Accord Insight II project and publication
Local civil society engagement of non-state armed groups

Joint Analysis Workshop, London, 1 November 2013
Workshop Report by Sophie Haspeslagh

Introduction

Conciliation Resources’ second Accord Insight publication looks at local civil society efforts to engage non-state armed groups (NSAGs). It builds on Conciliation Resources’ Accord 16 (2005), Choosing to engage: armed groups and peace processes, which argued for the need to shift the debate from “whether” to engage NSAGs to “whom” and “how” to engage. Contributions to Accord 16 found that dialogue with NSAGs is essential for ending armed conflict, protecting civilians and addressing the underlying issues of conflict.

At the time, these arguments went against the grain and the dominant “war on terrorism” discourse. Since then we have seen negotiations take place with armed groups previously branded as “terrorists” in Afghanistan, Colombia and Turkey. However, military force and counter-terrorism measures have also been used against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Central Africa, and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

There is continuing uncertainty at the policy level over how and when to engage NSAGs, including a disconnect between official and unofficial approaches. In particular, local civil society involvement – which often takes place when no one else is talking to an NSAG – is often overlooked.

This Accord Insight looks at the spaces in-between formal negotiation processes, focusing on local civil society efforts to engage NSAGs. It explores the experiences of local actors living and interacting with NSAGs, including the opportunities, challenges and risks they face. Such initiatives may provide insights into how NSAGs function, and into untapped possibilities for peacebuilding; the Accord will reflect on how these initiatives can contribute to broader peace efforts.

1 Sophie Haspeslagh is an MPhil/PhD candidate at the International Relations Department of the London School of Economics and Political Science where she is researching the effects of proscription on peace processes. She is currently a visiting scholar at SAIS Johns Hopkins University in Washington D.C. Ms. Haspeslagh is Issue Editor of the Accord Insight II publication.
This report provides a synthesis of an international Joint Analysis Workshop held in London in November 2013 that brought together 31 stakeholders with a range of experiences – from international mediators and humanitarians to local civil society actors, ex-combatants and those with affinities to NSAGs. This one-day reflection on local approaches to engaging armed groups explored the following questions:

• How do local civil society groups approach NSAGs?

• What type of actor can have leverage with an NSAG?

• What type of initiative is more effective and more likely to contribute to broader peacebuilding?

• What are some of the main challenges faced by local civil society groups engaged in these efforts?

This report distills the main points of the discussion and will be used to inform the Accord Insight publication due out in mid-2014. Deliberations were held under the Chatham House Rule.

Understanding the local

There is a wide range of local actors. Civil society actors who typically reach out to NSAGs include religious and traditional leaders, youth or women’s groups, and economic actors such as business communities – for example, livestock marketing committees along the Somali-Kenyan border. They may belong to the same community from which the NSAG emerged, and may have kinship, religious or ideological ties to it. The separation between civil society and political actors can be complex in conflict zones. Hamas and Fatah in Palestine have civil society organisations affiliated to them; are these organisations civil society or political actors?

Internal or external actors? Internal and external dichotomies can be misleading and unclear when trying to position different actors in a conflict. Members of diaspora, for example, often have little connection to the ground but may consider themselves “internal” to the conflict, as many were directly displaced as a result of it. In Sri Lanka and Myanmar, diaspora actors were not always a force for good: some held polarised views based on the last time they were in the context and had become more militant in exile.

On the other hand, several civil society actors that played key local roles in engaging NSAGs were not originally from the area, such as a Spanish priest based in Gulu, Northern Uganda, and Dekha Ibrahim Abdi who was a Kenyan-Somali peace activist but did not belong to the actual community in which she worked.

The “local” is not easily defined. Some may define themselves as “local” because of ethno-cultural ties with a NSAG or because they have been directly affected by the conflict, others because they live in the area in which the NSAG operates regardless of any historic or ethnic link to the region. In this
complex picture, our understanding of “local” can be understood as “geographic proximity to the conflict”.

**Key characteristics of local actors in the engagement of NSAGs**

*Local communities in conflict-affected areas often do not have the luxury of asking whether or not to engage with NSAGs*; they may have no other recourse than to stay in an area where an NSAG operates and deal with the consequences. If you live on the Ethiopian-Kenyan-Somali border, the chances are you “live together and even sometimes eat together with Al Shabaab militants” (quote from workshop participant). In northern Uganda, when the government withdrew from the north of the country, religious organisations remained. They continued to pursue peace and reconciliation efforts, which included speaking to the LRA.

*Local actors who successfully access NSAGs may have a number of the following characteristics:*

**Direct access.** Local actors often have direct access to NSAGs. Through family or social ties they may have in-depth knowledge of the different actors as well as how to get in touch with them. Because of their geographic proximity, local actors also have a better understanding of the context and culture, and can often find effective ways of persuading NSAGs that might elude others.

**Pre-existing trust.** Close proximity often means that local actors are known to the NSAG. They may enjoy greater trust and credibility with an NSAG, which as a result may be more ready to listen to them. Local actors can have particular leverage with a NSAG when they represent constituencies that support the group. An example from the Basque country shows that NSAGs tend to trust local actors if they are somehow linked to the group or share its end goals.

**Partiality.** The ability to be even-handed and to demonstrate impartiality is generally recognised to be an important attribute for those working in conflict contexts including mediators and humanitarian actors, whether the facilitating agents are local, national or international. But not all effective local actors are impartial: partiality is often an essential way in. In Northern Ireland local actors who had some connection to the NSAG – such as ex-prisoners – were key intermediaries. In some contexts, armed actors may trust partial actors who share their aspirations or understanding of a conflict context or otherwise have inside knowledge of the situation, more than they trust so-called impartial actors. It is also unusual for local civil society groups to have the same level of legitimacy and credibility with both armed groups and governments. In cases where local actors have linked up and worked with a range of actors, including national and international NGOs, with certain actors seen as closer to the NSAG and others closer to government, civil society initiatives as a whole attained a more impartial status.
A key approach used by local actors is to engage NSAGs on means not ends. Effective local actors do not necessarily oppose or reject the armed groups outright; they may have the same objectives, but disagree on the means.

Multiple and fluid identities. Effective local actors – particularly those able to network and link with other actors and institutions – often have multiple identities that give them leverage and bring different perspectives. Dekha Ibrahim Abdi was a woman, a local actor with access to elders, who also had an international profile. Santa Okot was a Member of Parliament for Acholiland (the area where the LRA operated) and close to the ruling party in Uganda, who then became the main negotiator for the LRA in 2007; she was able to make this shift because of her ethnic links to the Acholi region and her close ties to community and religious leaders there. Padma Ratna Tuladhar comes from a minority group in Nepal, is a local Nepalese mediator, Member of Parliament, human rights activist and member of international networks. This fluidity and complexity increases the ability to network and link up to national and international peace efforts.

Local actors are particularly relevant in what some describe as the “pre-pre negotiation” phase. They can provide crucial insights and links to NSAGs in the earliest phases of a peace process when parties do not have the will to negotiate. This information can be crucial to international mediation efforts that otherwise have no entry point until the parties express an interest in negotiating.

Different types of armed groups: implications for local engagement

“Non-state armed group”, “liberation movement”, “militia” are among the many contested terms used to refer to armed groups. The relationship between local communities and NSAGs depends on a number of factors such as the nature of the conflict, the response of the state, and the type and character of the NSAG, including the ways in which it sustains itself through recruitment and funding.

Diversity in typology. There is huge diversity in the typology of armed groups with a range of remit and ambition, from local or national, such as Gamaa Islamiya in Egypt, to transnational networks such as al-Qaeda. The picture is increasingly fuzzy with the rise of groups with both local and transnational aspirations, such as Al Shabaab. The attributes of a group or network have an important bearing on the influence local actors can have. Even in the same country the relationship between multiple NSAGs and the same local communities can be very different – in Colombia some NSAGs, such as the ELN, have formal mechanisms to engage with communities whereas others do not.

Liberation movements and ethno-nationalist groups. Liberation movements and ethno-nationalist groups tend to be more amenable to the needs of local communities and have established relationships with them. Where there are strong local linkages – such as NSAGs fighting for land or minority rights – it may be possible for local communities to prompt a shift in the NSAG’s strategy by
expressing their war fatigue or dissatisfaction. In Mexico, communities with strong ties to armed actors involved in the Zapatista minority rights struggle were able to push the Zapatistas to adopt a less violent strategy. Similarly, in Colombia, communities were clear that the security risks associated with the armed struggle affected the support they were willing to give Quintín Lame. These NSAGs were open to shifting their strategy when they saw their support base was negatively affected by it. The need to maintain legitimacy can drive many groups to be more compromising and moderate.

**NSAGs are not homogenous.** There is not “one Taliban but different Talibans”. Some Tamils were considered “20, 50 or 70 per cent LTTE”. Though these distinctions are often lost in war, this fluidity is important; it may make engagement by local actors more challenging but can also create opportunities. What happens inside the armed group is hard to figure out; some describe NSAGs as a “black box”. Are particular parts of an NSAG more responsive than others?

**The state’s response to the NSAG can affect local engagement.** One objective of counter-insurgency strategies is to take “water out of the water tank”. The treatment of local communities can be an intrinsic part of state war efforts. This can adversely affect the space, capacity and willingness of local actors to reach out to NSAGs, particularly due to the security risks involved in doing so.

**Effective entry points to engage armed groups**

**NSAGs often want to “neutralise the influence of others”**. They will not easily allow access to those with an overt peace agenda but may be more open to an agenda that pursues economic or social issues without being explicitly political. Similarly they may be more open to religious actors.

**Economy, trade and services.** Security and power sharing is often the focus of international engagement with NSAGs, but the economy is extremely important at the local level. Many NSAGs are also economic actors. They may be deeply involved in war economies or, as in the case of Al Shabaab, control cross-border trade. Their presence can also have a negative impact on local economic activities when trade routes or markets cannot operate. Some groups, like Hamas or Hezbollah, have institutional networks that provide services. These multiple roles can be used by NSAGs to control constituencies. What factors enable constituents to put pressure on armed groups and influence their behaviour?

Across the Line of Control (LoC) between Indian and Pakistani-administered Kashmir, civil society groups such as the People’s Resistance Movement were formed to engage NSAGs at numerous levels and on specific issues such as cross-LoC trade and multi-faith or inter-faith work across the border and between NSAGs.

**Clan and kinship ties.** Kinship and clan ties can often be effective entry points to engagement with NSAGs. Local civil society groups proactively engaged the Papua New Guinea Liberation Movement through kinship connections. By establishing a Peace Task Force encompassing local commanders, they brought cohesion within the wider liberation movement and became a “moral force” advocating a
peaceful solution. This engagement also gave the movement legitimacy and was successful in persuading the guerrillas to favour political struggle over armed struggle.

On the Kenyan-Ethiopian-Somali borders, where centralised governments have little or no reach or power, the role and position of clans is integral to dialogue with armed groups on crucial issues such as trade. In efforts to protect cross-border trade in the Gedo region, local actors negotiated with Al Shabaab using their next-of-kin as emissaries. They also succeeded in establishing cross-clan linkages – through businesses, for example – to encourage greater cooperation rather than competition among clans.

In Myanmar, the legitimacy of civil society actors with specific ethnic-based armed actors, particularly those who have been in exile for many years and are beginning to return, is linked to their ethnicity.

**Prisoners and ex-combatants.** Working through trusted intermediaries is essential. Ex-prisoners or ex-combatants often have in-depth knowledge of an NSAG and trusted access due to a shared or common ideology or history. In Egypt, civil society organisations were able to connect with Gamaa Islamiya in jails through prisoners. Under the Mubarak regime, local human rights activists were imprisoned and placed in the same jails as members of the NSAG. This created a space for the NSAG to interact with “non-likeminded people”. This interaction had a significant impact on the decision of the group to abandon arms, updating the world-view of the organisation.

The involvement of prisoners is often an important “in” with an NSAG. They are a key constituency of the NSAG and often have less “left to lose”, so can go further in dialogue.

**Local civil society interaction with NSAGs**

Local civil society can function as a challenge to the NSAG, or can offer a new perspective, specialist knowledge, contacts and training. This means local actors need to be seen as competent and credible. Sensitivity and the capacity to listen and to work with ambiguity are also key ingredients for those who work in the “spaces in-between”.

**The challenge function.** NSAGs can be closed and fearful of dissent. Local actors may play a key role in bringing different perspectives to the group, like human rights activists did with Gamaa Islamiya in prisons in Egypt. In Northern Ireland, civil society actors opened up space for reflection on issues that were once taboo for the NSAG.

**Capacity building** can be a way for local civil society actors to interact and establish a rapport with NSAGs. The group may be at a stage where they are interested in developing their abilities and strategies for negotiation. Meetings with civil society in Guatemala were central to the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity guerrillas’ efforts to hone their negotiation skills. Similarly, in South Africa,
ANC members who returned from exile needed the support of local civil society organisations to better understand the needs and realities of life in the country.

An NSAG can also be open to improving its compliance with humanitarian norms through training on human rights and humanitarian law. Local actors encouraged the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines to give up the use of landmines by increasing awareness of international humanitarian standards. Sometimes this dialogue on specific issues or for a specific purpose can also open up space for an NSAG to think about broader dialogue.

**Alliance building.** How is it possible to convince the leaders of armed groups that there are other, more peaceful ways to move forward with the movement? Some local communities have chosen to link up with an NSAG to effect political change. An NSAG can be asked to give up its armed strategy as a precondition to building a joint alliance. In the Basque country a section of the Basque social sector involving women’s organisations, trade unions, and political parties joined forces with the Abertzale Left to build a “popular wall of the people”. Analysis suggests that many civil society organisations, including the trade unions, would not have joined the movement if ETA had not given up its armed strategy. The Basque example highlights the role of local actors in engaging an NSAG in a debate about the best way to achieve their goals.

**What makes for effective initiatives?**

**Initiatives with NSAGs can lead to several outcomes.** Some may remain local, such as the cross-border trade engagement with Al Shabaab. Others have been able to link with and influence national peace processes, such as the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) initiative. Looking back at both these initiatives it is important to remember how impossible they seemed at the time. What was it about these efforts and the way they were pursued that allowed them to happen at all? And how did ARLPI have a wider peacebuilding effect whereas trade engagement with Al Shabaab did not?

**Person to person.** Personal interaction was key to these initiatives, as was the ability to listen humbly and not impose views. It was not necessarily just a question of the right individual but also of the right teams of people. In Northern Ireland, the ability of local civil society actors to “move between different worlds”, including community, and formal and informal political levels, was key to promoting restorative justice with the Irish Republican Army (IRA). This allowed local civil society actors to “translate” different understandings and perceptions of the conflict from one actor to another.

In the age of social media, NSAGs have Facebook pages and YouTube videos. The Taliban have tasked a new generation of militants to manage their social media presence. This has led them to be more responsive than before. But this is a difference in means rather than principles. In Northern Ireland local actors played an intermediary role between the IRA and the government through a physical person. Social media simply allows diversification in channels.
**Starting small.** Effective initiatives started off focusing on more immediate local concerns, such as humanitarian access or trade. In some cases this developed into a longer-term structure to deal with subsequent crises and underlying conflict drivers. In some cases local initiatives were able to contribute to and influence national political processes.

In northern Uganda the ARLPI initiative developed from promoting return of combatants to supporting reintegration and reconciliation, as well as facilitating dialogue between the LRA and the national government. For local actors, accurate local political analysis allows them to locate their actions in broader political dynamics in a culturally sensitive way. ARLPI in Uganda had a strong understanding of the local context and culture, which allowed them to strategically understand how their actions fitted with national political processes.

**Link with institutions to support national peace processes.** Local actors’ initiatives are particularly effective when they are able to link up with broader peace process dynamics. In Northern Ireland, “punishment violence” was used by armed groups in response to pressure from their communities to deal with anti-social behaviour and crime, allowing the group to gain support for other activities. This was particularly important at a time when the national police force was not trusted by Catholic communities or was seen as absent by Protestant communities. In the early 1990s, community actors established a restorative justice movement as a direct alternative to punishment violence. Initially, state authorities considered this “vigilantism” and were deeply sceptical. But over time, state authorities slowly became more supportive, in particular as negotiations between the main parties gained momentum. For the NSAGs, the programmes contributed to building a space in which they were able to reflect on their perceptions of policing and security. This can be seen as a small and early step in the process through which Sinn Féin came to formally recognise the police authorities in 2007.

**Political space.** Contacting NSAGs can put local actors at risk in contexts where it is illegal or politically difficult to do so. Having the space to establish contacts with NSAGs is essential for the protection of local actors and effective initiatives. In Uganda, ARLPI’s initiative was supported at a national level by an amnesty law, which safeguarded those speaking to the LRA against prosecution. This space can also be encouraged by external links or actors. ARLPI’s connection with the Vatican meant they had an external power base. This made it difficult for the Ugandan government to ignore them or throw them in jail for establishing contacts with the LRA. Local, international, informal and formal networks can be complementary. This was a crucial element of ARLPI’s strategy, and allowed it to become a bridge between the LRA and the government.

**Timing.** Initiatives can have broader impact when NSAGs realise a military victory is not possible or when there is increasing war fatigue among the community and the NSAG itself. But local actors have to be prepared to encourage the armed group to "shift gears".

In Egypt, interaction between Gamaa Islamiya and "non-like minded" groups came after a sharp increase in violence between 1992 and 1997 under the Mubarak regime. Combatants across the movement began to question what impact the high numbers of jailed combatants (approximately 12,000
by 1997) was having on the ability of the group to achieve its aims. “There was a sense of loss of control” that led to internal divisions and questioning. It was these divisions that made the group ready to listen to the external challenge and that drove the leadership to begin exploring alternative strategies.

**Challenges faced by local actors**

While it is important to recognise the contributions of local civil society efforts in peacemaking, it is equally important to understand their limitations. Local actors live and suffer through conflict – they take direct risks for peace.

**Continued violence and instability is a key challenge.** There have been many targeted attacks on local peacebuilding actors. Local actors are limited by recurring violence and an ever-evolving context. The 2013 Al Shabaab attack at the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, for example, negatively affected cross-border trade work on the Kenyan-Somali border. In Gaza, actors who work on trauma recovery often find violence re-erupts just as they are starting to see some positive effects of their work. There is no “time out” from conflict for local actors – they cannot just choose to withdraw from the context. In northern Uganda a number of religious leaders involved in ARLPI went through a stage of burn out. Psycho-social and spiritual support was viewed as very valuable.

**Attacked by all sides.** Often local actors come under fire from all sides. In Uganda, the government saw ARLPI as LRA sympathisers (if they knew where LRA leaders were, why did they not tell the government?). The LRA, on the other hand, saw ARLPI as government sympathisers, especially when LRA meetings were later bombed by the government. The government’s attempts at intelligence gathering also posed a related challenge in this context. Similarly, in Kashmir, civil society organisations must be registered with the Indian government and commit to supporting the “integrity of India”.

**International political agenda.** Local actors do not operate in a vacuum and we should not assume that peacebuilders are not involved in or affected by power politics. Donor relations are very important. Receiving funds from a foreign actor can raise suspicions. It is important that civil society organisations are seen by NSAGs as independent from external agendas. In Lebanon, a number of civil society organisations do not work with the US Agency for International Development because it does not permit engagement with Hezbollah, a key actor in the conflict.

Similarly, international actors can impose restrictions on local organisations – for example regarding whom they can interact with. In Gaza, where Hamas has effective control, local organisations are often requested not to deal with the group, making it extremely difficult for them to be effective. The particular challenges around proscription are relevant here. Does the listing of NSAGs as terrorist organisations shrink the space for local peacebuilding? The listing of Al Shabaab has led some Somali civil society actors to stop their work in South Central Somalia where they are at risk of being seen as contributing to the NSAG through the payment of taxes imposed by the group.
In some cases, organisations have been forced to support only pro-government peacebuilding work. There is a real danger that such sanctions narrow the space for broader engagement and dialogue that seek to tackle the root causes of conflict. One way this risk has been handled by international peacebuilders is to outsource it to local organisations working on the ground: “we transfer risk to local partners and expect them to do things that we wouldn’t expect to do”.

One concrete suggestion is to ensure that proscription regimes include a clause that monitors the impact of these sanctions on peacebuilding and puts in place measures to counter any negative impact. This would be similar to the humanitarian clause contained in the UN listing of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

**The role of international actors**

The geopolitical reality of armed conflicts is such that international actors often play an important part in efforts to engage NSAGs. International mediators come with power and influence that local actors might lack. They have more resources, particularly money and political support. At times, they may have more access and space to engage the top leadership of NSAGs – see, for instance, President Clinton’s role in the Northern Ireland peace process in 1995. They have often proved particularly useful in a time of crisis or heightened polarisation such as during the post-election violence in Kenya in 2007.

**Stepping back from the local context.** It can be useful to step back from a local context and bring forward international perspectives and support on issues. In Northern Ireland, a 2013 report by Amnesty International, *Northern Ireland: Time to Deal with the Past*, brought much needed attention to international human rights standards. However, governments in conflict-affected countries often fear that the internationalisation of a conflict will shift the asymmetric power balance between themselves and the NSAG. In Uganda, attempts by the ARLPI to bring international attention to the plight of those displaced from northern Uganda caused tension with the government.

**The risk of “projectised” involvement.** International actors tend to set up processes that have a start and an end; in this way they can “projectise” their involvement. They come in and out of conflict areas, use local knowledge to access NSAGs, and then leave. Some international actors say they feel like “vampires”. Track one initiatives in particular tend to come and go. On the other hand, initiatives by local actors, who are there for the long term, tend to develop into structures to deal with recurring crises. International interventions can also undermine carefully crafted local initiatives – the trust and relationships built up over time between local civil society and militant groups. In Sri Lanka, the arrival of Indian peacekeeping troops undermined the influence of the local civil committees and led to their eventual decline.

**The need for strategic complementarity.** Local and international initiatives are not necessarily at odds with one another and can have “strategic complementarity”. The varying strengths, expertise and
capacity of international and local actors can be effective at different points in the engagement process as well as be mutually reinforcing. International organisations often work very closely with and rely on local partners to carry out their work on, for example, monitoring an NSAG’s compliance to humanitarian commitments. Similarly, internationals can do much to support local efforts, particularly in taking an initiative to “the next level” and sustaining the momentum for change.

**Key emerging issues**

- How much impact do local initiatives have – do they stay localised or are there cases where they have fed into national initiatives? How does dialogue on specific issues or for a specific purpose open up space for NSAGs to think about broader dialogue?
- In what ways can local and international initiatives complement each other and for what purposes?
- Liberation movements and ethno-nationalist groups seem to be more responsive to local communities. Are particular types of NSAG, or particular parts of NSAGs, more responsive than others? How does the broader nature of the conflict affect local initiatives?
- At the local level, partiality is often an essential “in” with NSAGs. How does this fit with the idea that impartiality is essential for effective mediation?
- How do legal requirements and sanctions (e.g. proscription) set by international actors affect the space for local actors to contact NSAGs? How does it change the nature of peacemaking?