Commander Captain Ray Apire, who reflects on how the LRA viewed the ARLPI.

Second, Mauricio García-Durán and Fernando Sarmiento Santander explore an initiative by the population of Micoahumado in southern Bolivar, one of the most disputed zones in the Colombian conflict. The article identifies how the community was able to convince the ELN to unilaterally de-mine the main arteries connecting the village of Micoahumado in a territory under de facto ELN control. The case study looks at how local actors circumvented a ban on talking to the ELN, which was proscribed as a terrorist group.

The third case study examines the effectiveness of community-based initiatives to engage in dialogue with armed groups in rebel-controlled Syria, a fluid environment with high levels of insecurity and violence. Wisam Elhamoui and Sinan al-Hawat describe how a number of communities living in these areas have organised informally to facilitate relief operations and broader social welfare. Some communities have sought to engage directly with armed groups to reduce violence or coordinate responses. The article looks at the extent of engagement that may be possible, as well as the key factors involved in exerting influence over armed groups.

Brian Gormally reflects on efforts of civil society activists in Northern Ireland to promote alternative approaches to punishment violence within the IRA. The initiative – which became known as community restorative justice – also provided space for the republican movement to open up discussion on community security and justice and the role of formal policing as official peace negotiations emerged.

An Insight article distils lessons from the cases for peacebuilding policy and practice. It suggests the importance of a security imperative – to protect populations from attack – as a primary motivation for local communities to reach out to armed groups. It reflects on how local initiatives to reach out to armed groups often play a crucial role in promoting local human security and peacebuilding, and in some cases can support broader transformation of those groups. It details the real risks local actors face, and highlights the importance of pre-existing links with armed groups, of networks that predate the conflict, of informal or formal institutions, and of the role of external relations and support to gain leverage and maintain space.

BOX 1

Local mediators

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There is increasing international awareness of the importance of local mediators. In 2012, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon noted: "There is growing recognition that mediation is not the exclusive purview of external mediation actors. Local mediators who come from the conflict country can usefully lead local mediation efforts or complement regional or international initiatives" (Report of the Secretary-General A/66/811 25 June 2012).

Who are local mediators?
Mediation can be understood as a structured process of negotiation and conflict resolution supported by an acceptable, impartial third party. Local mediators – sometimes referred to as insider mediators – help actors from within their own contexts to develop mutually acceptable agreements. Local mediators have credibility with the parties to the conflict and influence in their community, and can include traditional elders, religious leaders, leaders of women's groups, state officials, security sector actors, and business people. The term "local" is relative, as the delimitation of the context can be village, sub-regional or country level.

At what levels do they work?
Typically, local mediators are involved in informal peace efforts, where their mandate is less prescribed and trust is built through relationships rather than through formal institutions. While they usually focus on the sub-national level, there are cases where local mediators have also taken on a facilitating role at the national level.

During the 2007–08 election crisis, a group of eminent Kenyans created a Concerned Citizens for Peace initiative in response to election violence. This brought together Kenyan peace mediators and members of civil society to provide input into the formal mediation process led by Kofi Annan, and help link relevant official and unofficial actors at the national and sub-national levels. In Nepal, the main parties to the negotiations leading to the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement did not accept a formal outside mediator. Instead, local and international actors helped to pass messages between the parties and support the negotiation process in a much less structured and directive way.

How do they work?

The types of activity undertaken by local and non-local mediators may not differ fundamentally, but the normative framework in which they work is different, influenced to varying degrees by local legal frameworks: modern (formal, domestic); customary (eg regarding collective land use); or religious (eg regarding compensation for damage according to locally prevailing religious standards).

In some cases, there may be tensions between modern formal law, based on individual rights, and customary law, where collective punishment may present a pragmatic option, for example to minimise the use of violence in inter-community disputes, such as regarding cattle rustling. Local mediators are well suited to dealing with such tensions as they have in-depth knowledge of relevant cultural norms. Cultural considerations also shape methods of relationship building, communication style and perceptions of what constitutes a fair process. Local mediators in north-east Kenya, for instance, tend to be influenced by Somali culture that emphasises poetry and storytelling as communication tools.

Strengths of local mediators

The main strengths of local mediators are the depth of their contextual knowledge and the extent of their local networks. These are built on trust and may derive from holding a particular position and level of authority within their communities. As local mediators are geographically and culturally close to a specific context, they may be more attuned to a conflict's potential for escalation, and so are well placed to step in to prevent violence before it breaks out.

Local mediators can help secure pauses in fighting, longer term ceasefires, or a complete resolution of a conflict through mutual agreement, which may for example include compensation or justice mechanisms. Effective intervention typically requires strong relationships with conflict parties, state and non-state, as well as community leaders. Local mediators also often work on conflicts long before the international community mobilises and are there long after it disengages. They may, therefore, enjoy significant local legitimacy linked to their commitment and relationships, which can help to maintain the social fabric in times of crisis.

Local mediation and non-state armed groups

Local mediators are often in contact with non-state armed actors, especially in areas where there is a weak or predatory state presence. Local mediation processes have sometimes led to the establishment of "zones of peace" related to specific territories. Local deals do not automatically lead to a nationwide peace agreement, as they may lack authority beyond their immediate context. But they may provide useful lessons and facilitate a more conducive environment for formal political processes.

Challenges and responses

Local mediators face challenges including threats to their personal security, and lack of technical expertise – for example relating to ceasefire agreements or institutional options for power sharing, such as models of federalism or devolution. They can face accusations of bias, as conflict parties from one location or community may mistrust mediators associated with another. A number of approaches to broaden local mediation through internal and external cooperation have helped to respond to these challenges and maximise local mediators' strengths. These include:

- *Co-mediation:* local mediators can work in teams assembled from across conflict lines to soften perceptions of partiality.
- *Peace committees:* local mediators can become part of a broader "infrastructure for peace" or "peace architecture" – a system for coordinating and supporting peace processes. This can include an established network of local mediators in the form of peace committees that meet regularly (eg once a month) and can react rapidly as tensions arise. The work of peace committees usually goes beyond mediation to include peace education or policy work. This helps to address the structural causes of violence, rather than only the immediate conflict.
- *Regional and international networks:* external support can help mitigate security risks, perceptions of partiality or lack of technical knowledge. Regional and international actors can also provide diplomatic or political contacts that local mediators may not have, provide a different type of legitimacy, and bring comparative lessons from other contexts.