Bridging the gap

Improving UK support
for peace processes

conciliation resources

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1 Introduction

Conciliation Resources (CR), an international organization focusing on providing support for peacebuilding around the globe, recently commissioned an assessment of the UK's conflict policies. CR has concluded that there are conceptual, policy, institutional and practice gaps in the UK's responses to violent conflict. Informed by experience working in the field, CR is convinced that the UK can better address key global challenges by directing more of its diplomatic, political and economic resources to the resolution and prevention of conflict through increasing and improving support for peace processes leading to better peace agreements.

There are currently more than 70 situations of actual or potential armed conflict worldwide[i]. While the number has fallen since the 1990s, there is little room for complacency. Factors such as environmental degradation caused by climate change are likely to increase pressures that could give rise to more conflict in the future. Globalization means that actions in one part of the world can fuel conflict elsewhere; just as conflict in one part of the world can have consequences far away from its origins. For these reasons and more, the urgent need to respond effectively and constructively to armed conflict remains one of the great global challenges of our time. The UK, as a leading member of the international community can do much to improve the quality of support to peace processes through its overall foreign policy tools.

What we mean by 'peace process' and other terms

A *peace process* encompasses all the initiatives intended to reach a negotiated agreement to ending an armed conflict. In addition to formal negotiations, peace processes include other efforts with belligerents and non-combatants to reduce animosities, increase understanding and improve relationships. *Peacebuilding* is the gerund of 'to build peace' (ie those multiple activities aimed at addressing the structural causes of conflict and reconciling relationships affected by conflict). Peace processes can create a framework conducive for longer-term peacebuilding, and are – in turn – underpinned by peacebuilding processes throughout the conflict.

2 Improving the UK's conflict policies

The UK is already involved in numerous peace processes around the world in a variety of ways, however it has yet to develop a strategic and coherent approach for consistently supporting best practice in peacemaking as a part of an overall conflict response. The UK has played a leading role in building capacities for international intervention and civil-military cooperation towards 'stabilization', but it has paid far less attention to how it can support processes leading to effective peace agreements – or to preventing the descent into violence through better preventive diplomacy. Instead, peacemaking generally falls into a gap in the government's conflict response:

- *Conceptual gap* – there is little conceptual clarity guiding the government's approach to resolving conflicts through political negotiations and other processes of social and political dialogue and insufficient attention to ways of supporting the primary protagonists (the belligerents as well as others in the conflict-affected society) to develop political solutions to their differences.

- *Policy gap* – peace processes have been sidelined in the government's conflict policies, with the notable exception of DFID's new *Preventing violent conflict* policy, and are subject to competing policy goals that undermine the requirements of a good process.

- *Institutional gap* – inconsistency of cross-Whitehall mechanisms to develop and deliver support for effective peace processes.

- *Practice gap* – uneven resources, skills and specialized capacities to best support an inclusive, comprehensive and sustainable process.

Yet there is an opportunity for the government to bridge these gaps. *The Building on Progress: Britain in the World* policy review identifies the need to take a strategic approach throughout the spectrum from conflict prevention to nation-building. DFID's conflict policy sets out a solid framework for understanding conflict and peace processes, and recognizes the primacy of local actors in resolving their own conflicts.

3 What makes for better peace processes?

Peace processes are potentially much more than simply finding a way to silence the guns – as difficult as this challenge can be. If negotiations are conceived only as a means to reach a quick settlement on ending a war, too often the results are a recycling of power within the same basic structures. Done well, however, peace processes offer opportunities for developing a more peaceful future by addressing the underlying issues generating conflict, developing new rules of the game, and forging a new basis for the political and social relationships of those involved in the conflict. As such, peacemaking can be a political process leading to profound social change, better governance and more responsive state structures.

The necessity of negotiation

Sustainable peace cannot be achieved through the exercise of force alone. It is extremely difficult to impose peace on those who remain committed to achieving their objectives through violence or those who feel excluded from peace processes. As the Iraq war demonstrates, those willing to achieve their goals 'by any means necessary' can sustain a military campaign against even the most powerful armed forces in the world. Consequently, decisive military defeat has become increasingly rare as the means of settling conflict.

For the first time in history, since the 1990s more wars have ended through negotiated agreement than through military victory.[ii] Yet many of those agreements failed and the belligerents returned to war within five years. The reasons for conflict recurrence are complex and varied, however there is clearly a need for better processes leading to stronger agreements that are strategically designed, skilfully implemented, and well supported. Much more needs to be done to ensure that future peace processes become the bridge from profound animosity to sustainable peace.

Local ownership and the limits of UK influence

For the UK to become better at supporting conflict resolution, it needs to recognize that primary responsibility rests with the belligerent parties and those affected by the conflict. It therefore needs to support their capacities to negotiate agreements, settle their differences, address the underlying causes, and repair relationships damaged by years of hostility. The government needs to recognize that while it cannot 'fix' these situations through the projection of UK power, it can better support and empower those in conflict to bring peace to their own societies –

and even to prevent the disputes from escalating into violence in the first place. Promoting local ownership is complex and difficult; it has proven challenging in cases where genuine commitment to it does exist.

Multilateralism and opportunities for UK leadership

While the UK may not be a leading player in each peace process, it can contribute to ensuring that international strategies and mandates are effective in underpinning peace processes. The UK can also work to confront dilemmas, such as barriers to engaging appropriately with non-state armed groups. It can also help to ensure that the longer-term requirements of good peace processes are not overridden by more short-term objectives, including the need to be seen to be 'doing something' in response to crises. The UK should not seek to become the world's mediator, but there are opportunities for it to play a significant role in developing multilateral strategies to underpin peace processes.

Most armed conflicts attract at least some level of international attention from governments and humanitarian agencies. Yet their responses are often uncoordinated and sometimes counter-productive, with different governments and agencies working either at cross-purposes or pursuing strategies that undermine the peace process. There is a clear need for the international community to better coordinate its response to conflict.

Too often, international action is determined through diplomatic negotiations that result in a lowest common denominator approach rather than in promoting the highest common purpose: a more peaceful and equitable resolution of conflict. It therefore requires strong leadership to shape a far-sighted and skilful international response.

The breadth of the UK's engagement on the international stage gives it great potential to encourage the development of better practice and to help craft international strategies to support more effective peace processes:

- It has key positions in the UN, European Union, Commonwealth, OSCE, NATO, and the OECD and IFIs, and can push towards coherent multilateral support for peacemaking.

- This is complemented by the UK's extensive bi-lateral relationships, including as a donor and trade partner and the potential to help incentivize a peace process.

- The UK's reach gives it the ability to make strategic contributions through more informal but often effective 'group of friends' networks of countries responding to specific conflict situations.

Comprehensive, inclusive and participatory processes

Good peace processes require a comprehensive process. A comprehensive negotiation agenda should address the root causes and underlying needs of the various stakeholder groups in the wider conflict system, in addition to the actual belligerent parties. A comprehensive process also often requires a negotiation structure capable of addressing a number of inter-connected conflicts within the state or in a sub-region (or at least having a strong interface with other processes aimed at resolving them).

Comprehensiveness is best achieved through inclusiveness. This can mean moving beyond the bi-polar logic of classic mediation efforts to develop and support multistakeholder – and possibly multi-level – processes involving representatives of multiple political and social groupings. This does not necessarily mean that everyone needs to sit together at the same table at the same time; however there should be mechanisms to involve the many constituent groups in a society in developing agreements that will shape how they live together.

Inclusiveness can extend beyond the decision-making elites to provide mechanisms for public participation in peacemaking. Depending on the social context, this can be achieved through a range of consultative processes, as well as through participation of elected representatives in talks and through dialogue at local levels. Participatory processes can build wide consensus on the content of the agreements reached and generate understanding of the reasons why the agreement is the best possible means of addressing the conflict. The parties need to feel that the agreement is 'theirs' and that they are responsible for its implementation.

4 Intervention is not enough

The UK has increasingly emphasized the need for the international community to become better at international peace support operations and has invested heavily in strengthening its own military and civilian capacities for intervention and stabilization.

Conflicts are unlikely to end unless those involved agree on ways to settle their differences and to live together peacefully. Outsiders can help them to engage in processes to resolve grievances, contribute resources to help deliver solutions and help provide sufficient security so as to cool hostilities and protect the vulnerable. Yet outsiders cannot substitute for the parties resolving their conflicts themselves. As peacemaking in Darfur revealed, efforts to impose an agreement can backfire because the parties feel little commitment or responsibility for imple-

menting the agreement. Attempts to impose security in the absence of a peace process leading towards a durable resolution tend often to fail outright. Alternatively they freeze the fighting while leaving the conflict intact and the society highly dependent on outsiders to maintain stability, as seen in Cyprus and Kosovo.

Too often external actors are so eager to reach agreement to end the fighting that they encourage compromises that create serious difficulties in the medium to long-term. Sometimes this pressure to reach a quick agreement comes from foreign governments keen to appear responsive to public concern for the humanitarian crisis and to move the story off the headlines.

Ultimately there is no substitute for peace processes when it comes to developing sustainable peace. Yet far more attention and resources go towards improving intervention than to developing state of the art peacemaking. A better understanding of the requirements of effective peace processes is needed to underpin coherent strategies and good practice.

Learning from experience in Northern Ireland

The UK can learn a great deal from its own experience in the long quest to resolve the conflict over Northern Ireland. Complex processes have aimed not only to settle the political disputes but also to support transformation of inter-communal hostilities. Ultimately it has been a shared responsibility between the parties and the peoples of Northern Ireland – as well as the British and Irish governments – to make the necessary changes and compromises to bring about peace. It required courage to engage with those who had been 'the enemy'. They were aided by a host of external mediators, monitors, facilitators, trainers, analysts, and donors. These external actors offered assistance and tried to ensure that their efforts complemented the needs of the overall peace process. While setbacks have been encountered and challenges remain, enormous progress has been made through the painstaking efforts of many over several decades.

5 Achieving the UK's security and development goals

Improved support for peace processes will help the UK to achieve its broader security and development policy goals.

First, conflict resolution can help to generally promote global security by addressing the specific grievances that fuel instability in specific conflicts and, in the eyes of some, make terrorist actions seem justifiable as the only available means of redressing injustices. Furthermore, if the UK becomes more strongly perceived as a peacemaker, it may help to counterbalance the effects of an interventionist foreign policy in increasing hostility towards the UK and radicalizing some within the country.

Second, promoting peace through peaceful means can offer 'value-for-money' relative to many other response options. The costs of supporting preventive diplomacy and peacemaking are a fraction of those involving military intervention – although the former does not necessarily exclude the latter.

Third, resolving protracted conflict in some of the world's poorest countries is essential for poverty elimination and for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which are core government commitments and are essential for long-term development and security.

Fourth, resolving conflicts peacefully is one of the most important tasks of the international system. The UK, as a key member state, can do much to strengthen multilateral responses by strengthening its own capacities, as well as building the capacities of the relevant international organizations. Sustainable conflict resolution is necessary both for the wellbeing of conflict-affected societies and, in this highly inter-dependent age, for the long-term development of a more peaceful and secure world.

"Participating in peace processes, engaging directly with political leaders, and building international coalitions of support are all central parts of our business"

Dr Kim Howells, Minister
Foreign and Commonwealth Office[iii]

i International Crisis Group, Crisis Watch. Available online: http://www. crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=1200&l=1

ii Human Security Centre. 2006. Human Security Brief. University of British Columbia. Available online: http://www.humansecuritybrief.info

iii Opening speech, CR's 10 year anniversary event 'Peacebuilding works: A British foreign policy priority', 2 November 2006

Policy Recommendations

1. **The UK should develop a coherent concept of effective peace processes and preventive diplomacy to guide UK policy, strategy and practice in its multilateral and bilateral engagement towards conflict:**

a Conduct a study of recent practice within HMG of supporting peace processes and preventive diplomacy (including both successes and failures) to identify key learning points to feed into future staff training;

b Build on DFID's *Preventing violent conflict* policy and develop a strategic approach to supporting peace processes as an explicit part of the UK's overall response to conflict;

c Honour commitments to apply the DFID's Country Conflict Assessment tool and develop the second stage institutional tools and skills to connect analysis with response strategies;

d Develop staff training to deepen understanding of what makes for effective peace processes and preventive diplomacy. These efforts should seek to institutionalize comparative learning and the ongoing development of good practice.

2. **The UK should provide leadership through multilateral organizations for strong support for conflict resolution through preventive diplomacy and peace processes:**

a Address practical and policy challenges that can impede preventive diplomacy and peacemaking, such as barriers to engagement with non-state armed groups (including proscription policies);

b Make more effective use of the multiple tools available to the UK to positively and constructively influence the choices and behaviour of governments and non-state actors in conflict to constructive engagement in a peace process through more effective use of incentives, sanctions and conditionality;

c Ensure that mandates and operational concept of international peace support operations underpin effective peace processes and local peacebuilding capacities;

d Support the development of institutional mechanisms and instruments for early dispute resolution;

e Build capacity for peacemaking and preventive diplomacy and provide sufficient resources for effective operations.

3. **The UK should strengthen its own institutional capacity to engage effectively in peace processes:**

a Mainstream and integrate support for prevention and conflict resolution into the policies and strategies of all relevant government departments;

b Strengthen the conflict-response architecture in Whitehall to build on best practice and better address these challenges;

c Increase the resources available through the Africa and Global Conflict Prevention Pools and make greater use of their coordination mechanisms;

d Prioritize support for the ACCP and GCCP in countries and contexts where the UK is not widely perceived to be a protagonist in the conflict;

e Develop specialized capacities to provide expert knowledge and skills needed to back-stop UK involvement in peace processes;

f Build upon and expand cooperation with NGOs and academics both in the UK and internationally with regard to specific conflict situations.

4. **The government should support the parties to conflict to address their differences through peaceful means:**

a Enable more effective and appropriate engagement with armed groups;

b Build capacities of the parties to engage skilfully in peace negotiations;

c Support greater public participation in peacemaking.