Introduction

Policymakers and practitioners increasingly acknowledge the importance of supporting reconciliation for building sustainable peace. Conciliation Resources’ Accord Insight 3 project aims to help develop greater understanding of how reconciliation activities can support inclusive peace processes. In particular, it focuses on how efforts to transform relationships at multiple levels (elite and non-elite, state and society) can open up space for societies to address the legacies of violent conflict in order to facilitate progress towards a peaceful and inclusive common future.

The project explores two practical challenges relating to the relationship between reconciliation and inclusive peace processes:

1. how to integrate bottom-up (non-elites) and top-down (elites) approaches to reconciliation
2. understanding what types of reconciliation activity are appropriate to different phases of a peace process

In order to interrogate these two challenges, the project looks at practical lessons from four case studies, each reflecting a different phase of a peace process:

1. The Georgian-Abkhaz context: Pre-peace settlement: continuing conflict
2. Colombia: Settlement: peace talks
3. Mindanao: Post-peace settlement: implementation
4. Northern Ireland: Post-peace settlement: consolidation

A working definition was developed for the specific focus of the project, emphasising the role of reconciliation as a stimulus for, or component of, inclusive peacebuilding:

“Reconciliation processes can help to transform relationships in societies affected by conflict, encouraging accommodation of conflicting views and facilitating space for individuals and groups to engage in inclusive political processes. To support inclusivity, reconciliation requires integrated top-down and bottom-up reconciliation approaches that engage both elites and non-elites, and sensitivity to the types of reconciliation activity that are appropriate to different circumstances and phases of peace processes.”

The working definition helps to clarify which aspects of reconciliation the project is looking at. It acknowledges that terminology relating to reconciliation and dealing with the legacies of...
violent conflict is contentious.

This report presents a synthesis of a Joint Analysis Workshop (JAW) that brought together over 35 experts, practitioners, policymakers and stakeholders from diverse backgrounds for a two-day reflection on the Accord Insight theme. The report distils the main points of discussion and is intended to inform the development of the forthcoming Accord Insight publication, due in mid-2016.

The report is structured into seven main sections, each representing a workshop discussion. Section one reflects on existing conceptual frameworks on reconciliation, including the relationship with inclusive peace processes, as well as crucial definitional challenges. Section two explores different approaches for putting reconciliation into practice. The following four sections each look at a separate case study reflecting different phases of a peace process (Georgia-Abkhazia, Colombia, Mindanao and Northern Ireland). The final section reviews key lessons from the workshop to inform the project’s research questions, including the working definition.

1. Key concepts: reconciliation and inclusive peace processes

The opening session sought to clarify how key operational ideas and concepts are understood. In particular, it explored the relationship between reconciliation and inclusive and sustainable peace, as well as the differences and inter-relationship between reconciliation and other widely used terms and approaches, including transitional justice, dealing with the past and transformative justice.

It was suggested that our understanding of reconciliation can usefully be addressed via a series of key questions: What? Why? Who? When? How?

What? Practical experience indicates that understandings of reconciliation vary widely between contexts. For example, many Argentinians view reconciliation as synonymous with impunity after the former military junta was seen to appropriate the term to avoid prosecution. In contrast, in francophone West Africa the term is widely used to describe everything from national peace talks to backroom deals between politicians. In Sri Lanka, the term in its literal sense does not exist in either of the country’s main languages (Sinhalese and Tamil). And in South Africa, reconciliation is widely considered a ‘dirty word’: the focus on truth-telling and on victims providing forgiveness has overlooked, for many, the complicity of minority white populations in structural violence.

Overall, a key lesson is that before embarking on reconciliation efforts it is vital to clarify specific contextual understanding(s) of the term.

Why? Reconciliation is often held to be important for: holding people to account; preventing future violations; repairing the harm done to individuals, communities and society; and restoring legitimacy of, and confidence in, the state. A pragmatic understanding of why reconciliation is important for inclusive peace focuses on a shared aim of rebuilding or establishing relationships, on building social cohesion, and a recognition of the need for all those touched by past violence to coexist within a common social space.
Who? An overly binary (top-down/bottom-up) should be avoided: to be effective, reconciliation processes should always be viewed holistically. Top-level actors can take the most visible role, but those with less visibility are often the most critical to reconciliation’s ultimate sustainability and success. In particular, “enablers” who have good linkages both upwards and downwards – “middle-level leaders” – can prove some of the most important reconciliation actors (for example: teachers, doctors and religious leaders).

When? Discerning which types of activity are appropriate or possible at various phases of a peace process is critical but difficult and often poorly understood. The case studies explored in this project are designed to help shed light on this problem with the understanding that neither peace nor reconciliation processes are linear.

How? Four basic categories of reconciliation-directed action were suggested: truth-telling; justice; reparations; and healing. It is important to note that different societies approach healing in different, often culturally rooted ways. Moreover, reconciliation can be viewed both as an intended outcome and as a process in itself. However, the ability to measure reconciliation as an outcome, given the protracted and nebulous nature of reconciliation activities, remains a core challenge.

Connecting the dots between reconciliation, human rights, transitional justice and conflict transformation

“Addressing the legacies of violence” is an important consideration in peace and reconciliation processes that is often overlooked. There are a number of different overlapping and complementary approaches.

While the transitional justice approach is increasingly associated with legal and judicial responses, dealing with the past is more of an umbrella term encompassing, but not limited to, truth, justice, reparations and non-recurrence of violence.

The reconciliation approach is broadly associated with an emphasis on relationship-building, and for some has connotations with healing, forgiveness and coexistence. Reconciliation came into popular contemporary use via the early truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs) in Chile and Argentina. These commissions recognised that “the truth” could be problematic or even sinister – the purpose of talking about the past should be to facilitate coexistence, not to deliver an official narrative.

The notion of transformative justice has come to the fore of late, as a direct challenge to the use of transitional justice. It argues that there is too much focus on civil and political violations in transitional justice, and that its perspective is dominated by political elites, with not enough focus given to structural forms of violence.

In many approaches there is a common failure to address gender. For example, in the South African TRC, women often testified as “indirect victims” rather than as agents in their own

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2 For a widely used outline of these components of reconciliation see Bloomfield, D., Barnes, T. and Huyse, L. (eds) Reconciliation After Violent Conflict: A Handbook (International IDEA, 2003)
right. Female anti-apartheid activists were almost completely ignored, and the issue of active participation was disregarded. A failure to address violence against women is one of the major structural failings of reconciliation processes to date.

**The relationship – and differences – between human rights and conflict transformation approaches**

- At one level, the two can be viewed as working towards the same goals of building more peaceful and fair societies.
- A human-rights-centred approach, emphasising adherence to international frameworks and domestic application of external norms, privileges formal state-based mechanisms. It also relies strongly on a binary analytical approach – such as the “victim/perpetrators” dichotomy.
- Where the human rights approach leans toward the notion that internationally agreed norms “trump” local specificities, conflict transformation emphasises local agency – “insider” norms pushed outwards, and sometime acquiring priority over global norms.
- The conflict transformation approach to justice places less emphasis on retribution and civil and political rights, and more on restorative and redistributive justice as well as relationship-building and addressing structural causes of conflict.
- In conflict transformation there is implicit recognition that while formal mechanisms can be useful and important, local, often informal mechanisms are widely viewed as equally, if not more, legitimate.

**2. Reconciliation in practice**

This session explored how different actors move from a particular theory of reconciliation to engaging with the legacies of violence in practice. It looked at specific initiatives in the field – two research-based projects – by the US Institute of Peace (USIP) and George Mason University (GMU), and by the Swiss Government and Swisspeace – followed by broader discussion of participants’ diverse experiences.

**USIP** is currently looking at reconciliation as a potential conflict prevention strategy, testing the hypothesis that the likelihood of the recurrence of violence increases if reconciliation processes have not been established. The project has raised an interesting question about the difference between reconciliation and peacebuilding, as the types of activities and underlying theories of both overlap strongly. It suggests the field may need to develop a more distinct typology of reconciliation activities and theories of change.

The USIP project mapped a number of reconciliation intervention strategies and identified 10 distinct types of practice: conflict mediation; trauma healing; community leader dialogue; exposure to “the other”; joint development projects; community dialogue; broadening change; documenting history; vertical connections; and research. A key challenge is to ascertain whether it is possible to measure significant results for reconciliation initiatives after only one year.

Initial results suggest there may be a possible sequencing of activities. For example, activities such as transitional justice, trauma healing, joint development or community dialogue projects
may only be possible when there is a framework for a peace process or at least a reduction in violence; others, such as conflict mediation, can take place during conflict. Documenting history, usually associated with the post-conflict phase, can take place earlier, as has been done in Colombia.

The “everyday peace indicators” project from GMU focuses on how to include local communities in processes to monitor and evaluate progress in order to produce bottom-up indicators of positive change. Categorising these indicators allows for the identification of trends and offers an idea of the priorities of people in a specific context – for example, security or socio-economic issues. The development of such indicators, it was suggested, could be used to incorporate grassroots perspectives into reconciliation processes and to support inclusion.

A pilot has been conducted in four countries: South Africa, Zimbabwe, South Sudan and Uganda. Examples of indicators include:

- Uganda: “the boda-boda cyclist can ride to different areas” (boda-boda are typically ex-combatants)
- South Africa: “cars don’t have bullet holes”
- Zimbabwe: “people can worship whatever religion they want”
- South Sudan: “there are no barking dogs at night” (this came up in several contexts)

The Swiss approach to reconciliation and transitional justice has focused on dealing with the past. It avoids the use of the term reconciliation (although it is part of the framework) because in some contexts where they work it is problematic, such as Tunisia. While recognising the links between reconciliation and dealing with the past, they argue that dealing with the past is broader than a peace process: it includes transition from violent conflict to peace but also the transition from dictatorship to democracy.

They have developed a conceptual framework, which can also be used as a mapping tool. It is based on the “impunity principles” – the right to truth, the right to justice, the right to reparations and the guarantee of the non-recurrence of violence. It draws links between principles of the rule of law, conflict transformation, reconciliation, prevention, and citizenship, with a strong emphasis on the need for a holistic approach that connects the informal and the formal at different levels of society.

A common challenge identified by many participants is that civil society’s role is not taken seriously. Civil society can be particularly important in monitoring processes. For example, in Tunisia there are good transitional justice laws but what was negotiated is not being implemented. Civil society is playing an important accountability role by demanding the implementation of what was promised. Civil society can also support official structures as part of a long-term process, bridging the gap between the grassroots and the official level. In Sierra Leone, there has been a huge change in policing but a lot of pressure from civil society was needed to make it happen.

Another challenge is practical implementation: ensuring there are processes of reparation and justice in a given peace process, but also looking beyond attendant assumptions – not least the assumption that the use of such justice mechanisms will lead to reconciliation. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia worked on the assumption that the
process would help build peace in the Balkans. While criminal prosecutions in all countries of the region were an important precondition for trust-building, narratives on the conflict remain divisive many years later. For example, in Croatia former combatants want the official Croatian story to remain dominant, which means the selective identification of victims to receive reparations.

3. Establishing peaceful relations in the absence of a political settlement: the Georgian-Abkhaz context

At the core of the conflict, which has persisted for over half a century, is a clash between the Abkhaz claim to self-determination and Georgia’s claim to territorial integrity. Competing claims to territory and political power came to a head with the collapse of the Soviet Union, resulting in full-scale war in 1992-93. A peace process, initially mediated by the UN, and since 2008 co-mediated by the EU, UN and OSCE, has not resulted in significant progress towards a negotiated peace. Some argue that it is too early to work on dealing with the past, which will only be possible after a political settlement.

Experience has, however, shown that finding ways to engage with the past is essential if people are to get to the point where a political settlement might be possible. Legacies of the violent past remain in the present; in the politics, opinions and actions of people. Unaddressed grievances from the recent past create obstacles for building constructive relationships. Through dialogue, civil society has developed the Memory Project, to create an archive of print materials and oral history testimonies that reflects multiple perspectives and provides a basis for current and future generations to understand, acknowledge and learn from the past. There have also been initiatives to transfer copies of existing archive materials from the Georgian to the Abkhaz side, in part as a symbolic reparation of materials lost when the Abkhaz state archive was burned during the war. These initiatives have to be supported by both sides, and thus involve finding points acceptable to both. However, with little happening in official talks there are limitations in engaging either political elites or broader society in dealing with the past work in this context.

Georgians and Abkhazians do not share common physical or political space. For well over 20 years, societies on either side of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict divide have been living almost entirely separate existences. They have very little contact with one another, and the younger generation has almost no experience of interaction. There is an ethnic Georgian population in the Gal/i region of Abkhazia, but even in this instance there is often a physical separation and lack of exchange between the Georgian and non-Georgian communities.

People who challenge mainstream narratives are marginalised. There is little space to counter the official narrative and argue for a more holistic approach that engages with the “other side”. The past is highly politicised, and mistrust, insecurity and unaddressed grievances remain core drivers of conflict. The Abkhaz speak of the 1992-93 war as an attempt to wipe out their existence as a nation; many in Georgia view the fate of the Georgians displaced from Abkhazia as a gross human rights violation, and closer ties between Abkhazia and Russia as proof of Russia’s expansionist policy in the former Soviet space.

The term reconciliation is not useful in the Georgian-Abkhaz context because it is seen through the prism of differing political aspirations. Most Abkhaz associate the concept of
reconciliation with forgiveness, which would disregard past Georgian aggression. For Georgians, it can seem a positive word, signifying that the parties to the conflict can return to the relations they enjoyed previously, and bring them closer to the goal of reintegrating Abkhazia. People working to improve understanding and relationships across the conflict divide therefore prefer to talk of peacebuilding or of dealing with the past at this point in the conflict.

Can community processes facilitate political change on their own? It is essential to the longer-term goal of peace that there are people on either side who are open to seeking points of connection and who have managed, in small circles, to establish good relationships based on a mutual understanding of the different perspectives they hold. This persistent work, despite changes in context, has kept channels open and does influence decision makers and those in positions of political power. This vertical influence is largely based on personal relationships and ensures analysis and understanding of the conflict is better on both sides, but there are necessary limits on how far it can lead to political change at this point in the peace process.

4. Reconciliation during peace talks: Colombia

Colombia is seeing unprecedented developments in peace talks between the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army) and the government, with a final peace accord imminent in 2016. Reconciliation, traditionally the preserve of religious leaders, is now happening across society, involving a number of different actors. In the autumn of 2015 an initiative brought together Colombian civil society organisations working on reconciliation to achieve common understandings and develop a joint plan of action.

Exposure to the “truth” has been difficult for Colombians, outstripping people’s ability to deal with it. Information on the scale of the violence, including details of disappearances and deaths, has only become publicly available recently. There is a need to develop accessible ways of understanding and interpreting the violence as a collective burden on the whole of society, not just certain individuals and groups.

Reconciliation also means the state rebuilding trust with society. Public scepticism concerning democracy prevails: Colombia was a violent democracy for many decades, and so people associated democracy with violence. Reparations could have a reconciliatory function to address high levels of civilian mistrust towards the state. In this context, it is worth noting that the government has asked for public forgiveness no less than seven times during the course of the conflict.

An approach that does not focus exclusively on forgiveness is needed. Structural drivers of violence must also be addressed in order to bring about true reconciliation. Transformative justice and reconciliation have to happen side by side. However, there are doubts that there will be a fundamental restructuring of power, and this will in turn constitute the biggest challenge for the peace process.

Working towards reconciliation is not just about transitional justice. Under the agreement, guerrillas and Colombian military commanders accused of rights abuses will be allowed to confess their crimes at special tribunals in exchange for reduced sentences that can be served
through community service and confinement in specially designated areas. Disarmament and reintegration, as well as reparations, are a means of promoting reconciliation. In the agreement with paramilitaries in 2005, there were no reconciliation activities integrated into disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes. The sharing of limited land and resources in the context of the reintegration of ex-combatants will be very difficult to negotiate, constituting a real challenge to reconciliation.

**Colombia is simultaneously in both a pre- and a post-peace-agreement phase** – there has been no ceasefire and conflict with another group, the ELN (National Liberation Army), is still continuing.

**Colombian civil society** lacks collective strength, and it is frayed by the legacy of violence. It needs to become an articulated movement that – among other things – works to bring people into political office who are not tainted by previous political power. Women are key to bridging the gap between different strands of civil society and providing a united front, empowering unheard voices and imbuing society with collective strength.

5. Reconciliation post-settlement – implementation: Mindanao

The 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, signed between the Philippines Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), set out the establishment of a new self-governing entity, the Bangsamoro. This was to be set up following a transitional process led by the MILF and instantiated in a new legal code – the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) – formally regulating the entity’s autonomous status.

The agreement provided for the creation of a Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC) made up of members of the Peace Panels of the MILF and the Government of Philippines that represented the parties in the talks, as well as two officials of the Swiss Government, which has supported the process.

The TJRC was tasked with undertaking a consultation, including an extensive “listening process” with local communities, and to make recommendations to the Panels for appropriate mechanisms to: address legitimate grievances of the Bangsamoro people; correct historical injustices; address human rights violations, including marginalisation through land dispossession; and promote reconciliation of different communities affected by the conflict.

Within Mindanao, there has been a lack of direct local community involvement in the peace process – even if today they do make an informal contribution via their grassroots inputs. The TJRC listening project involved researchers visiting various parts of the region to document ordinary people’s narratives in order to understand how their concerns could be integrated into prevailing national discourses.

An overall communications plan was required to help wider Filipino society understand the rationale for entering into a peace process with a group previously denounced as “the dregs of the earth”, and more recently as part of a global network of “terrorists”. There is a long history of prejudice and demonisation of Muslims. Discussions suggested that a rewriting of histories to include the Mindanao perspective was needed. This is critical given that while Mindanao
society is majority Muslim, the Philippines population as a whole is majority Christian, and the educational system is correspondingly largely Christian-based.

There have been some challenges of interpretation, such as where to draw the line between historical injustices and legitimate grievances. If you wear the hijab and apply for a job in the Philippines today, for example, there is a high chance you will not get it, since the majority Christian society frequently finds traditional Muslim clothing unacceptable. Should such issues, then, be treated by the Filipino authorities as requiring active state intervention?

There is a wide range of views of what healing and reconciliation are for the Bangsamoro people. Interviews conducted by the TJRC revealed a variety of views: “it’s not a pill that can easily take away the pain”; “asking for blood will not bring back the life of our dead relatives”; “we need other narratives to complete catharsis and not forget the past”; “memorialisation is important”; and “the need for justice” (recognising a multiplicity of “truths”) and “addressing impunity”.

The TJRC process also highlights the importance of managing expectations and of engaging “unlike minds” – for example, those who were averse to the MILF peace process – in a series of dialogues. In this instance, the aim has been to get sceptics to buy-in to the process by engaging with those connected to the MILF and MNLF (The Moro National Liberation Front – another secessionist group in Mindanao which signed a peace agreement with the Government of Philippines in 1996).

6. Reconciliation post-settlement – consolidation: Northern Ireland

The 1998 Belfast Agreement created the basis for power sharing between Nationalists and Unionists. While there was no explicit formal mechanism for dealing with the past, there were elements of the agreement that engaged with the structural drivers of conflict – police reform, for example.

It is often argued that the 1998 agreement’s priority was sharing power rather than building a shared future. Governments in both Dublin and London were more interested in keeping the conflict contained within Northern Ireland than trying to resolve it. This has proved a huge disadvantage to progress, and the emphasis on maintaining political stability has resulted in backpedalling on contentious issues – most notably reconciliation.

Dealing with the past remains an enormous challenge. Despite considerable support, post-Belfast Agreement peacebuilding initiatives have not been able to promote reconciliation systematically. Communities were neither asked nor expected to reconcile in the many peacebuilding projects that developed after 1998. It was, however, a very diversified funding portfolio that incorporated aspects of reconciliation along with other priorities such as economic development or regeneration. A number of initiatives were prompted by the prospect of European Union funding. Unfortunately, many pilot projects failed to develop into sustainable, long-term endeavours as initial activities fell away and were not followed up.

Over time, power has been pushed away from a community sector that had been both innovative and willing to take essential risks. More reconciliation processes and initiatives took place during the conflict and early years of the peace process than since the 1998
agreement. It was suggested that such initiatives were “stamped out” as politicians across the divide became fearful of losing control of their constituents’ voices. Today, housing and schooling are still divided along sectarian lines, and people’s enduring “mind maps” mean that they avoid opposition areas, for example when moving house.

Some definitions of reconciliation may be too aspirational for the prevailing circumstances. It was suggested that small gains should be celebrated. While relationship-building is essential to establishing trust, it is a gradual process. And there are significant examples of success. The women’s movement has been very effective in building connections and relationships across the prevailing sectarian divide. A baseline understanding of reconciliation could therefore be sufficient consensus over how people can live together without moving back to violence, which puts the focus on what is achievable. While quite a bit short of peace, mutually tolerable relations are nonetheless a necessary part of it. A willingness to hear the other and act out change by challenging the assumptions of one’s own group are vital components of building relationships across the prevailing divides.

Taking responsibility has been a challenge. The overall Irish record on truth-telling has been poor. The Irish Republic, for example, has refused to confront the past since 1921. Who are the truth holders? Survivors and victims are hugely diverse groups, which can be easily instrumentalised. Most perpetrators were also victims. The role of community decision-makers in violence has often been overlooked. In Northern Ireland there is a cycle of recrimination in which “they” are always responsible. There is a form of meta-victimhood in operation. Truth telling can only work if all parties commit to it and are genuine in their participation, but there has been reluctance, particularly from governments, to engage in formal truth-telling exercises.

7. Workshop review

This session revisited the project’s core research questions to explore how workshop discussions have added to participants’ understanding.

How does reconciliation contribute to inclusive peace?

Reconciliation can support inclusion if it brings together people who would otherwise not have had contact. It can also broaden and strengthen the social contract by linking state and community-level views of reconciliation and joining these strands in an inclusive dialogue. However, it can be problematic to talk of inclusiveness when a reconciliation process has been designed and implemented by political elites, with relatively little reference to other social forces. For outsiders trying to support reconciliation there is also the question of ownership: what if stakeholders prefer separation to integration?

Reconciliation can allow space for multiple narratives, contributing to inclusive peace by creating a framework for “difficult discussions” among diverse groups and perspectives. Making voices heard that may otherwise go unnoticed is another form of inclusion. Reconciliation also draws attention to the quality of relationships. It is about knowing and accepting “the other”, and creating dialogue focused on the kind of shared future a society wishes to create. Emphasis should be placed on its transformative perspective.
Inclusion overlaps with debates about whether reconciliation is an outcome or a process: how do reconciliation activities contribute to more inclusive societies or political systems, and how can the relationship between process and outcome be better understood? The project’s working definition is perhaps unclear on the distinction. Is reconciliation a route towards inclusive peace or is reconciliation only possible after a settlement? Alternatively, reconciliation could be seen as shifting the paradigm away from conflict, enabling a society to avoid a return to violence. An unresolved question is to what extent community-level reconciliation can lead to a national political settlement, as well as being an end in itself.

How to connect bottom-up and top-down peacebuilding activities?

**Middle-level leaders.** One way to connect top-down and bottom-up is through “middle-level” leaders with horizontal and vertical networks and reach. Such leaders are often able to take more risks due to structural and institutional guarantees – such as religious leaders who are supported and protected by the church. However, the effectiveness in practice of linkages between the macro and micro levels in peacebuilding and reconciliation processes is hard to determine empirically, and more work is needed to understand how to measure progress. A first step is ensuring that potentially relevant middle-level structures and individuals are proactively identified in contextual conflict analyses.

**Capacity-building, including accompaniment,** can help support both grassroots and elites to reach out to each other in order to build trust. In Fiji, for example, work being done to help the government to demilitarise includes efforts to transform decision-making in ways that builds trust with citizens – for example through greater consultation and transparency. Communities can also be supported to engage in activities to restore trust in authorities at all levels – community, provincial and national.

**‘Locals’ are not a homogenous group.** External actors need differentiated approaches to engage with different types of local actor so that reconciliation activities are sensitive to differing demands and priorities at different levels, and recognise the relationships between groups. It is important both to understand where real power lies (not always in the most obvious places), and to be careful not to reinforce existing power imbalances, conflict causes and drivers. Micro-analysis is needed to understand a context before engaging: how power works, what reconciliation initiatives already exist and where support can most usefully be directed.

What types of reconciliation activity are suitable for different stages in a peace process?

**Reconciliation is a step towards peace but it does not follow a linear process.** Horizontal dialogue may facilitate vertical dialogue. Civil society can try to promote dialogue at different points in a conflict cycle, but successful developments in such dialogue may be contingent upon enabling factors and other variables that are more difficult to codify. There is currently no clear guide to the conditions under which community-level dialogue can facilitate national reconciliation in a situation of continuing violence. In some circumstances it can be easier to hold dialogues for reconciliation when there is at least a ceasefire to stop violence – although the Colombian peace talks in Havana have deliberately not relied on a ceasefire in order to avoid being derailed by breaches.
A peace agreement can be an enabling condition for reconciliation, but there are others, for example, when armed actors reach the conclusion that there is no alternative to dialogue. In some contexts where there are high levels of violence, such as Central African Republic (CAR), the presence of some sort of agreement is almost a necessity for reconciliation, not just an enabling condition.

The type or nature of the conflict may be an important variable in whether reconciliation is possible or successful. For example, the absence or presence of state institutions may impact on reconciliation opportunities. In CAR, where the state is largely absent, there are obviously very limited expectations of what can be achieved through vertical dialogue in terms of enhancing the possibilities for state–society reconciliation.

Phasing reconciliation. Reconciliation can be viewed as the bridge between a past that cannot be changed and a future full of possibilities. It can be located along a spectrum of approaches to addressing the legacies of violent conflict, which runs from transitional justice to dealing with the past, and increasingly also incorporates the notion of transformative justice. The overall impact of reconciliation activities cannot be realised within a project timeframe. Experience indicates that deep reconciliation can be inter-generational, or at the very least long-term. It is important to find ways to recognise and measure the achievements of small steps and “good enough” activities along the continuum of reconciliation and dealing with the past.