Section introduction

borders define states but can divide peoples: cross-border community relations

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Maps are useful tools for understanding the world, showing how it is divided into many countries of many different sizes and colours. The power of world maps is their ability to reduce complexity and offer a simple and comprehensible picture. But in reducing complexity, maps can distort our worldview, conveying wrong assumptions. They can mask at least two important kinds of diversity: diversity of peoples; and diversity of institutional strengths of states.

Countries are rarely monocultural, but instead host a number of communities with different (sometimes multiple) identities. The geographic distribution of peoples and cultures does not necessarily coincide with state borders, and therefore social, cultural and even economic ties between them can have significant cross-border dimensions.

At the same time, in many countries the state is not present in the same strength across the breadth of the territory: education, healthcare, infrastructure and other important state functions tend to be precarious in remote areas, which often coincide with borderlands. In these places local people are left to take the lead in addressing their more pressing needs, and this often entails collaborations among and between communities across borders, instead of cooperation with political or administrative centres. Borders are of fundamental importance for states, but can be much less relevant to people’s identities and needs.

In order to address cross-border dynamics of armed conflict effectively it is essential to understand the social, cultural and economic conditions of peoples living in border areas. This is the aim of this section of the publication. It includes case studies from East Africa; the Middle East; Colombia’s borders with Venezuela and Ecuador; the Mano River Union; the South Caucasus; and Acehnese refugees in Malaysia.

The case studies highlight how cross-border dynamics of conflict affect local communities, and the agency these communities can offer to respond effectively to such dynamics. They suggest why this agency needs to be supported and strengthened, and provide examples of how this can be done.

Cross-border conflict dynamics and peacebuilding challenges

The conflict dynamics described in this section relate mostly to cases where disputes are not about the border itself, but instead cross the border. In other words, the borderline is not contested, but it creates or exacerbates tensions and conflict. Dynamics can be horizontal, relating to antagonism between communities, as well as vertical, relating to relations between border communities and state capitals.

Since the breakdown of the Juba Peace Process in 2008, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) has become nomadic, moving out of its traditional areas in northern Uganda – where it originated – and Southern Sudan – where it had been hiding for a long time – into the Democratic Republic of Congo and as far north as the Central African Republic. In its initial phases the LRA acted as an Acholi protest movement that challenged the Ugandan government. This periphery-centre conflict has subsequently escalated to overlap with multiple regional conflict systems involving rebels in Southern Sudan, the government of Sudan in Khartoum, and other regional actors in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic.

After the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Sudan in 2005, and following an arrest warrant against LRA leaders by the International Criminal Court that same year, the LRA seems to be spreading terror not so much to pressure the government of Uganda, or even neighbouring countries, but existentially just to survive and to defy the international community in general. The
limited capacities of the affected states to control their border territories make predation easier for the LRA. Inter-community tensions have ensued with the newly affected communities blaming the Acholis in northern Uganda for these developments.

Inter-community conflicts become less tractable when different communities have claims of exclusive access to or ownership over a given territory. The conflict between Israel and Palestine is among the most protracted and complex in the world. While the internationally-sanctioned approach aims at reaching an agreement on a two-state solution, others favour allowing Israelis and Palestinians to live together in one state. No matter which approach finally prevails, animosities between communities have escalated to a point where any solution must go beyond political engineering and will have to devote enormous amounts of energy and creativity to establish a minimal level of trust and communication between affected communities.

Disputes in borderlands can eventually affect international relations between neighbouring countries. Colombia’s primarily military response to leftist insurgencies has pushed these out to its vast borders with Venezuela and Ecuador. Soft borders (long and sparsely populated) ease the transit of insurgents and facilitate illegal trafficking of drugs, chemicals for drugs production, weapons, money and people.

Local (often indigenous) peoples become exposed to an expanding borderland economy of war and crime – although they can sometimes benefit from it. State responses from within Colombia as well as neighbouring Venezuela and Ecuador have tended to be unilateral and overly simplistic, reacting more to respective capitals’ political agendas than to the needs and appeals of the conflict-affected peoples. Nationalist discourse can inflame some people, but does little to address the real challenges at stake.

One of the most visible cross-border dynamics of conflict is when people have to leave their home country as a result of violence. The sudden influx of a number of people can generate tensions within the receiving community. But in some circumstances social and cultural ties across borders can help to develop solidarity networks that can address grievances – imagined or real. People in Aceh in Indonesia and in Penang state in Malaysia have a long history of social and cultural exchange across the Malacca Strait. This provided a welcoming environment for Acehnese political refugees, students, economic migrants and even rebels seeking a safe haven from fighting in Aceh. But despite this affinity, there remained a challenge to address potential tensions between the migrating and the hosting communities, as well as intra-community tensions between Acehnese who were already living in Malaysia for very different reasons.

Distinct armed conflicts within a region that have different roots can also share mutual or connected dynamics. Escalation in one area can have a knock-on effect throughout the region. The South Caucasus has been in a state of ‘no peace, no war’ since the early 1990s, interlaced by closed borders, front lines, and abandoned roads and railways. Contact between ordinary people has been severely restricted. Weak border management has undermined legitimate cross-border movement and commerce that is the traditional lifeline of many borderland communities in the Mano River Union (MRU). Informal cross-border trade in livestock or manufactured goods underpins many local livelihoods. Bad border management affects both men and women, but women are especially vulnerable to sexual assault and harassment by corrupt security services. While international third parties have the potential to support peace initiatives – to enhance, facilitate, mediate or even broker them – the international community seems badly equipped to deal with the complexity of conflicts that have cross-border dynamics. Too often international responses apply crude models that risk exacerbating the problem instead of solving it.

The case studies in this section of the publication suggest that military responses to cross-border conflicts in particular tend to be simplistic and counter-productive. In the LRA case study, Archbishop Odama from northern Uganda describes how the effect of the regional military response since the end of the Juba negotiations has been “like throwing stones at bees; the swarm of bees scatter and are now stinging people everywhere”.

**Peacebuilding responses**

People living by borders have developed a number of initiatives to respond to the cross-border dynamics of conflict. The primary reason for their engagement is probably the fact that they are most directly affected. But additionally, local actors have a far better understanding of cross-border conflict dynamics and this in-depth perspective can inform and influence action by states and inter-governmental organisations.

Community-dialogue initiatives are a basic but essential approach for identifying mutual, cross-border peacebuilding challenges and priorities, and for assessing whether these can be addressed at the local level or whether there is a need to connect these with national and regional initiatives. Traditional mechanisms can be very helpful, such as the Mato oput reconciliation ceremony in northern Uganda that has helped reconcile rebels returning to their communities. Community dialogue needs horizontal capacity – people who are respected in their own community and at the same time will be listened to outside it. Religious leaders in northern Uganda, cultural leaders in Aceh and Malaysia, or local government officials along the
Colombian borders act as unofficial conflict mediators and bridge-builders, playing a role that external actors cannot.

Cross-border community coalitions can help to strengthen the vertical capacity of local, grassroots initiatives to influence national, regional or international efforts. Regional diplomatic channels to respond to regional conflict systems can be blocked by historical, political or ideological disagreement and discrepancy between capitals, or poor personal relationships among leaders. Cross-border community interaction can offer parallel tracks for improved regional relations and integration.

Two innovative examples described in the case studies below include the Regional Civil Society Task Force, which is helping to join up local communities in countries affected by the LRA conflict, and initiatives led by universities in Colombia and Venezuela that helped to unite peoples of both countries when their governments were at diplomatic loggerheads. Vertical capacity has more traction when local initiatives can offer alternative approaches to formal national or international ones. Civil society efforts in Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador were successful when they were able to challenge and, eventually, change the populist nationalist discourse that the political leaderships in all three countries were focusing on.

Civil society efforts in Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador engaged with the media to get their message across. When mainstream media are hard to reach, it is still possible to harness the support of alternative media with a strong commitment to challenging stereotypes and providing more accurate information. All for Peace Radio presents an initiative covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with the goal of promoting the role of the media as a key agent of change and engaging policy-shapers and decision-makers through interviews, radio programmes and cross-border action. In the South Caucasus, the media have helped to reconnect people and to rebuild ties severed by violence.

Civil society actors can also be well-placed to identify unexpected or neglected agents of change. The Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang was able to help channel the potential of Acehnese refugees, from being seen as victims of the conflict into active agents of peacebuilding. Women’s organisations, indigenous groups, humanitarian agencies, environmental associations, schools and local governments, all played a role in developing a citizens’ cross-border response to tension between Colombia and Ecuador. Such local peace coalitions have been further strengthened with the support of international civil society actors such as the Carter Center (Colombia-Ecuador border), and Conciliation Resources (the Regional Civil Society Task Force). Support for Acehnese peacebuilders from the Universiti Sains Malaysia stressed the importance of local ownership. In the MRU, CR has been supporting local communities to develop accountability and oversight over border management and security.

Conclusions and policy recommendations
Combining traditional and modern, local, national and regional peacebuilding approaches is complex. At the same time balancing and integrating several approaches, and linking track one and track two peacebuilding at the regional level, can help address cross-border conflicts.

Recommendations for policy:
- Local and traditional structures and relations can span political borders to promote social cohesion and relieve inter-community tensions that can underpin or complicate regionalised conflict. Cross-border community structures can often function horizontally despite state weakness in borderlands and either poorly managed or heavily militarised borders.
- Borderland community actors can provide unique insight and analysis of cross-border conflict dynamics. The number and range of potential local peacebuilders is surprisingly large. Local strategies and priorities for response can both inform and assist track one regional peacebuilding. Traditional mechanisms that have fallen into disuse can often be effectively revived, carrying legitimacy and authority from the past.
- Refugees are not merely cross-border victims of conflict. They can provide vital capacity and should be encouraged and supported to engage in peacebuilding, as well as being protected and provided for. It is essential to prioritise local ownership of refugee peacebuilding initiatives.
- Networks of community peacebuilders can be built across borders to bolster community resilience to cross-border violence and to build track two advocacy capacity at the regional level. The media can help amplify political voice. Community networks need help and support to thrive. Official and unofficial peacebuilders should find ways to cooperate regionally in order to address cross-border dynamics of conflict more effectively.
- Local borderland actors have capacity for vertical conflict transformation. They can identify cross-border dynamics, network across borders, develop and sustain bottom-up perspectives, engage with the media, and ultimately shape broader policy.

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