

Accord Insight

In the midst of violence: local engagement with armed groups

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This second Insight publication in Conciliation Resources' Accord series looks beyond state-centred and international debates over whether or not to engage in dialogue with an armed group. Instead it explores the spaces in which armed groups operate and their relationships with the people who live there.

Local populations are not just passive actors in conflict zones, simply coerced by armed actors. Equally, armed groups do not merely exploit or abuse communities in areas in which they operate. Three in-depth case studies from Colombia, northern Uganda and Syria, as well as a shorter reflection from Northern Ireland, illustrate how communities have tried to influence the behaviour of armed groups away from violence, and the factors that have affected their interactions – most of which took place in advance of more formal negotiations and often in situations of intense violence and embedded conflict.

These local “spaces in between” fighting and talking shed light on the possibilities for more upstream engagement with armed groups and the variety of peace efforts involved in shaping their decisions. The case studies illustrate that reaching out to armed groups does not have to legitimate their tactics or even ambitions. They also show how active community engagement with armed groups can make an important contribution to local human security and peacebuilding.

The experiences documented confirm that local peace actors face huge security risks – unprotected by diplomatic immunity or the security of the state. Armed groups often have a blatant disregard for civilian security, or worse, purposefully target populations. Local populations also face security threats from the state, which often views communities close to armed groups as complicit. Active contact by a community with an armed group risks exacerbating perceptions of association.

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During intense fighting, local efforts to reduce violence and promote dialogue may also be seen as contrary to conflict parties' efforts to gain military advantage. Local actors expend considerable effort to remain both impartial and safe. Maintaining this space is important so that those who can and do reach out to armed groups in order to counter violence are protected.

The case studies presented here are only a snapshot of the complex and at times ambiguous relations between local populations and armed groups – communities can be victims, allies, family members, protesters, or channels of dialogue to armed actors. However it is hoped that these case studies can contribute to discussion and inquiry into a broader range of constructive options to reach out to armed groups to promote peace, as well as highlight the experiences of people who face the daily challenge and risk of living alongside armed groups and who decide to confront their use of violence.

Peacebuilding insights from local engagement with armed groups

Community engagement with armed groups can open entry points for peacebuilding when more conventional paths are blocked, through:

- maintaining and sustaining contact with armed groups when no one else will
- providing practical support for an armed group's transition from violence to non-violence
- embedding engagement with armed groups in broader peace efforts to promote societal change

Community strategies to reach out to armed groups use existing local institutions and systems, including:

- building on pre-existing links with armed groups such as kinship and shared ideology
- developing and strengthening structures for non-violent community mobilisation and organisation
- framing discussions in local cultural and social norms

Local actors face considerable risks when talking to armed groups and develop techniques to reduce these, including through:

- linking with external networks and support structures
- asserting their impartiality

Community engagement with armed groups can open entry points for peacebuilding when more conventional paths are blocked

In the case studies presented in this publication the main imperative for local populations to reach out to armed actors was security – to protect themselves from attack. Other immediate reasons included securing access to roads, water and other humanitarian resources. In Micoahumado in Colombia, communities were at risk from crossfire between the National Liberation Army (ELN) and paramilitary forces. Local populations caught up in intense and chaotic warfare in Syria sought to end regime-imposed sieges. In northern Uganda, communities faced the threat of extreme violence as well as the abduction and forced recruitment of their children into the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

As the Syrian case study illustrates, armed groups, particularly those without pre-existing links to local populations, may be difficult to influence in the short term, as violent tactics and strategic priorities overwhelm and silence voices for peace. Yet, many initiatives documented in this Accord Insight started as efforts to enhance local human security and subsequently developed broader ambitions. In northern Uganda there was explicit recognition by community actors that protecting local populations from violence required longer term peace efforts – for the LRA to talk to the government. In other cases the transition to peacebuilding was less deliberate and developed as a result of the specific approaches taken.

Maintaining and sustaining contact with armed groups when no one else will

Local actors can provide crucial insights into and links with armed groups when conflict parties are unwilling to negotiate

and when there are no discernable entry points for more formal mediation. Through direct contact, local actors in each of the case study contexts gained understanding of the structure and priorities of the respective armed groups. They can act as barometers for when groups might be “ripe” for formal talks – and understand the barriers.

Local actors are also likely to have a long-term view of engagement. This can contrast with international involvement, which tends to prioritise delivering demonstrable results in specific timeframes. When violence explodes, local actors may temporarily retreat from direct engagement with an armed group, but they can maintain reduced contact, ready to reach out again when circumstances allow. In northern Uganda, customary leaders continued to transmit messages to the LRA during periods of heavy fighting between the LRA and the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) when civilian attacks were particularly intense.

Practical support for an armed group's transition from violence to non-violence

There are real and practical challenges for armed groups to cease violence and enter negotiations. Community-based groups can provide a trusted space for armed groups to test new ideas or challenge existing ones. They can also help create conditions conducive to encouraging peaceful change within an armed group, and support and facilitate a group's transition from violence to non-violence.

In Northern Ireland, discussions between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and local civil society on restorative justice took place alongside formal peace talks. The IRA had come to realise that its punishment activities – beatings and shootings to enforce order among communities – were at odds with its political ambitions and commitment to a ceasefire. Recognition of this tension incentivised IRA interest in alternatives. Conversations with civil society provided conceptual frameworks, practical advice and training on different approaches. This also opened up space for the republican movement to rethink community security and the role of state police services, and address the key issue of police reform in emerging peace talks.

In northern Uganda, community engagement with the LRA identified concerns regarding reintegration. The peace work of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) fostered community understanding that many LRA members were victims of abduction by the armed group, often when they were children. Communities were sensitised to the potential return of LRA fighters, which opened up a possible demobilisation route. The ARLPI's community work provided incentives for combatants to return to their communities without fear of rejection, and promoted LRA reintegration.

Embedding engagement with armed groups in broader peace efforts to promote societal change

Local actors have a fundamental stake in the outcome of engagement with armed groups, which often reflect a community's ambitions for broader societal change. In both northern Uganda and Micoahumado, community activists observed that peace mobilisation and organisation provided strength to, and promoted the agency of, fearful communities facing severe violence and insecurity, encouraging them

to believe in the possibility of peace and work towards it. In Syria this has proved important as conflict dynamics have overwhelmed the possibility of formal peace negotiations.

The Accord Insight case studies show local actors were involved in a range of activities that contributed to the possibility of sustainable peace, including: the return and reintegration of combatants; community security and de-mining; addressing the effects of violence in society; peace advocacy to national and international actors; and efforts to socialise armed groups to be mindful of constituency priorities. In northern Uganda the ARLPI conducts trauma-healing therapy for those affected by violence, and has mediated localised conflicts such as land disputes.

In Colombia, those involved in the Micoahumado de-mining initiative have shared lessons with other communities and national NGOs, leading to national learning and mobilisation on the issue. De-mining has also become a key negotiating topic in talks between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and is likely to feature in talks with the ELN.

Community strategies to reach out to armed groups use existing local institutions and systems

Conflict disrupts the social fabric. For example, as the Syria case identifies, the taking up of arms can give those who have felt marginalised in society an opportunity to exercise power and defy social and cultural expectations and structures. In each of the case studies discussed in this publication, high levels of violence (both state and non-state) reshaped social life, cultural practices, routine activities, and public and personal space.

Engagement with armed groups therefore implies different challenges for local communities who are part of the conflict context than for external actors. Access to and relationships with armed groups, including at leadership level, may already exist. But the ability to influence requires much more active agency, including adaptation of existing networks and development of innovative ways to sway armed actors.

Building on pre-existing links with armed groups such as kinship and shared ideology

In Micoahumado and in certain areas of Syria, communities relied on pre-existing relationships – kinship and family ties – to engage armed groups in dialogue. Some religious leaders in the ARLPI did not have ethnic links with the LRA, but initial contacts were often made through customary leaders with more historical connections to LRA members.

Many armed groups, at least initially, also had community support for their objectives, for example in their opposition to the state. In Syria, self-defence forces often emerged in areas of mass popular uprising against the Assad regime. In earlier phases of the conflict, the relationship between armed and unarmed elements was akin to a division of labour around shared revolutionary principles.

Identifying with and understanding the ambitions of an armed group is key to local actors' ability to influence it: to establish trust, to be able to say things that others cannot, and to be

listened to. It was easier to reach a de-mining agreement with the ELN than with paramilitary groups in Micoahumado – and it was more likely that the deal would stick – because of the ELN's roots in the community. In Northern Ireland, local connections between the IRA and communities were less evident, but the restorative justice initiative relied on ex-prisoners formerly associated with the IRA to develop convincing contacts with it.

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Developing and strengthening structures for non-violent community mobilisation and organisation

Community mobilisation, organisation and strategy were key features in all of the case studies. In both Micoahumado and northern Uganda, communities assembled to discuss how to address the violence that was affecting them. The conveners of these local peace conferences went on to represent communities in talks with the armed groups. The fact that consultations were community-wide gave weight and credibility to the individuals who led the engagement.

The presence of pre-conflict networks and informal or formal institutions was also significant. Local representatives brought with them existing sources of status or authority, from both inside and outside the community. The ARLPI, as religious leaders with influential networks nationally and internationally, had access to the Ugandan government and the international community that traditional leaders did not, and so could, for example, promote an Amnesty Law, and advocate for peace. In Syria, civilian administrations in regime-free areas were more effective where there was a previous history of civil society activity or traditional structures.

A reliance on pre-existing community networks and structures can reinforce embedded social, cultural and political power actors and institutions. In the case study contexts, it was largely traditional (male) elders and religious actors who engaged in direct negotiations with the armed groups and governments, and church networks that provided protection.

However, the capacity of conflict to disrupt the social fabric can allow for new or previously muted social, cultural and political sources of agency to come to the fore. In Micoahumado, local leaders were forced to flee, leaving behind a new cohort of community activists; subsequently, the peace commissions included equal representation of women. In northern Uganda, an Acholi mothers' network was instrumental in galvanising support for talks with the LRA and community acceptance of the return of abductees. Acholi women have also been at the forefront of reintegration activities, supporting the particular needs of female returnees.

Framing discussions in local cultural and social norms

As Simon Mason identifies in this publication [see Box 1], local actors work through different normative frameworks than their external counterparts, which can allow for a broader set of rules for engagement. These include more flexible cultural and informal understandings – often shared with armed groups – of issues such as justice.

In Northern Ireland and northern Uganda, legal and justice frameworks grounded in local social and cultural norms played important roles, at times complemented by international standards. Peace initiatives applied lessons from transitional justice such as conditional amnesty, reconciliation and restorative justice, which integrated traditional customs and understandings.

The ARLPI advocated for an Amnesty Act that allowed for the return of combatants, often abductees, to their communities without fear of prosecution, which applied principles of forgiveness rooted in Acholi culture. Restorative justice approaches used in Northern Ireland were grounded in international human rights and legal principles of rule of law, but were developed according to local considerations of legitimacy and reputation.

Local actors face considerable risks when talking to armed groups and develop techniques to reduce these

Communities suffer violence and human rights abuses by non-state and state armed forces alike. Before the ARLPI went into the bush to speak to the LRA, three traditional leaders had been killed while attempting to dialogue with the group. In all cases presented in this publication, contact with armed groups was criminalised, and in Micoahumado, a previous generation of community leaders had been forced to leave the area after state security forces accused them of siding with the ELN.

Even where an armed group is prepared to accept some reduction in violence, strategic military imperatives may subsequently undermine such commitments. The ELN protested that de-mining reduced its military advantage. Government restrictions, including proscription regimes and counter-insurgency tactics, have at times been more disruptive to local actors than the behaviour of armed groups. In Micoahumado and in Acholiland, northern Uganda, efforts by community peace committees were repeatedly held up or threatened by escalations in violence.

Linking with external networks and support structures

Local initiatives have cooperated with external networks and support structures to maintain a secure space in which to operate, and also to gain leverage. In northern Uganda and Micoahumado, local actors looked to national religious networks that had powerful currency within society, and hence with the government, to provide umbrella protection

to initiatives. International human rights and humanitarian organisations that were able to mobilise international awareness and influence also played a beneficial role.

In northern Uganda, the ARLPI was at the forefront of interactions with the LRA, even though some ARLPI members, including a Spanish priest, did not share Acholi ethnicity with the LRA. Various religious establishments in Uganda provided a form of protection against government accusations of collusion with the rebels. In Micoahumado the cover of “pastoral dialogues” was an innovative way for communities to bypass the issue of criminalisation of contact.

External actors also played complementary roles through sharing experiences from other contexts. However, Accord Insight authors from northern Uganda and Colombia assert that the most welcome and effective external interventions were those in which ideas and norms chimed with local priorities and approaches.

Asserting impartiality

Impartiality is important for people working in areas controlled by armed groups. While community peace actors featured in this publication were not necessarily neutral, as they were part of the conflict context and may have had links with an armed group, they strived to act impartially so that they could operate as effective brokers between two sides and avoid perceptions of collusion.

The need to maintain impartiality sometimes required the renegotiation of pre-existing relationships. In Micoahumado, the community rejected either joining one or other of the armed actors, or opposing both of them, as each of these options risked provoking their own displacement. Instead they chose a “third way” of civil disobedience, which meant refusing to support any of the armed actors and maintaining a clear stance of nonviolence.

The ARLPI, in its role as conduit between the LRA and the government, reduced the risk of accusations of either spying for the government or colluding with the LRA by insisting that the parties signed respective messages before sharing them with the opposing side.