lead them to pursue strategies of hybrid governance – sharing or ceding some political, administrative or security functions to local non-state structures, especially in borderland areas where customary and traditional institutions are strong. However, such strategies have contributed to the fragmentation of local political leadership in regions with longstanding historical experiences of state exclusion and where non-state institutions are well-established.

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Attempts to ‘formalise’ informal borderland structures have exacerbated conflict in different ways – encouraging elite capture of resources and increasing rewards and incentives for competition. In Tunisia, central state recognition of informal cross-border trade routes in Medenine and Tatouine governorates brought these to the attention of local elites, who then sought to control them by imposing taxation on longstanding users. The case study on north-eastern Kenya describes how peace committees had historically provided an effective resource for mediating and resolving clan tensions. But efforts to recognise them more formally and bring them into the public sphere intensified competition for resources and administrative posts among local clan leaders, shifting the committees’ focus away from conflict resolution. The case study authors warn against a blanket assumption that the ‘localisation’ of conflict resolution mechanisms or political administration is naturally stabilising or peaceful.

The potential for lucrative economic opportunities around borderlands, such as cross-border trade, is often said to encourage violence. Yet in Bab al-Hawa, Syria, various armed groups cooperated to formalise the border crossing. This in fact reduced violence around the crossing, increasing revenue from the border and enhancing the security of the local population by reducing the need to deal with conflict among multiple competing armed groups.

Engaging with armed groups to provide governance presents ethical, political and practical dilemmas for peacebuilding. Particularly for local peacebuilding organisations, initiatives to reach marginalised populations may rely on connecting with services provided by non-state armed actors. Attempts to dismantle or an inability to recognise such structures therefore risk making life more insecure for borderland populations or local peace activists. But while armed groups may be effective in delivering certain services, working with them risks potentially strengthening their presence and control of a particular region. Supporting the improvement of state systems may also be problematic, however, as these may lack local legitimacy or capacity, while peacebuilding processes themselves can risk replacing local non-state systems for service delivery and resource allocation. In Myanmar, local ceasefire arrangements in some parts of the country have sought to overcome this through ‘interim arrangements’ that do not acknowledge the legitimacy of the services provided by armed groups but accept them as a temporary reality under the terms of the ceasefire.

Peace and transition processes can prompt negative narratives of borderland communities that reinforce their exclusion

Periods of conflict and transition can trigger or amplify negative national narratives or portrayals of borderland communities. Constructed and reconstructed over many years, these typically focus on cultural, religious and political differences and an assumed lack of commitment to national ideals and identity. For example, the Donbas region of Ukraine enjoyed political representation at the centre and thrived economically for many years after independence. But as tensions rose in relation to the 2014 Maidan Revolution, nationalist narratives and stereotypes resurfaced, demonising and isolating Donbas communities and emphasising their links with Russia. The Donbas has subsequently been portrayed as a ‘world apart’ from the rest of Ukraine.

Dominant identity narratives can also occur within borderlands, masking the fact that borderlands are often inhabited by diverse communities and may themselves contain stark economic and political inequalities. In the southern Tarai region of Nepal, for example, recent political struggles have brought to the fore Madhesi claims for greater political autonomy. However, Madhesis are one of several major identity groups in the Tarai, each with different narratives about who they are, the nature of the border and their relations with the centre.

Apparently unrelated policy decisions can also trigger trauma associated with actions around the border. In Northern Ireland, the open border with the south has been a key component of the transformation of the conflict. But the potential return of restrictions on the Irish border prompted by the UK’s exit from the European Union has worried many border communities.
Memories of the uncertainty, insecurity and sense of division associated with the violent years of the ‘Troubles’ are still vivid, and it is feared that any restrictive border control will bring a return of conflict-era suspicions and communal divides.

‘We’re still on the path to reconciliation and [Brexit] is like opening a wound.’

Northern Ireland case study

In response to narrowing national identity narratives, borderland communities may turn their attentions inwards, emphasising the ‘local’. Communities living in border regions in Ukraine, Tunisia and north-eastern Kenya have developed economic ties, trade relationships, political affiliations and social relations at a very local level and across state borders with neighbouring borderland communities. This can lead local populations to feel disconnected from national processes and that they lack political voice. For example, some communities living in the Medenine and Tatouine governorates of Tunisia have been demonised and associated with ‘terrorism’ in the national media – exacerbated by sensationalist reporting of violent events. This has deterred local communities from speaking out against violence in their region for fear of aggravating suspicions, and has led to policy responses that ignore the more immediate forms of insecurity experienced by border communities.

‘While local inhabitants were concerned about spillover from Libya, they saw restrictions on border trade and lack of development as the main causes of any insecurity, rather than a terrorist threat.’

Tunisia case study

A commitment to inclusion should involve recognising how exclusionary narratives are triggered and operate during conflict and peace processes. The representation of borderlands in the national imagination influences how borderland communities are included in nationally led peace processes and how their concerns are negotiated in relation to other priorities.

Prospects for peacebuilding in borderlands

Ensure conflict and peacebuilding analysis captures borderland dynamics

Any peacebuilding effort should be based on coherent, up-to-date and politically attuned analysis that includes how different groups in borderlands experience national transition processes.

Capturing these insights requires shifting the current configuration of the development and peacebuilding sector – with country teams and planning processes headquartered in national capitals and using official, rather than local, languages. Sub-national offices with a remit for cross-border analysis and programming is a key starting point. This does not mean replacing a country-level, national focus with a borderland one, but rather taking account of non-national histories and how local, national, transnational and global relations create outcomes in borderlands very different to those seen nationally.

Special attention should be paid to how sub-national modes of exclusion operate. Targeted analysis that disaggregates identity can help identify key ‘exclusion variables’, such as informal and formal barriers to inclusion, marginalised groups who need particular support, and influential local actors who can either champion or resist change. Understanding these dynamics can also help identify unexpected opportunities for change. For example, in Tunisia, in-depth political economy analysis and community perceptions analysis allowed international peacebuilding organisations with strong relations to local peacebuilding networks to advocate on sensitive issues when democratic spaces opened up.

The design of transition processes, such as devolution, constitutional reform and national dialogues, should incorporate measures to mitigate against the unintended consequences of elite contestation and co-option. This could involve commitments to track the inclusion of different groups, the prevalence and incidence of different forms of violence, and service provision outcomes. Planning should also involve gender-sensitive conflict mitigation strategies that focus on civic engagement and education, and channels for non-elites to take political office. For example, emerging discussions on decentralisation in government-controlled areas of the Donbas region of Ukraine have sought to engage populations stigmatised in the post-2014 conflict, providing space for them to shape priorities and mechanisms for future political governance.
Make space for peacebuilding in borderlands: constraints, entry points and brokers

While peace and transition processes may open up peacebuilding space at a national level, borderland areas can at the same time become heavily contested and constricted due to increased violence, securitised measures or geopolitical wrangling. Local peacebuilders may have the greatest access and legitimacy among their communities but can also face suspicion and threats through their activities and associations. In Myanmar, the army’s role in stabilising the Kachin and Shan states to facilitate resource extraction ensures it is the most powerful actor and authority. Local peacebuilding organisations have had to navigate a complex web of power relations to gain access and permission to work there.

‘Personalities and personal ties continue to be much more important than formal structures and systems. Organisations are required to constantly assess where power lies in the country’s bureaucratic structures and who best to approach, creating a system of perpetual uncertainty where the reasons for gaining or being denied permission remain opaque and are not easily replicated.’

Myanmar case study

International actors can play a key role in highlighting the contradictions between national and local peacebuilding spaces. They can also provide (discreet) analytical, logistical and financial support to local peacebuilding organisations, such as those looking to call attention to state violence, and help mitigate risks that such activities pose to an organisation’s operations in other parts of the country. In areas where armed groups provide governance functions, international agencies can support community-based actors to avoid government sanction for engaging with them, or mediate between local organisations and national governments to help develop mutual options.

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Hybrid governance and institutions in borderlands means there may be multiple actors for peacebuilders to navigate and from whom buy-in must be sought. Marginalised groups in borderlands and play important roles to support inclusion. In other places such as Kenya, Tunisia and Ukraine, brokers mobilise resources and mediate political positions across borders as well as with the centre, without necessarily reflecting broader community interests.

Questions therefore arise about who has legitimacy to effect peaceful change, reduce violence or speak on behalf of borderland communities. Different groups’ aims can be contradictory in contested spaces, and it can be difficult to gauge who is relevant and effective at specific times. The case studies suggest that communities may be pragmatic as to whom they assign legitimacy to at different times – for example, looking to current service providers or to people with more traditional authority. A focus on the role of brokers can help navigate such murky territory, and identify those best placed to advance particular agendas with different powerholders – at the centre, and in and across borderlands.

Connect peacebuilding at the centre, in borderlands and across borders

Support to peacebuilding in borderlands needs to acknowledge or link efforts within borderlands, across borders and at a national level. In Nepal, the two brokers described in the case study pursued contrasting approaches to representing the Tarai borderland region: while one sought to shape debates in the capital, Kathmandu, the other focused on building grassroots constituencies in the Tarai itself. Each faced a different set of challenges working at different levels and scales. Influencing the centre can require alliances with the national media, national political parties and national civil society, as well as international NGOs that may provide vital support but who may also dilute or co-opt local agendas. Sustaining mobilisation at a local level, on the other hand, requires maintaining legitimacy and relevance with different local constituencies amid shifting dynamics and competing agendas.

Working at multiple levels and scales is especially important where there are polarising nationalist narratives. The Ukraine case study highlights the lack of inter-community dialogue to dispel nationally driven misperceptions of Donbas populations. In Tunisia, international organisations have used the opening up of democratic space to challenge national media accounts of ‘terrorist’ borderland populations, highlighting instead their acute historic marginalisation and security concerns.

All of the case studies describe the importance of cross-border interaction for local communities, yet official peace and transition processes often struggle or neglect to incorporate this. Governments tend to focus on the financial potential of border regions for accessing transnational economic opportunities. But such opportunities do not necessarily include the communities living there and often fail to consider how local economies and livelihoods have historically been built around the border. Previously neglected by the centre, north-eastern Kenya is now a key regional trade route, for example, while Myanmar’s northern border regions have become hubs for resource extraction.
Border management is an underexplored area for conflict prevention and peacebuilding interventions. Decisions such as whether to open or close a border are often decided centrally and determined by security concerns, neglecting the economic, social and political impact on populations and the ‘choices’ they make in response to uncertainties created by inappropriate border management. The Syria and Tunisia case studies suggest that while many people benefit from informal trade, borderland populations favour predictability and regularisation of cross-border movement. In Tunisia, any interruption of income from the border results in significant social upheaval, and the lack of predictability has drawn many young men towards informal and dangerous migration.

There are challenges to regularising cross-border institutions in areas where the state has previously ceded its functions, in particular risks of displacing informal arrangements. Peace committees across the Kenyan–Somali border that tapped into Somali clan networks lost their role as improved government relations allowed for the development of joint border-management policies. These were less effective in managing security challenges related to Al Shabaab, while other important benefits such as Somali children’s access to schools in Kenya were also disrupted.

Further study could understand how movement across and activities around borders, such as local trade, are incorporated effectively into transition processes. This could include the informal ‘back roads’ that emerge around border restrictions, the impact on communities, including vulnerable groups such as refugees, and how such routes are exploited and secured by different sets of actors.