

Accord Insight

Making peace with the past: transforming broken relationships

Alexander Ramsbotham and Zahbia Yousuf

Alexander Ramsbotham is Head of Accord and Series Editor at Conciliation Resources.

Zahbia Yousuf is Senior Adviser, Peace and Transition Processes at Conciliation Resources.

This third Accord Insight reflects on practical approaches and challenges to addressing the legacies of violent conflict, including various activities intended to promote reconciliation, support justice and deal with the past. The case studies in the publication all stress the importance of 'transforming relationships' in peace processes: horizontally, between conflict parties and groups in society; and vertically, between citizens and state institutions. 'Transformation' focuses on dismantling conflict-generating relationships from the past, and instead creating new relationships for a peaceful and inclusive future. The emphasis on both horizontal and vertical relational transformation can help provide a much needed bridge between peacebuilding and statebuilding.

One of this Accord Insight's main questions has been whether different phases and circumstances of a peace process imply different types of reconciliation methods. Efforts to deal with the effects of violence often assume that violence has stopped, that a ceasefire is in place and an agreement signed, ushering in a new phase of post-conflict peacebuilding activity.

The case studies attest that transforming relationships is not simply a post-conflict endeavour but a continuous process that can start at an earlier stage, before a formal settlement. It requires different approaches, attention and application according to the particular contextual and chronological circumstances of the conflict and peace process – in the absence of a political settlement in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, during a negotiation process in Colombia, in the immediate post-agreement phase in Mindanao, and to consolidate peace in Northern Ireland.

The four case studies illustrate the complexities in overcoming the deep political and social divisions created by violence. They look beyond particular frameworks for reconciliation, transitional justice or dealing with the past that have shaped contemporary discussions, to encompass the diversity of practical experiences used to tackle the legacies of conflict.

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This publication has drawn on participatory activities as part of a broader project, such as a Joint Analysis Workshop (see Conciliation Resources (2016), 'Workshop Report: Peacebuilding and Reconciliation') and other forms of consultation. These have contributed a variety of experiences and perspectives, which have highlighted the challenges of developing a common language and understanding. Terms such as 'reconciliation' and 'co-existence' hold particular and different meanings in each context. Sometimes terminology can contribute to splits among groups within the same society. The case studies have therefore explored the contextual relevance of various practices. As Graeme Simpson stresses in the foreword, it is the common ambition to redress the damage done to both vertical and horizontal relationships in conflict-affected societies that connects the various approaches documented here.

The development of the case studies has also stimulated in-country efforts to understand what it means to transform relations. In Colombia, at a key moment in the peace process, authors Rosa Emilia Salamanca González and Ricardo Mendoza convened a series of conversations among civil society, academics and analysts to look at existing reconciliation initiatives, the experience, opportunities and challenges emerging from these, and key priorities during and after the Havana talks. In the Georgian-Abkhaz context, the case study has been an opportunity for authors from both sides of the conflict divide to explore together the difficulties

Priorities for transforming relationships in peace processes

Transforming relationships from the middle out

- Identify links that connect across constituencies, levels and distinct social platforms, in particular intermediaries who can 'listen down and speak up'.
- Are there efforts to support the resilience of diverse reconciliation efforts? In particular, is there awareness of political schisms that may be reinforced by power-sharing arrangements and that risk reversing community initiatives?

Upstream reconciliation

- Are efforts helping to break down polarised narratives of the conflict?
- Do they support conditions for negotiations to encompass diverse perspectives – for example to accommodate the interests of victims of violence, direct and indirect?

Building new relationships

- Do practices prioritise building new relationships rather than restoring old ones? Do they recognise different types of harm and are they adaptive to evolving needs and priorities across society?
- Are discrete spaces available where different institutional interests or personal experiences can be brought together to build trust and transform 'victims and perpetrators' into 'citizens with equal rights'?

Relational statebuilding

- Are institutional reform processes engaging society to create greater confidence in the state?
- Are reconciliation initiatives addressing structural violence?

of undertaking initiatives when there are different contextual understandings of dealing with the past.

Transforming relationships from the middle out

Both horizontal and vertical reconciliation efforts are essential to build trust in the state and within society. Too often peace processes prioritise one approach over the other, or fail to connect different efforts to transform relationships at different levels. Previous Accord articles summarised in this publication, which draw on experiences from a number of contexts, illustrate that practical templates to deal with the legacies of past violence are often planned or financed from above or externally while being implemented at community levels. This has at times imposed inappropriate approaches and led to tensions with existing local practices or structures for reconciliation. A continued emphasis on 'bottom up' and 'top down' can also reinforce the gap between the two – even in the context of efforts to link them. This risk particularly arises as reconciliation efforts are often compromised by wider political dynamics.

Rufa Cagoco-Guiam describes in the Mindanao case study (*see page 35*) how the listening project as part of the Truth and Justice Reconciliation Commission in Mindanao in the Philippines has innovatively brought diverse perspectives into a national framework for dealing with the past. Local researchers visited numerous communities across the region to collect testimony and understand local priorities. This data has been used to inform the commission's recommendations to the government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) 'peace panels'. Yet, the success of such innovations also relies on progress in the formal peace process, which has been severely disrupted by obstructions to the passing of the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) through the national Philippines Congress in Manila.

As Graeme Simpson suggests (*see page 5*), rather than thinking in terms of bifurcated levels of 'top' and 'bottom', it is important to pay attention to the 'connective tissue' or 'social fabric' that integrates diverse engagements across multiple levels within a wider understanding of reconciliation strategies as both multi-faceted and non-linear. This approach requires the development of platforms and constituency groups that can push from the 'middle out'. This emphasises the role of intermediaries who can 'listen down and speak up', including individuals, social structures and institutions (such as religious leaders in Mindanao), as well as distinct social constituencies (such as women in Colombia). As González and Mendoza reflect (*see page 27*), after decades of hostility, insecurity and suspicion in Colombia, there is a need to re-orientate the mindsets and energies of conflict parties and broader society towards reconciliation, and to build their capacity to do this.

In addition, initiatives to deal with past violence often evolve through processes of learning in response to particular contextual conditions. In Northern Ireland, longstanding sectarian conflict has prompted both community-level initiatives and institutional reforms (such as in education and housing) to promote inter-community relations. In Colombia, high levels of extreme violence and a corresponding culture of human rights activism have resulted in an emphasis on victims. They have featured prominently in the Havana negotiations, accompanied by initiatives across the country to document and uncover what happened during the conflict.

Supporting the resilience of reconciliation efforts, especially community-based ones, is therefore important to enable their cumulative impact. Civil society work in Northern Ireland has been integral to developing policy frameworks for a 'shared future'. These have been maintained through international recognition and funding, particularly from the European Union (EU), but have struggled to transform the national political environment. Northern Irish politics remain split along persistent sectarian divides, and leaders continue to appeal to identity-based constituencies for support. The outcome of the United Kingdom referendum on EU membership in June 2016 has placed a major question mark over the sustainability of funding for reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

In Mindanao, the discrete work done by community and regional leaders to date has helped to promote social cohesion locally, but has lacked a coherent and strategic

framework to elevate it to the national consciousness. The January 2015 Mamasapano incident, which linked the killing of security forces personnel with the MILF, reignited narratives demonising the Moro people; many suspect this led to Congress's rejection of the BBL. Professor Cagoco-Guiam (see page 35) suggests that a broader communications and education plan is necessary to help wider Filipino society understand the rationale for entering into the peace process with those they have long viewed as 'terrorists'.

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Upstream reconciliation

All of the case studies in this publication show that efforts to address the legacies of violence can start in the absence of a political agreement, or when one seems unlikely or even impossible. Such initiatives can in fact have a positive, practical influence on peace processes and support trust building. By providing space for alternative perspectives of the conflict to emerge, they can help to break down polarised narratives that act as barriers to meaningful dialogue between conflict parties. They can also help develop and sustain the trajectory of a peace process to be more transformative, helping to create conditions for negotiations to encompass diverse perspectives and to focus on changing relations – for example, the inclusion of victims' perspectives in the Havana talks as part of the Colombia peace process.

The case studies describe a range of initiatives that began when a political solution to conflict appeared remote. These efforts challenged entrenched conflict narratives that reinforced the necessity of violence by highlighting its impact from a range of perspectives and questioning the demonisation of the 'other'. They also tried to shift discussion towards the possibility of constructive relations, for example by encouraging peaceful dialogue between people across divisions, such as through practical projects directed at community development, or providing valuable space to share perspectives of the conflict. Examples include: inter-faith dialogues between Christian and Muslim communities in Mindanao; work on dealing with the past in the Georgian-Abkhaz context; and the work of the National Centre for Historical Memory in Colombia to document the testimonies of victims and serious human rights violations.

The depth and type of early activity depends on both context and circumstance. Early efforts can be risky, particularly when the level of violence is high or conflict parties feel threatened and fall back on nationalist agendas. Human rights activists

in Colombia suffered threats to their families as well as direct physical violence for speaking out against armed actors. In the early 2000s the government of Álvaro Uribe had an explicit policy of 'democratic security' whereby any criticism of the state was viewed as complicity with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP). Even so, civil society sustained attention on violations by appealing to the international community and highlighting international human rights obligations and norms.

An endemic lack of trust may limit the scope and possibilities to engage the 'other' directly and to build space for inclusive conversations about security and politics. Without the common political or legal framework for such conversations that a formal peace deal might provide, it may be difficult to touch on root causes or deeper structural conflict dynamics in order to stimulate broader transformative action.

In the Georgian-Abkhaz context, semantic and practical problems overlap as different understandings of reconciliation have increased mistrust. The Abkhaz associate reconciliation negatively with Abkhazia's reintegration into Georgia, fuelled by Georgians' own conflation of the two. On the Georgian side, some view efforts to change current approaches to the conflict and engage directly with the Abkhaz as promoting Russian interests in the region. Those who are involved in such work therefore raise suspicion within their own community as well as among the other side. Approaches that use the language of dealing with the past, and focus on acknowledging different experiences of the war and breaking down stereotypes of the 'other', have been more appropriate to this context.

It can be difficult to assess the impact of discrete efforts to address the past in such challenging circumstances. Yet the tendency to promote such initiatives only after a ceasefire is called or once conflict parties have reached an agreement misses a vital opportunity to capitalise on their transformative potential.

Building new relationships, not restoring old ones

An important part of addressing past violence acknowledges harm done and grievances on all sides, and looks to establish accountability for violations of human rights. Yet an exclusively binary focus on victims and perpetrators can negatively affect the ability to change the nature of hostile relations. First, it can overlook the multiple beneficiaries and bystanders in violence and conflict. Second, it can reinforce antagonistic relationships from the conflict era or before, which are often based on contested ethno-nationalism and historical grievance.

This can lead to contestation over which victims deserve greater attention, such as the 'hierarchy of victims' that some point to in Northern Ireland: women and children killed by paramilitary organisations are placed above all others, with members of paramilitary organisations and their families killed by the state at the bottom. This has polarised attempts to pursue national-level transitional justice initiatives. It also negates the varied type of victim that the *Gender Principles for Dealing with the Legacy of the Past* (see page 42) address. Inclusive reconciliation practices therefore look beyond

the victim/perpetrator dichotomy to prioritise building new relationships rather than restoring old ones.

Relationships are also dynamic: different types of violence, suffering and victimhood continually emerge as conflicts and peace processes progress and mutate over time. In Colombia, women are drawing attention to the increased incidence of domestic violence in post-conflict contexts, highlighting 'continuities of violence' that are often ignored. Distinctions between physical, political, criminal and structural violence can be blurred as well. The authors of the Gender Principles argue that deaths from conflict in Northern Ireland led to multiple related harms from state and non-state actors. These range from impoverishment, neglect, harassment and vulnerability to other abuses that affect the whole family, for which the woman may now be the sole caregiver. For peace to be sustainable and inclusive, reconciliation needs to adapt to evolving needs and priorities across society.

Authors of the Colombian case study reflect on the need to move beyond victims and perpetrators, towards notions of shared responsibility. Similarly, in Northern Ireland 'a shared future' for both state actors and society was a core vision for civil society. This echoes the approach to dealing with the past by swisspeace, a practice-research institute, which points to transforming victims and perpetrators "into citizens with equal rights who can play a meaningful role in the establishment of a peaceful and democratic society".

Two examples from the case studies, the Women, Peace and Security Collective in Colombia, and the Memory Project in the Georgian-Abkhaz context, highlight the benefit of opportunities to break down institutional and personal conflict-based views. They look to create space to build new relationships among representatives of communities and institutions that are violently at odds with or isolated from each other, but who understand the need to find ways to communicate and cooperate in order to build a peaceful future. The examples suggest that spaces work well when they are discrete and invite in motivated participants with sufficient experience to raise sensitive issues that might be problematic in a more public discussion.

The Women, Peace and Security Collective involves 'difficult conversations' between women from sectors traditionally opposed to each other, such as the military and human rights groups. These try to shift the security paradigm from one based on traditional hard security operations and military capacity to one with human security at its centre. The practical exercise of collating and systematising oral histories and archival material in the Memory Project sheds light on the range of perspectives and experiences of the conflict, and supports people-to-people contact in a closed political space. At its core, the work is about creating a foundation for building different and new relationships, rather than restoring previous ones.

Relational statebuilding

Institutional reforms are integral to peacebuilding but are seldom associated with reconciliation. Yet the institutions of a state that has been the object of contestation and conflict for many years are often deeply mistrusted and unstable.

Even after a peace agreement is signed, changes to political and security arrangements as part of statebuilding exercises (see Conciliation Resources (2016), 'Workshop Report: Peacebuilding and Reconciliation') can result in the emergence of new forms of violence and threats to sustainable peace such as electoral violence or the splintering of armed groups.

A gap in both current reconciliation and statebuilding approaches is how they address structural violence – a key conflict driver – and the relationships that underpin it. Conflicts are often asymmetric, driven by discrimination, marginalisation and inequality, and a core challenge for reconciliation efforts is to address unequal and intersecting power relationships. A focus on integrating reconciliation into statebuilding could help to address the political deficit in statebuilding that has been identified as a stumbling block to its effectiveness.

For example, the transitional justice process in Tunisia (see Conciliation Resources (2016), 'Workshop Report: Peacebuilding and Reconciliation') has targeted, among other things, political and economic corruption – the main rallying point for the revolution and removal of former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. The process is seen by many as integral to re-establishing citizens' trust in state institutions, and promoting the rule of law, equitable development and reconciliation. Yet recent political developments, including the emergence of former regime officials on the political scene, have favoured prioritising human rights violations over corruption, leading to stalemate in how to push the entire transitional process forward.

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The case studies illustrate how questions of statebuilding are bound up in the possibility of transforming relationships. In Northern Ireland, while the two main communities share the same political institutions, they remain divided by physical, social and political barriers such as continued segregated housing and education. In Mindanao, the formalisation of a proposed self-governing territory of Bangsamoro with a predominantly Moro population is affected by negative stereotypes of Muslims from the broader (predominantly Christian) Filipino population. In the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, territorially divided communities have little physical opportunity for interaction. This is driven by contrasting positions on statehood, whereby Abkhaz claims to self-determination threaten Georgia's territorial integrity. The distinction between intra- and inter-state conflict is also contested.

The case studies suggest that statebuilding cannot be a purely technical exercise to define the nature of the state and reform public institutions. While post-war institutions may bring

together former adversaries (most obviously in the security sector), significant parts of the public are likely to remain highly mistrustful of the state. Addressing this gap is vital to a transformative approach to statebuilding, and can support prevention of future conflict risk.

For example, González and Mendoza suggest that in Colombia a truth-telling process providing clarity on the failure of previous demobilisation negotiations with the FARC-EP, as well as accurate information rather than speculation about who committed particular attacks and massacres, would support community confidence in future disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes. In Mindanao, a key question is how community priorities highlighted in the listening process – such as discrimination and land dispossession – can be incorporated into a potential truth commission.

The example of police reform in Northern Ireland demonstrates the need for continued awareness of the past in institutional changes. Reform has involved a change in name, the incorporation of all political parties including Sinn Féin on the Policing Board, and stronger community involvement. This has been largely positive: the new service has greater accountability and trust among unionist and nationalist communities. It presented a clear break from the Royal Ulster Constabulary, which held significant and opposing conflict associations for both sides. However, broader political disagreements over how to deal with the past have left the new police service responsible for investigation into historical violence – leading to renewed suspicion and recurring questions on the contested role of the police during the conflict.

Conclusion

As the case studies testify, and Bloomfield stresses in this publication, reconciliation is not a soft or easy option: it is hugely challenging, and the stakes are very high – “if politics fail, or community relations revert to violence, then all is lost”. Nor is it restricted to the ‘local’ or grassroots level, but involves concerted efforts to transform relationships at all levels.

Rather than, as is often presented, necessitating a binary choice between accountability or peacemaking, reconciliation involves difficult conversations and decisions happening simultaneously: how to provide redress for those who have experienced different types of violence (direct, indirect and structural); how to build trust in political institutions; and how future societal relations can be strengthened to ensure non-recurrence of violence.

The case studies highlight that reconciliation is also a political question that requires acute awareness of who is promoting it, at what moment, for what purpose, and from what perspective. Experiences from Northern Ireland reveal the danger of persistently prioritising political power sharing over a mutual future for all communities – resulting in a fragile political system that prolongs conflict-era polarisation (in this case between nationalism and unionism), and continued societal divisions.

A look at different phases of a peace process provides a better understanding of what types of activity are appropriate in the

conflict cycle. The case studies highlight that upstream efforts can be effective when focused on changing relationships. Different contexts demand different emphases at different junctures – be it political design, development of civil society practice, or disarmament and reintegration. Rather than reconciliation as a single or fixed outcome it is more useful to talk about ‘the art of the possible’: to transform relationships according to the particular demands of local circumstances, and the cumulative and ongoing effect of multiple efforts, across levels and over time.

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This third Accord Insight aims to open up conversation on how efforts to transform relationships can effectively overcome the legacies of past violence and support sustainable peace. It identifies opportunities for further analysis, including: the possibilities for upstream and preventive reconciliation, and how these can be sensitively supported; the potential of efforts to address diverse forms of conflict-related harm, including structural change; and how progress in the quality of relationships can be measured.