ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This briefing paper was written by Clem McCartney, Sally Holt, Rachel Clogg and Michelle Parlevliet, with editorial input from Zand Ramsbotham. It is based on desk research and interviews with practitioners, analysts and academics in the fields of futures thinking, mediation, reconciliation and peacebuilding. It also benefits from inputs at a half-day workshop in December 2021 convened by Conciliation Resources which brought together policymakers from the UK government with futures thinking, mediation, reconciliation and peacebuilding experts and practitioners from a range of organisations and from every continent. The authors and Conciliation Resources would like to thank all those who have contributed their time and shared their analysis and experience to inform the paper, and in particular those who participated in the workshop and interviews. Interviewees and workshop participants are listed in the Appendix to this paper. We would like to give special thanks to Carl Stauffer and Simon Keyes for their insightful feedback on an earlier draft.

This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government; however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government’s official policies.
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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores how futures thinking can be applied to peace mediation and reconciliation, help connect the two, and contribute to more sustainable peace processes.

Reconciliation and mediation are intrinsic to effective and sustainable peace processes, to improving relationships among conflict parties, communities and constituencies, and to reaching mutually acceptable agreements. Futures thinking, as a component of wider peacebuilding efforts, can help to unblock some of the obstacles in a mediation or reconciliation process. It can explore how the future could be different from the present in ways that are acceptable to all sides, and avoid undesirable events from occurring, also taking into account conflict drivers beyond the parties, such as trends in economics and demographics, climate change or regional or global politics. Involving participants in conflict in identifying possible futures can help overcome some of their reluctance to move from fixed positions. It can challenge assumptions and offer fresh insights and alternative frames of reference for a shared future, even at times when progress seems impossible.

The core questions this paper explores arose from and build on Conciliation Resources’ Reconciliation in Focus publication, which considers the relationship between reconciliation and peacebuilding practice. That paper identified a need to further explore the relationship between reconciliation and mediation, and the potential for greater application of futures-focused approaches. The three are interlinked:

- reconciliation features in mediation processes, either explicitly or implicitly, and the mediation process itself can serve as a space for reconciliation;
- mediation processes impact on reconciliation, sometimes in unintended ways and with positive or negative consequences;
- and futures thinking is relevant to both mediation and reconciliation as these are (or should be) future-focused and transformative by their nature. Using a futures thinking approach can therefore enhance the linkages between mediation and reconciliation.

All three – mediation, reconciliation and futures thinking – are necessary and ideally complementary supports of a fair, inclusive and forward-looking peace process. It is important to take care to understand the relationships between them and to strive for balance. The main focus of this paper is on the potential contribution of futures thinking to mediation and reconciliation.

Futures thinking methodologies are already being applied in peacebuilding practice – intuitively and through the use of visioning or scenarios approaches, for example.

This paper proposes a more intentional and proactive future-focused approach in the design and implementation of mediation and reconciliation initiatives. While they aim to find mutually acceptable solutions that will enable parties to coexist and live together without violence in future, too often they get caught up in the immediacy of the situation, or in looking back at the past. Futures thinking provides tools to look forward.

While there is a need for more evidence, experience to date provides proof of concept and supports greater attention to the potential of futures thinking to help start or move negotiation or reconciliation processes forward. On its own, futures thinking cannot dismantle the pillars or drivers of conflict. It faces the same challenges as other peacemaking and peacebuilding initiatives, but it is an additional option that provides a space for participants to reflect on what might be if they could overcome the obstacles that make it difficult to move to a new future.

Who is the paper for and what does it do?

- The paper is a resource for people working in conflict contexts – parties, mediators, reconciliation and peacebuilding practitioners and policymakers. People interviewed for this research who had used futures thinking approaches in conflict contexts generally affirmed their feasibility and utility. The majority had not done so, but saw the potential of such approaches and expressed interest in adopting them when asked.
- The paper also responds to a burgeoning interest among futures thinking practitioners in applying their approaches to work in conflict contexts. While there is a substantial body of futures thinking literature and practice, including a few examples from conflict-affected contexts which the paper draws on, the connection to mediation, reconciliation and peacebuilding is largely undocumented. This paper aims to fill that gap by providing an overview of how and when futures thinking can make a difference in these processes. In doing so, it draws on knowledge and experience in the peacebuilding and futures thinking worlds that have not been brought together before.
- In spite of growing recognition of the value of futures work, there are many different approaches and as yet no agreed terminology. The term futures thinking is therefore used here as an umbrella for a range of methods and techniques. This paper develops a new typology of futures thinking which provides clarity on what different components or activities can contribute to a peace process.
- Practical examples from conflict contexts where futures thinking approaches have been applied illustrate how different methodologies have played out in practice. Longer examples are set out in an Examples Supplement to this paper.
• An overview of benefits and challenges draws on these experiences of applying futures thinking in practice, reflecting the existing literature but also eliciting insights from interviews with a range of futures thinking and peace practitioners, many of whom have not documented their practice.

• The paper is not intended as a guide or toolkit. It sets out some key observations and questions relevant to mediation and reconciliation and examines the potential for a more intentional futures thinking approach and what that might look like in practice.

• Nor does it attempt to provide an exhaustive account of futures thinking theory, methods and practice or its contributions to mediation and reconciliation. Rather, it serves as an entry point, framing questions and providing pointers to inform reflection and practice, and encouraging discussion among the wider community of practice.

• Depending on the reader’s background and interest, different sections may be of more or less interest and can be accessed as standalone pieces. For example, peacebuilders may be particularly interested in methods used in futures thinking, while futures thinking and peacebuilding practitioners will both be interested in the challenges of applying them in a conflict context.

• While the impact of futures thinking on reconciliation and mediation processes cannot be empirically proven, it is hoped that the paper will encourage more use of futures thinking by those working on conflict, which will create a richer body of evidence that will illuminate the ideas in the paper and guide good practice.

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**METHODOLOGY**

This paper is based on insights gained in various ways. A literature review and desk research focused on the relationships between futures thinking, mediation and reconciliation. A review of futures thinking theories, methods and practice aimed to identify examples and provide food for thought on the potential for, and barriers to, their application in conflict-affected contexts.

A total of 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely with 17 women and 8 men with experience across different geographic regions between November 2021 and January 2022. Futures thinking practitioners provided insights into the methods, outcomes and the potential applicability of their work in conflict-affected contexts, as well as the challenges arising. Experienced mediators and mediation support actors, negotiators and reconciliation and peacebuilding practitioners shared their experiences, knowledge and perspectives on: the relationships between reconciliation and mediation processes and how they can be treated more coherently; to what extent and how the future is addressed in these processes; and whether/how a more future-oriented approach in both could be beneficial. Between them, those interviewed bring decades of experience in various capacities and at different levels, including high-profile mediators, community peacebuilders and senior UN officials. Interviewees and workshop participants are listed in the Appendix.

Case studies were identified drawing on Conciliation Resources’ programme experience (especially in Bougainville and the Georgian-Abkhaz context) and on the knowledge and experience of the authors in applying futures methodologies in conflict situations (Hong Kong and Northern Ireland). The decision to focus in depth on one particular methodology, the transformative scenarios process (TSP), was based on the fact it is well-documented, has been tried and tested in various conflict settings and seems to hold much potential to contribute to peace processes. One of the authors also has direct experience of applying the approach in practice. An introduction to the TSP methodology and case studies of its application are provided in a TSP Supplement to this paper.

A mid-term workshop was held in December 2021 to test initial findings and analysis. The workshop brought together practitioners using futures thinking methodologies with a group of experienced mediation and reconciliation policymakers, practitioners and researchers to explore connections across these fields. The 29 participants included officials from the UK government’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office working on conflict, mediation and reconciliation thematically or in specific countries or regions. The aim was to draw out lessons from practice where futures methods have been applied in conflict-affected contexts such as Colombia and Ethiopia. Participants also considered the relevance and potential of scenarios work to further dialogue, negotiations and reconciliation in ‘live’ conflicts, using Somalia as a case study and drawing on their knowledge and experience in a range of other contexts including the Philippines, Catalonia, the Caucasus and the Balkans. The authors also benefited from participating in a November 2021 workshop on The Potential of Scenarios and Foresight Work in Supporting Peacebuilding organised by Reos Partners.

**Limitations of the research**

Limited time and resources constrained the scope and depth of the research. Case studies demonstrate how different methods can be used, but it was not possible to undertake an in-depth analysis of outcomes and impact of different initiatives within the framework of this project. This paper provides some reflections and insights, but the usual problems of attribution and relating outcomes to specific actions apply, as in other areas of peacebuilding practice.
2. FUTURES THINKING, MEDIATION AND RECONCILIATION – MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

It is important to be aware of the sometimes hidden links between futures thinking, mediation and reconciliation and their impact on each other. This can help avoid unintended consequences. It can also reveal opportunities to proactively enhance the connections and to ensure that different initiatives are together contributing to more productive peace processes.

2.1. LINKING RECONCILIATION AND MEDIATION IN PEACE PROCESSES

There are intrinsic links between reconciliation and mediation processes. Reconciliation and mediation should ideally work together throughout a peace process: building relationships and negotiating structural and systemic reform, and implementing agreements in a participatory way to achieve inclusive and sustainable change. In many cases, reconciliation features in mediation processes implicitly, if not explicitly, but paying more consistent attention to reconciliation throughout a peace process can potentially help parties move towards agreement and achieve sustainable outcomes.

DIAGRAM 1: FUTURES THINKING, MEDIATION AND RECONCILIATION: SEEKING STABILITY ON ROUGH GROUND

- To what extent does reconciliation feature in mediation processes?
- To what extent can mediation serve as a space for reconciliation?
- To what extent is the future addressed in reconciliation processes?
- How can futures thinking contribute to reconciliation processes?
- How can futures thinking help to conceptualise future relations between parties?
- To what extent is the future addressed in mediation processes?
- How can futures thinking contribute to mediation processes?
In this paper we use the following working definitions of mediation and reconciliation.

**MEDIATION**

Mediation is defined by the UN as a voluntary process ‘whereby a third party assists two or more parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage or resolve a conflict by helping them to develop mutually acceptable agreements’.¹ It encompasses the entire process of supporting negotiations, from initial contact between mediators and conflict parties to ceasefire negotiations and the implementation of peace agreements.² A mediated agreement does not mark the end of a negotiated peace process. On the contrary, negotiated transitions over the past 25 years have frequently resulted in what has been called ‘formalised political unsettlement’, where agreement to end violent conflict translates into a set of political and legal institutions for ongoing negotiation as the parties continue to jostle for power.

**RECONCILIATION**

Reconciliation is a broad concept with no single fixed or widely agreed meaning. In this paper we use the working definition elaborated in the Reconciliation in Focus publication: reconciliation involves [re]building and/or transforming relationships damaged by violent conflict and oppression. It focuses on improving horizontal relationships between people and groups in society and vertical relationships between people and institutions, or building new ones where they did not exist.³

Reconciliation encompasses a wide range of activities, across three timeframes: it entails working in and reframing the present; looking backwards to acknowledge and address the legacies of past violence; and looking forward toward developing a fair, mutually acceptable and interdependent future.

See Diagram 2 for a graphic representation.

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**DIAGRAM 2: WORKING DEFINITION OF RECONCILIATION**

This diagram reflects the emphasis on horizontal and vertical relationships and the forward- and backward-looking nature of reconciliation. For more discussion, see the Reconciliation in Focus briefing paper.

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2.1.1. The scope of reconciliation and how it features in mediation processes

It is important to recognise the broad scope of reconciliation and consider how different elements can be addressed in a peace process. Different activities will be possible or appropriate depending on the local context, the stage and type of conflict, and on what people in that context are willing to accept.

“Generally, there is a shying away from wanting to address the word or concept of reconciliation directly even though the whole process is going to be about it.”

Yet, in interviews, mediators and mediation support actors identified a range of reasons why reconciliation may not be addressed directly in mediation processes. Reconciliation may not register with mediators or negotiating parties as relevant to the mediation process. It may be considered outside the bounds of what can be achieved in a ‘hot’ conflict where negotiation is focused on striking a deal to end violence. In some talks it has been deprioritised due to a sense that there was already too much on the agenda. Alternatively, negotiators may believe it is antithetical to reaching the settlement they want, or that it deals with emotions and introduces moral judgements which they are concerned will undermine their positions. Negotiators may also deem constituents or society not ready to consider reconciliation.

Multiple understandings of reconciliation may coexist within a context at any given time. The term itself is often contentious: it can be interpreted in different ways or carry particular connotations or assumptions. For example, it may be regarded as culturally inappropriate or seen as a foreign imposition, particularly in former colonial contexts. In some settings it is associated with particular religions or notions of forgiveness; in others it can be seen as politically biased, something that promotes one party’s political interests more than another’s.

In each context it is therefore important to discuss what reconciliation means and to tailor the use of language accordingly. Many avoid using the term reconciliation altogether. Other terms are also sometimes used to describe processes that can contribute to reconciliation, particularly in relation to addressing a legacy of violence or oppression, such as transitional justice, transformative justice, or ‘dealing with the past’. These concepts have evolved over time and are often used alongside reconciliation in overlapping ways.

“The word itself may not be useful, but a successful mediation process needs to have elements of reconciliation built in.”

When reconciliation has been explicitly mentioned in mediation to date, this has often been in relation to retrospective activities that are seen as intrinsic to negotiating a political and military settlement and focused on justice and accountability, such as addressing war crimes. Yet, a broader scope includes forward-looking elements of reconciliation which may involve addressing questions of structural inequality and the need for economic and institutional reform, such as establishing democratic control over security forces or land reform. It may focus on a concrete activity, like opening a bridge to enable travel across divides; this can be more palatable for parties than articulating reconciliation as a desired outcome. It may involve the strengthening of mechanisms for handling conflict without violence in future, including enhancing mediation capacity and systems, including community-level mediation. It may also entail forging new narratives and creating space for multiple narratives to coexist, including those that imagine the future. Potential for integrating any of these elements into a process or agreement should be assessed. If the time is not right to do so, it is important to keep the door open – or at least not to close off opportunities – for reconciliation further down the line.

Therefore, careful context and conflict analysis is essential when considering what can or should be introduced into discussions and how that should be framed – including the choice of terminology. This involves identifying the

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4. Interview with mediation support practitioner on 30/11/21.
5. Interview with former negotiator on 01/12/21.
6. See Reconciliation in focus pp. 9–10 for key terminology, its uses and evolution.
7. Interview with mediator on 30/11/21.

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EXAMPLE 1

RECONCILIATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Nelson Mandela did not talk about reconciliation at the beginning of the process in South Africa for fear that African National Congress (ANC) supporters would see it as a concession. While reconciliation was always in the background, long dialogue, negotiation and constitution-building processes were necessary to prepare the way for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that would eventually address these matters directly.⁴
multiple different spaces and levels where reconciliation is being fostered, formally and informally, at a given time and thinking about how and whether to link to these. Being alive to this and understanding the agendas and interests of the range of peace support actors (internal and external), can help ensure that proposals for potential inclusion in agreements do not actively undermine initiatives in other spaces or by other actors.

Looking to the future is an important element of reconciliation, but reconciliation is not a linear process or an ‘end point’ to be dealt with later or that will automatically follow an agreement. Reconciliation may be linked to specific components of a negotiation process or agreement, or it may be intended as the overall outcome. There is no ideal point in time, level at which to work, or method for incorporating reconciliation into a mediation process that applies to all contexts. There is no ‘right’ formula or sequence of activities to follow. Because reconciliation is inherently political and has implications for the distribution of power, resources and opportunities, introducing it into substantive negotiations can be very sensitive and might fuel existing divisions. It is therefore crucial to understand the dynamics at play, anticipate challenges, or any tensions and resistance that may be triggered, and develop mitigating strategies.

2.1.2. The scope of mediation and its potential as a space for reconciliation

“Agreements are not set in stone. Modifications and adaptations are needed because societies are alive and evolving and the process of negotiating the social contract and managing conflict is ongoing.”

The mediation landscape has evolved since the 1990s. Political bargaining by elites supported by a high-level third-party mediator with the aim of reaching a comprehensive peace agreement remains relevant and needed in some contexts. Yet, nowadays multiple, sometimes overlapping, efforts and initiatives often take place at the same time and at different levels. These tend to involve a more diverse group of local and external actors who promote dialogue, mediate local-level agreements, and seek transformative and durable outcomes.

Current mediation practice arguably focuses less than before on comprehensive mediation processes and more on violence reduction, brokering ceasefires, and designing transitional periods. The political context for mediation has changed with the resurgence of geopolitical polarisation, proliferation of ‘proxy warfare’ and hybrid conflicts, erosion of multilateral systems and values and challenges to the rule of international law. New digital means to wage war (cyber conflict) and facilitate peace, including through online mediation, further complicate the conflict and mediation landscape. In this evolving environment, the international third-party mediator is but one actor among many in a process of assisted negotiation that draws on more diverse mediation (support) teams. As greater understanding of the role of mediation in building trust and relationships emerges, the need for ‘soft skills’ such as empathy, as well as qualities such as curiosity and foresight, is highlighted.

“Reconciliation is what I call trust-building in a process – not a neat justice arrangement once an agreement has been signed.”

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8. Interview with mediator on 30/11/21.
10. Interview with mediation support practitioner on 08/11/21.
12. Interview with mediation support practitioner on 16/11/21.
All peace processes are inherently forward-looking and have reconciliation at their core insofar as the aim is to find mutually acceptable solutions for living together peacefully in future. Beyond this, the mediation process itself provides spaces, formally and informally, for reconciliation. These can enable trust and relationship building between negotiating parties, the shifting of attitudes and reframing of narratives about the conflict – all of which can contribute to reconciliation. An external mediator or support team cannot engineer the development of trust and relationships, but can design the enabling environment for that to happen. This requires attention to both the substance of discussions and to the process, demonstrating sufficient trustworthiness and holding space for people to express difficult emotions and connect across divides. Mediators and support teams also need to be aware of how attitudes, understandings and positions of negotiating parties shift over time as they build connections across parties, in order to nurture and build on those processes where possible. They may be able to assist those directly involved in negotiations to manage the risk of alienation from their constituencies or broader society as relationships and positions evolve. Mediators and support teams can also contribute to careful information management around negotiations to help minimise misconceptions and avoid loss of trust in the process from those not directly involved.

2.2. LINKING FUTURES THINKING TO MEDIATION AND RECONCILIATION

2.2.1. Building on futures perspectives already present in peacebuilding practice

The future orientation of mediation and reconciliation processes is embedded in other component parts of peace processes, such as constitution building or institutional and legislative reform initiatives. These are all meant to lay the foundation for a future where past grievances have been or are being addressed, mechanisms exist to handle new issues arising, and vertical and horizontal relationships are more constructive.

But this future orientation can be limited in scope and fall short of its full potential. It is often implicit and intuitive; the future is not per se an agreed topic for consideration in a thorough, systematic way. When embarking on mediation, conflicting parties usually start with a concern to protect current or recent privileges (if they have been dominant) or to increase protection (if they are or have been vulnerable). They do not necessarily have an explicit vision of the future which they are working towards – other than a general intention to secure a future that represents as little loss or as much gain as possible. Fear of what the future might bring can also be a driver of the conflict and restrict the options that parties are willing to consider. Such incremental building on the present without consideration of possible futures is likely to embed past problems and current challenges in future arrangements.

“We have to address the past and find a way of thinking about the future together using the skill of imagination.”

This is where futures thinking has a role to play. It provides a way to look forward intentionally, question current assumptions and compare different possibilities.

EXAMPLE 3

NAVIGATING IMPASSE IN SOUTH AFRICA

In South Africa, the ANC’s sense that the government was keen to hold on to as much power as possible led to breakdown in the process. The chief negotiators on either side, who had built a close trusting personal relationship, were able to get the talks back on track by working behind the scenes with their teams to develop a vision that could work for everyone. In this way, the existing personal trust between individuals provided the basis on which working relations and eventually greater trust could be developed in the public process. \(^{13}\)

13. Interview with former negotiator on 01/12/21.

In this paper we use the following understanding of futures thinking.

### FUTURES THINKING

Analysing the future and relating that analysis to current planning processes happens in many fields, including industry and commerce, public services such as health and education, infrastructure and security. Interest has grown in applying this kind of analysis to conflict contexts and its potential benefits for peace processes.

There are many different approaches and no universally agreed terminology. Futures thinking, strategic foresight, futures methodologies, futures studies, visioning, and scenario planning are among the terms given to this practice, but are often overlapping or used interchangeably. Here, we use futures thinking as an umbrella term to refer to the field as a whole, encompassing the range of methods and techniques to which other terms refer. The typology set out in Section 3.1 aims to address this conceptual confusion by identifying core components that can contribute to an overall futures thinking process in conflict-affected contexts.

The plural term ‘futures’ recognises that it is not realistic to think that only one future is feasible, or that all possible futures can be foreseen. Futures thinking does not attempt to predict the future, nor does it claim that there is only one correct future or that the future is immutable. It argues that there is a range of possible futures, some more plausible than others, and that the future can be actively influenced by the decisions we take today. It is a creative and exploratory process that uses divergent thinking, acknowledges uncertainty, and lets go of the idea that there is only one possible answer.

Some futures thinking approaches help actors to understand the drivers of change and emerging issues that are shaping the future and, on that basis, test current positions and proposals. Others assist in articulating alternative images of the future, which can be used to develop a common vision of a desired future, and the design of robust policies and strategies for achieving it. The different approaches are complementary and can be used in combination.

Futures thinking is not about untested aspirations. Nor is it just about responding or adapting to what develops, which is common practice in the corporate sector. When used in conflict contexts, it involves the proactive identification of possible future developments – based on careful observation and analysis of the present and underlying patterns – that can create challenges and threats as well as opportunities. On this basis, parties can take steps to shape the elements of the future that they can influence, and to adapt to future developments beyond their control. For parties and groups in conflict situations, futures thinking enables them to imagine possibilities for a nonviolent future.

### 2.2.2. A futures thinking approach can help link reconciliation and mediation

Attention to the different timeframes of reconciliation (past, present and future) is needed to prevent the recurrence of conflict. The retrospective and prospective dimensions of reconciliation are not separate or mutually exclusive but interlinked. Acknowledging the past is an important precondition for enabling parties to move forward. Yet work focused on redressing past wrongs – specific human rights violations, and structural imbalances in power, resources and opportunities that may be underlying causes of conflict – is not only about looking backwards, but also about prevention. For example, criminal justice is important but is only one element of retrospective reconciliation; the needs of victims go beyond what criminal justice can deliver and often include their demand to be acknowledged and demands for structural change that relate to a long-term vision of the future which will prevent such wrongs happening again.

Work that raises the prospect of a shared future – whatever that may look like – and engages societies in discussion of options, is a key component of reconciliation and of mediation. More intentional application of futures thinking approaches in these processes in a conscious and purposeful way may help to open up new possibilities in relation to them individually and can also strengthen, or make more explicit, the links between them. Looking to the future in more structured ways also responds to the realities of peace process and reconciliation timeframes, which typically span years and generations.
3. THE APPLICATION OF FUTURES THINKING IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED Contexts

Futures thinking is already being used to some extent in reconciliation, mediation, conflict transformation and peacebuilding processes. In some cases approaches are being adapted from other disciplines where the use of futures thinking is more developed and established, such as the business world. Some peacebuilding practitioners use futures thinking without necessarily following a particular model or terminology, but such interventions are likely to be more useful if they are based on an awareness of the potential and variety of approaches that futures thinking offers. The typology below has been developed to help facilitate that understanding.

3.1. UNDERSTANDING FUTURES THINKING: A TYPOLOGY

There are various components or activities which can be part of a futures thinking strategy in peace processes. These can be assembled in different permutations depending on the goal of the exercise, rather like the way we use our mobile phones – downloading apps and updating or adding to them over time. Existing typologies of futures practice and the terminology used may be confusing for those unfamiliar with this domain. One and the same term is often used for different concepts, and different definitions exist for specific concepts. Sometimes a number of components are combined in a package and offered as a standardised process under the name of a specific component, which can also befuddle terminology and understanding.

Table 1 seeks to disentangle the components of futures thinking conceptually. It offers a typology which describes, distinguishes and names different components or activities and what they can contribute to an overall futures thinking process specifically in conflict-affected contexts. A shared understanding and language can potentially facilitate communication and the selection of appropriate activities for particular purposes in specific contexts. Examples in sections 3.2. and 3.3. show how different components have been combined in various configurations in practice. Longer examples are also provided in a supplement to this paper.

A note on ‘vision’ and ‘visioning’
The term ‘vision’ is often used in reference to the aspirations of one party which does not take into account the interests of other affected groups. ‘Vision’ then refers to a desired future. However, using the term in the typology is problematic as it is also used more loosely to refer to any imagining(s) of the future. It may also be unhelpful to distinguish ‘desired futures’ from other possible futures by giving it a separate name in this way, because it might imply that it should be given greater weight than any other scenario. When assessed in comparison to other possible futures, it is likely to lack broad based support across all the parties with a stake in the situation.

Diagram 3: A TYPOLOGY OF FUTURES THINKING COMPONENTS

1. The type of future to be constructed
   1.1 Route-mapping
      • Action/reaction
      • Critical juncture analysis
   1.2 Conceptualisations of what the future will be like
      • Scenarios
      • Forecasting

2. The process by which futures are constructed
   2.1 Horizon-scanning
   2.2 Projection
   2.3 Insights from relevant disciplines
   2.4 Joint analysis and creation

3. The way in which resulting futures are used and critically examined
   3.1 Comparison
   3.2 Testing assumptions
   3.3 Stress testing proposals
   3.4 Route planning
   3.5 Adaptive planning
   3.6 Outreach and dissemination

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**TABLE 1: A TYPOLOGY OF FUTURES THINKING COMPONENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. The <strong>type</strong> of future to be constructed</th>
<th>Ploting how the situation will change, starting with the present, considering how things will change and how actors are likely to react to the changes.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Route mapping</td>
<td>Starting from the present, describing likely next (re)actions of parties with a stake in conflict and extrapolating forward; may also entail identifying other relevant developments and how parties will react to them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Action/reaction</td>
<td>Analysing what is likely to happen at/around set points in the future (e.g. election, referendum) and how a peace process might be disrupted or otherwise affected by future changes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Conceptualisations of the future</td>
<td>Conceptualising what the future will be like, jumping forward from the present and envisaging what the future may be like or what possible futures could exist in a context.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**All entries bolded as they are in table format**

**Scenarios**
Sets out to create pictures of possible futures, based on the premise: ‘what would happen if...?’

Involves developing a set of internally consistent and plausible stories about possible futures, i.e. how the future may play out in different ways in relation to key uncertainties. Scenarios or ‘exploratory futures’ may be organised around various bases for future relations. Participants may consider how each scenario may come about, obstacles, consequences, threats and possible mitigation.

This does not entail assessing scenarios on desirability, feasibility, or suitability in terms of individual, community, or environmental wellbeing, which happens at a later stage (see 3 below).

**Forecasting**
Creating a picture, or pictures, of what will happen in the future based on possible developments in the wider context in which conflicting parties are situated, considering trends and patterns in demographics, science, technology, economics, global relations, etc.

Commonly used in business to identify opportunities and threats in relation to advancing a certain goal but it is equally relevant to mediation and reconciliation and can help to identify feasible goals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2. The <strong>process</strong> by which futures are constructed</th>
<th>Various techniques and sources of information are available to construct or understand a possible future.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Horizon-scanning</td>
<td>Looking ahead to identify signs of possible new developments. And by nature speculative. Often starts with determining what is likely to have a future impact (e.g. technological advances), then entails exploring the latest thinking on developments in that field. Possible to scan for the short, medium or long term. The term ‘scanning’ is often used loosely for multiple futures thinking techniques, but relates well to this kind of activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Projection</td>
<td>Identifying present or emerging trends (e.g. demographic changes, climate change) and projecting them into the future, then integrating changes surmised into the picture or story of a possible future. Shifts considered are usually wider regional and global changes beyond the control of those affected, but likely to affect them and/or conflict/peace processes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 2.3 Insights from relevant disciplines

Predicting future behaviour using insights from various disciplines such as natural sciences, information technology, psychology, economics, conflict theory, sociology, international relations.

Insights can be accessed from literature review and/or briefings with experts in those fields.

### 2.4 Joint analysis and creation

Involving as wide as possible a range of people in a safe environment to generate well-informed, challenging and non-partisan depictions of possible futures that stretch people’s understandings of present realities and future possibilities.

Recognises the inherently speculative and subjective nature of all techniques summarised above and the importance of including multiple insights that challenge assumptions.

### 3. The way in which resulting futures are used and critically examined

Implicit assumptions about the future, or notions of desired futures, are likely to influence positioning and problem-solving by conflicting parties in their current context, but are seldom explicitly articulated. The process of articulating, constructing, and critiquing futures narratives can be not only transformative for those involved but also a means of articulating and testing different options for the future more widely.

#### 3.1 Comparison

Constructing more than one future, which allows a range of futures to be compared and evaluated for how far they meet the needs and aspirations of concerned parties in a peace process, and how likely they are to be realised.

When only one future is explored, parties are more likely to act confrontationally and resist critical examination of their stance, replicating the current impasse.

#### 3.2 Testing assumptions

Identifying assumptions on which possible futures are based and testing them against known data, existing trends and alternative assumptions which may be more robust.

Helps assess how justified and sound the assumptions are in supporting the understanding of the future that relies on them.

#### 3.3 Stress-testing proposals

Testing proposals for peace settlements against possible future scenarios in the same way that proposals are already tested against factors such as resources availability, and economic and security implications.

Future proofing (elements of) settlements involves not only material costs and benefits, but also political, emotional and existential costs and benefits for parties.

#### 3.4 Route planning

Working together to identify incremental steps from the present to an agreed future or working back from the agreed or desired future to the present (backcasting).

Responds to the fact that parties in conflict often resist change because they see risk – it is easier to see problems to (potential) solutions rather than solutions to problems. For example, progress may require fear and hostility to be replaced by trust and openness, or investment of resources that are not currently available.

#### 3.5 Adaptive planning

Identifying challenges ahead – obstacles in the way of a desired future, or the likelihood that an undesirable future will result from current strategies – is part of futures thinking. Developing adaptive strategies to help avoid or mitigate the undesirable and facilitate progress towards the desirable, ideally allowing former enemies to support each other to take adaptive steps that are seen to be in the interest of all parties.

#### 3.6 Outreach and dissemination

Sharing ideas and insights from futures thinking processes with relevant stakeholders who were not involved, and with wider society, allowing them to critically assess the proposed futures.

Outputs from futures thinking can provide additional perspectives to help illuminate dynamics underlying inter-party hostility, and prompt strategic reflection on choices to be made. Approaches to outreach and dissemination will depend on the stage of the conflict cycle, and where the futures thinking process fits in the reconciliation and mediation architecture.
3.2. POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF USING FUTURES THINKING IN MEDIATION AND RECONCILIATION PROCESSES

“By using emerging issues to develop scenarios, futures studies can help uncover uncertainties, fears, and hopes – the future is questioned. This can lead to innovative solutions and resilient policies – because we see problems and opportunities earlier.”  

When parties are at an impasse it can be helpful to reframe the conflict and look at it from different angles. Introducing a futures perspective is one way to do that. ‘When you change the context, you change the problem’, as Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of the European Union, is reputed to have said. Considering alternative futures, and their possible positive and negative impacts, can help to move conflicting parties towards engagement with each other. The parties can consider current positions and trajectories and develop strategies for pursuing their goals and averting undesirable outcomes. Ideally, this will involve negotiating new structures and systems that provide pathways to a future that is sustainable and acceptable to all parties and that has the capacity to avert undesirable futures.

EXAMPLE 4

THE ‘MONT FLEUR’ INITIATIVE IN SOUTH AFRICA: MAPPING AND ASSESSING FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

The ‘Mont Fleur’ initiative was a futures thinking process in 1991-1992 that brought together a cross-section of South African society – current and potential leaders from across the social, political and economic spectrum – to jointly create a set of exploratory (sometimes called descriptive) scenarios of how the county might develop in the future under the existing system or an alternative. The group generated four possible futures which were then widely publicised to help the whole society, including political leaders, to consider the country’s challenges and identify how the future could be shaped, and to support the transition. The process drew on experiences with scenario planning within Shell, the oil company, and was facilitated by Adam Kahane, then head of social, political, economic and technological scenarios at Shell. He later reflected: ‘It was clear to me that the exercise had contributed to creating change in South Africa, but it was not clear to me whether or how this way of working could be used in other contexts.’

Together with others, he refined the approach, which has become known as transformative scenario planning or transformative scenarios process (TSP), through experience in other sectors, countries and situations around the world. TSP has been used in contexts experiencing or affected by violent conflict such as Ethiopia, Colombia, Guatemala, Thailand and has also been used in contexts not experiencing direct violence, but where the issue at stake is contentious and social systems are polarised and at an impasse (e.g. equity in the United States health system, democracy in Latin America, the drugs problem in the Americas).

By enabling dialogue and collaboration about what can happen, rather than on an end goal of what should or will happen, the TSP methodology can help seemingly intractable situations and dynamics to become ‘unstuck’. It does not require those involved to agree on the issues that divide them or on one specific future. As one practitioner has observed:

‘A TSP is a low-threshold, high-ceiling process. It is easy to step into. Once you’re there, lots of things can happen and are likely to happen – and are more likely to happen because they’re not demanded of you. Everybody is interested in the future and nobody has privileged information about it. In many TSP processes, people got bogged down in description of the present or the past, but not in the futures stories. The future is an uncontested space that people find interesting and pretty low risk.’

TSP may be particularly relevant to settings of considerable complexity, polarisation and disagreement, where trust is low, stakes are high, and positions entrenched. Developing scenarios also encourages people to think in-depth through possible futures – which may result in some potential futures evaporating if they cannot withstand the rigorous scrutiny resulting from the requirement that the scenarios must be plausible. This can in turn prompt actors to recalibrate their positions and strategies and make different choices.

For more information on the TSP method and examples of its application in South Africa and Colombia, see the TSP Supplement to this paper.

16. Interview with futures thinking practitioner on 13/01/22
Even when this is not achievable, a futures thinking process can change the tone of the discourse from defensive and combative to more open, curious, and (self-)reflective modes. Parties may gain greater understanding of each other’s concerns and aspirations and develop mutual respect.

Workshop discussions and interviews with futures thinking practitioners and with peacebuilders who have used futures thinking approaches identified a number of ways in which futures thinking can contribute fresh perspectives and facilitate more fruitful possibilities for discussions and reaching shared understanding and agreement. The benefits discussed here are not exclusive to futures thinking but are not always evident in other types of peacebuilding and conflict transformation work.

**Futures thinking can facilitate movement when a situation is at an impasse and engage otherwise reluctant or excluded actors.** A process that is not focused on reaching agreement or a specific outcome does not directly challenge existing positions and therefore 'lowers the bar' for people to step into dialogue with one another. Participants may feel more ready to use their imagination, leave their comfort zones and hear and consider different perspectives. Where a longer time frame is used and/or wider trends are considered (e.g. economic, environmental, scientific) the focus is directed away from contentious issues in the present. This can enable engagement between adversaries normally reluctant to sit together and/or collaborate.

**A futures thinking process can challenge assumptions and complacencies and bring home hard political realities to political elites dealing with shorter horizons.** Focusing on visions of possible futures, rather than desired ones or ones directly linked to positions on the conflict, can broaden participants’ perspectives. A futures thinking process can show stakeholders what a future might look like if they do not resolve the conflict and encourage them to address fears they may have been avoiding. For example the Mont Fleur initiative in South Africa included one scenario titled 'Ostrich', in which a negotiated settlement to the crisis in South Africa would not be achieved, and the country’s government would continue to be non-representative. It was helpful in showing the implications of how the future of the country might unfold in case the then government were to ‘remain stuck in the past’ and ‘not wanting to face realities.’

### Example 5

**FUTURES FOR DIALOGUE IN THE CONTEXT OF HONG KONG’S PROTESTS**

In January 2020, a futures practitioner in collaboration with citizens dialogue platform ‘Let’s Talk Hong Kong’, brought together a diverse group of 16 participants to consider different possible scenarios for the future of Hong Kong. Participants shared an interest in finding a path forward through the ongoing social unrest. The objectives of this process included identifying a range of potential opportunities for constructive action. One important outcome was the recognition that Hong Kongers can work together in the present to shape their own future.

Through the application of a futures approach, participants found the scenario of ongoing protests could lead to unwanted outcomes, such as increasing military presence and martial law, escalating violence, curtailed freedoms, economic crisis, and mental health impacts. Strategic analysis within alternative scenarios thus exposed how a particular strategy does not serve its proponents’ aspirations. The case also illustrates how asking people to consider scenarios they find implausible can help reframe perspectives. Participants were reluctant to consider the scenario they considered least likely: rising acceptance in Hong Kong of the role of Beijing. However, when prompted, they were able to identify potential for constructive action within severe constraints. For instance, they speculated that rising acceptance of Beijing might lead to more opportunity for universities and businesses in Hong Kong. This recognition exposed and challenged their initial assumption that a greater role for Beijing would lead to more restricted conditions for Hong Kong.

For more details on this case see the Examples Supplement to this paper.

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17. Interview with mediator/facilitator of reconciliation processes on 17/11/21.
18. Interview with futures thinking practitioner on 19/11/21.
19. Interview with peace practitioner with futures thinking experience on 17/11/21.
23. Interview with peace practitioner on 20/12/21 and
Futures thinking can surface taboos, and enable difficult conversations to take place, without focusing directly on core conflict issues or drivers. Asking people to consider different – even seemingly far-fetched – scenarios can surface taboo topics and create space to reflect on plausibility, which in turn may affect parties’ positions and strategies. When participants are forced to confront practicalities, fears and difficult truths, a different conversation about reconciliation may be enabled – including, but not limited to, retrospective aspects that deal with the past.

“Compared to other multi-stakeholder dialogue, scenario building enables people to identify threats in the future and allow joint thinking and approaches.”

Futures thinking can help make connections across levels. Working on futures thinking involves bringing together participants with varying amounts of power, who represent different interest groups and allows for exchange across different levels of the conflict system. Ideally, ‘radical diversity’ of participation including gender, ethnicity, social status, generation and ideology allows for a whole-system perspective. Broad participation can ultimately lead both to structural change (policy shifts) and to an improved social contract (in relation to vertical relationships, as well as horizontal).

Futures thinking can help make sense of complexity and encourage adaptive strategies and planning. For example, methods such as route mapping focusing on a particular upcoming event or critical juncture are useful for preparing responses to a range of potential scenarios.

Introducing possible scenarios into discussions in society, or simply communicating more widely about the fact that a futures thinking process has taken place, can generate a sense that different futures are possible. Other benefits of futures thinking common to other forms of dialogue include:

• Improving relationships by engaging participants from diverse backgrounds.
• Equipping people with skills – including learning to navigate diversity and agreement, discord and connection.
• Generating ideas for concrete actions to take to influence leaders and societies.

EXAMPLE 6
DIVERSE PARTICIPATION IN A TRANSFORMATIONAL SCENARIOS PLANNING PROCESS IN COLOMBIA

The Destino Colombia project unfolded at a time of great division and conflict in Colombia, from 1996 to 1999. It was initiated by businessman Manual José Carvajal and Juan Manuel Santos, a politician and former journalist who had read about the Mont Fleur process. An initial meeting to test the idea involved high-level politicians and military officials, religious leaders, prominent business people, academics, and some guerrillas; Kahane was invited to present on the Mont Fleur experience. Based on the interest expressed, the project went ahead with a first phase of convening and scenario construction.

Santos, who later became President of Colombia, realised that, as a politician, he was too partisan to be able to convene such a process and stepped back in favour of a broader, more neutral, organising committee of six. They were to assemble a group of people that reflected the whole conflicted society, legitimate players with plausible commitments to Colombia’s future who were not considered too criminal or corrupt by the convenors. A scenario team of 43 individuals was established, including guerrillas and paramilitaries, academics, activists, peasants, politicians, trade unionists, young people, journalists, military officers, and business people. Significantly, the two illegal, armed, left-wing guerrilla groups – the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the ELN (National Liberation Army) – also took part in the process, with four guerrillas participating by phone from prison, exile or the mountains.

While the Mont Fleur process had taken place in a context and at a time where countless multi-stakeholder forums were happening, the Destino Colombia workshops were ‘perhaps the only place where the full range of Colombian stakeholders met to discuss seriously and openly what was happening, might happen and should happen in their country’. This was a powerful feature of the project with a message for Colombian society at large, although the exclusion of some powerful actors limited the immediate impact of the process as discussed in Example 9.

For more details on this process see the TSP Supplement to this paper.

25. Interview with futures thinking practitioner on 15/11/21.
26. Workshop participant in group discussion, 15/12/21.
27. Interview with peacebuilding practitioner 04/03/21.
30. Workshop participant in group discussion, 15/12/21.
3.3. CHALLENGES OF APPLYING FUTURES THINKING IN MEDIATION AND RECONCILIATION PROCESSES

“Conflict offers an opportunity for change and growth, but our relationship to the future and the fear we have constrict us.”32

There are specific dimensions to conflict situations that make the systematic application of futures thinking more sensitive than in areas such as economic development. These are set out in Section 3.3.1. Challenges and limitations of futures thinking in mediation and reconciliation processes are summarised in Section 3.3.2.

3.3.1. Features of conflict-affected contexts to take into account

Fixed positions, conflicting goals and fear of considering other options. Parties to conflict may perceive futures thinking to be a risk and be reluctant to engage in it. Many of those locked in conflict and broken relationships have underlying concerns, rather than hope about the future. This colours people’s attitudes to, and relationship with, other parties to a conflict. Consciously or unconsciously, they tend to discount options for the future which are not aligned with their interests as they currently perceive them. They avoid addressing future threats, which in turn limits their openness to alternative futures which might deal with those threats.

Stagnation or impasse in discourse between parties. Conflict narrows the opportunities for changing the discourse between parties. Not only do they seldom have a shared goal or vision of the future, but parties are prone to finding such a possibility dangerous and undermining their current positions – the conflict is in large part a conflict of goals. For example, parties may use a political aspiration such as secession as an identifier for their group, while their opponents may identify with a diametrically opposite aspiration – and these respective aspirations are (often) mutually exclusive. It can also be difficult to look beyond past hurt and grievance. In the context of contested past and present, and incompatible aspirations for the future, reconciliation entails a process of reaching an understanding of a possible future that is mutually acceptable. That might only be grudging acceptance and it might be for an interim period; it is up to the parties to determine whether that is an acceptable basis to start building for future relations.

EXAMPLE 7

BOUGAINVILLE REFERENDUM SCENARIO ANALYSIS

In May 2017 Conciliation Resources facilitated a three-day scenario analysis workshop with 12 staff members of the Autonomous Bougainville Government’s Department of Peace Agreement Implementation (DPAI). The workshop developed and analysed ‘what could go wrong?’ scenarios related to violence, political instability and failure to find a political status solution around (before, during and after) Bougainville’s referendum on political status. The jointly initiated process was regarded as an opportunity to bring the new DPAI team together around this analysis and support the department’s work.

The methodology was tailored to context and went beyond developing scenarios to identify indicators for instability or violence as the basis for response strategies and planning. The process started with a present-day analysis focused on the context, attitude and behaviour of a number of actor groups. This was done from the perspective of key groups in society, i.e. not based on assumptions about these groups from the participants’ perspective. This was followed by identification of emerging trends (i.e. what those groups are likely to do in future) as the basis for scenario development. Thirty-one scenarios of concern were identified focused on potential future actions (and inactions) by multiple groups, including Bougainvillian ex-combatants, the Papua New Guinea (PNG) national government, and the international community. Six of these scenarios were prioritised based on the level of likelihood of occurring and potential impact if they did. Early warning and response analysis was conducted on these scenarios. This included a mapping exercise of available tools [skills, processes and relationships] to support responses. The analysis indicated areas that needed attention and served as a tool to signpost actors that needed to be engaged with and issues to work on. The scenario analysis exercise ultimately contributed, in a small way, to a peaceful referendum process in 2019 insofar as it supported the DPAI’s planning and strategy development processes.

For more details on this case see the Examples Supplement to this paper.

32. Julia Roig speaking at the launch of the Moving Beyond Multi-track Diplomacy and Big Man Mediation eBook, Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, Cambodia, 14 March 2022.
Defensive positioning and lack of trust. It is also in the nature of conflict that there is an absence of trust between the parties. In their interactions they are usually reluctant to allow any topic for discussion that may introduce unexpected ideas that may threaten their negotiating position. But futures thinking requires speculation, including ‘thinking the unthinkable’. This points to a paradox: to be able to move away from dysfunctional relations requires the willingness to test existing preconceptions and compare current experience with alternative foundations for more sustainable relationships. It effectively entails stepping into the unknown.

Thinking about the future reveals realities and insights that are often uncomfortable because they challenge the basis of current assumptions and positions. For example, it may show demographic trends indicating that the current majority in a territory may in future be in the minority. While such information could be a crucial factor in developing sustainable long-term relationships on a basis of mutual respect, this might be an uncomfortable assessment for those affected. It is therefore not surprising they may prefer to avoid processes that draw attention to such possibilities. Futures thinking provides space to identify and consider such challenges with some detachment, as the (longer) time horizon creates more distance. It reduces the immediacy of the problem and lessens the threat perception. Nonetheless, if it is not handled with sensitivity, parties may resist the introduction of futures thinking and reject its insights. The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict discussed in Example 8 exemplifies many of these features of conflict-affected contexts, as well as the barriers, challenges and limitations discussed in Section 3.3.2, including power dynamics in asymmetric conflicts.

3.3.2. Barriers, challenges and limitations of applying futures thinking in mediation and reconciliation processes

Potential barriers and challenges to engaging in a futures thinking process in a conflict-affected context are discussed below. Many of these barriers and challenges are common to any approach used in peacebuilding and conflict transformation. Some suggestions to help overcome them are provided drawing on practice, including futures thinking methods which can provide an alternative to other approaches. More general challenges in successfully implementing a futures thinking process, regardless of context, as well as limitations in terms of impact, are also identified. The list is not exhaustive.

A. Barriers to engaging in a futures thinking process

Getting the ‘right’ people to participate is key but will be different for every process depending on the context and purpose. In some cases, despite concerted efforts – sometimes over years or even decades – it has not been possible to get a process off the ground, or it has been less inclusive than desired because one or more actors considered essential to the process will not engage. Potential participants may resist for different reasons, and there are various potential barriers or limitations:

Fears and/or power imbalances

- Parties fear letting go of long-held beliefs, positions or goals. Parties may prefer to stay in an untenable position rather than brave the unknown and contemplate one or more possible future[s] different from the current preferred vision. They may be reluctant to engage in a futures thinking process that could expose how unsustainable their situation is upon close examination – or how implausible their desired future may be. For them the present is uncomfortable, but bearable.

- Power dynamics, particularly in highly asymmetric conflicts, can pose challenges. A futures thinking process requires some humility and imagination, particularly on the part of the most powerful party. In secessionist conflicts, the notion of a shared future within the borders of one state or country threatens one party while the notion of a separate one (through secession or partition) threatens the other. Weaker parties may be more inclined to look for allies but still with great suspicion, testing for what benefit they will get. More dominant parties may be even more reluctant to engage with new people, including peacebuilders and future thinkers.

- Discussing options in an authoritarian or closed space has limitations. There is a risk of inadvertently legitimising political agendas that perpetuate or fuel power imbalances, or of contributing to co-optation of less powerful actors.

Ways to address these challenges include:

- Using methods that focus on analysis of broader trends and not on the conflict and potential related outcomes;
- Framing a futures exercise in a way that addresses political issues sensitively or obliquely;
- Focusing on a relatively uncontroversial topic of mutual interest; bringing people together in an external context with fewer or no security constraints.

33. Interview with TSP facilitator on 13/01/22.
34. Interview with futures thinking practitioner on 17/11/21.
35. Participant in Reos Partners workshop, November 2021.
36. Interview with peace practitioner on 30/11/21.
EXAMPLE 8
INTEGRATING FUTURES THINKING INTO INFORMAL DIALOGUE IN A SECESSIONIST CONFLICT

Competing claims about the status of Abkhazia that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union led to war in 1992-1993 and the de facto secession of Abkhazia from Georgia. Contact across the conflict divide has been limited since, and the peace process has yielded few results to date.

The Schlaining Process was a series of 20 informal facilitated dialogue workshops that ran alongside formal bilateral Georgian-Abkhaz negotiations mediated by the UN, from 2000-2007. The meetings included Georgian and Abkhaz participants from a range of backgrounds and levels: politicians, officials, civil society actors, and some who were also engaged in the formal negotiations. A key aim of the Schlaining Process dialogue was to create a safe space in which participants could reframe the conflict to reveal opportunities for addressing areas of disagreement and explore ways to find more cooperative approaches to shared problems.

Futures thinking was integrated within, and tailored to, the ongoing Schlaining Process dialogue. In one early dialogue meeting, participants worked in separate Georgian and Abkhaz groups to create a ten-year development plan addressing the key challenges for their respective political communities and systems. The objective was to broaden the basis for a substantive dialogue beyond a focus on the conflict. Participants were encouraged to think strategically by creating an integrated programme and to see the exercise as a speculative and imaginative process. The task was not only to think about a development plan for their own society, but to also consider whether (or not) these would help them achieve their goals with respect to the other side. While there appeared very little scope for movement between the parties in the short term, the long-term possibilities for mitigation seemed more positive. The separate plans focused on issues such as the development of democracy and effective and equitable governance mechanisms in the respective societies.

Participants went on to consider whether alternative negotiation strategies would be more productive for achieving their long-term goals. They were asked to identify their preferred outcome and what they considered to be an undesirable outcome at the end of a ten-year period. They also discussed what they considered to be the most likely outcomes and explored the steps that could be taken to help achieve their goals. This session led to a frank exchange about the point at which, for each party, the lack of a negotiated settlement might begin to be more damaging than a negotiated settlement that did not maximise their objectives.

Two years later, another exercise involved speculative discussion of the future. During this workshop, again in separate groups, participants discussed the conditions under which Georgia could accept Abkhazia’s independence and the conditions under which Abkhazia could accept being part of Georgia. This was a sensitive issue to raise, and it generated heated debate and a degree of discomfort among some participants, who worried that the brainstorming might imply a readiness for change beyond that which was feasible. The speculative discussion did shift the dynamic of the meeting, though. It allowed for an imaginative, forward-thinking exploration of what participants wanted their societies to look like in future and what they could expect of themselves and their opponents in creating this, or not obstructing it.

Those involved in future-oriented sessions felt they deepened the dialogue and relationships between participants; having a serious and respectful conversation about what one or other party’s future aspirations entailed, even though these were just scenarios, contributed to mutual understanding and respect, and to interrogating their own assumptions and core aspirations. Importantly, a futures thinking approach allowed the unmentionable to be mentioned and accepted as a valid point of view, even if it was challenged vigorously.

For more details on this process see the Examples Supplement to this paper.

See also Example 11 on the challenges of reaching out beyond the dialogue.
Elite/leadership level barriers

- Elites (political, military, social, economic, religious, etc.) may have an interest in maintaining the status quo. This is especially true for political leaders working with short time frames: they may resist rethinking the future or opening up new possibilities for fear they do not favour their own interests. It is possible that some may engage with, but seek to spoil, a futures thinking process.

- Leaders want to control the peace/conflict agenda. Some may be concerned to maintain their own influence and power. Others may distrust and resist the emergence of any dialogue or process counter to the one they believe can solve the conflict, particularly a structured set of steps that may take them where they do not want to go. They may also fear that their constituents might interpret options that potentially challenge the traditional “party line” as compromise or selling out.

- Leaders and other key stakeholders may be overwhelmed. Potential participants may not have the mental space, physical presence or ability to engage in a futures thinking process if they are dealing with an immediate crisis and struggling to survive.

Ways to address these challenges include:

- Explaining to elites how a futures thinking process is a reputable and helpful way to review how their interests will be impacted by future trends;
- Identifying potential spoilers at the convening stage and assessing potential for their genuine engagement;
- Engaging elites at regional level within the country where national elites are resistant; beginning with a futures thinking process within the leadership of a ‘single party’ before widening it to other constituents;
- Convening a group comprised not of political and military elites but participants who can influence the leadership; in a ‘hot’ conflict, focusing on an issue of shared interest across parties, e.g. food security.

Personal and societal resistance

- Individual or collective trauma in the present can be a barrier to potential participants being able to contemplate the future.

Cultural and religious factors can also play a role. For example, a sense of fatalism may pervade where people believe the future is preordained, which discourages engagement with scenarios of alternative futures or may lead people to believe they have no agency in how the future unfolds.

Ways to address these challenges include:

- Initiatives to address trauma before a futures thinking process;
- Equipping facilitators to manage situations where trauma is surfaced – intentionally or not – during a process;
- Paying attention to how a discussion is framed and to how processes are conducted in ways that are culturally appropriate.

B. Challenges in implementing a futures thinking process

- There are risks in excluding key actors. It is a complex challenge to define who should be involved in a futures thinking process. Where external/geopolitical actors exert real influence, not factoring them in may limit the effectiveness of the process, yet their inclusion may be highly contentious or contested by actors internal to the conflict setting and/or other powerful external actors. Proscription (by national or international actors) can mean non-state armed groups are excluded. They may also choose to self-exclude.

- Large-scale futures thinking processes take time and resourcing – to sell the idea, get participants in the room, build relationships and engage in a meaningful process. Commitment from participants with busy schedules and competing priorities over a sustained period can be a challenge. Adequate human and financial resourcing is essential, but can be difficult to secure.

- Precautions to keep people safe are paramount. Making wider society aware that possible futures are being explored can have a positive impact, but in some situations it may be necessary to protect participants’ identities. In some cases, it has been possible to proceed even where informers were known to be present: participants were able to demonstrate the process was not threatening or subversive. In situations of high insecurity and instability it may not be possible to ensure safety, meaning a process cannot go ahead or is curtailed.

37. Participant in workshop on 15/12/21.
40. Participant in Reos Partners workshop, November 2021.
41. Participant in Reos Partners workshop, November 2021.
42. Interview with mediator/facilitator of reconciliation processes on 17/11/21.
43. Interview with mediator/facilitator of reconciliation processes on 17/11/21.
44. Interview with mediator/facilitator of reconciliation processes on 17/11/21.
EXAMPLE 9
IMPACT OF EXCLUDING KEY ACTORS IN COLOMBIA

The power, quality and legitimacy of a TSP process and the resulting scenarios depends on the composition of the group of individuals that take part. If the group is insufficiently diverse, the scenarios created are easily dismissed by others in or outside the context as representing a biased view and not credible as a means to generate dialogue and inform strategic decision-making. This limits the scenarios’ reach and relevance for mediation and reconciliation.

The Destino Colombia case illustrates the pitfalls of excluding influential actors from a process. The results from the project were ignored by the government at the time, headed by then President Samper. Members of his administration had not been invited to participate as his election campaign was thought to have been financed in part by drug traffickers who had been excluded too. Carvajal, one of the initiators of the process, later said he thought that this attempt to be ‘aseptic’ had been counterproductive, as the Colombian government did not engage with the scenario team’s work until after the end of Samper’s term. However Santos, on becoming president in 2010, referred to the scenarios and the remarkable collaboration across divides. He also cited Destino Colombia upon being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016, noting that it was this process that had made him see that peace was possible and realisable through negotiations.

For more details on this process see the TSP Supplement to this paper.

EXAMPLE 10
ADDRESSING SAFETY CONCERNS IN COLOMBIA

Key challenges at the start of the Destino Colombia process, related to safety and fear. The guerrillas had been offered safe passage to the workshops by the government but thought this too risky – hence they decided to participate by phone. Meanwhile, many other participants were initially terrified of engaging with the guerrillas, and feared retribution for what they may say. After the facilitator raised this fear with the guerrillas, they promised not to kill anyone for anything said in the meetings. The group’s decision to set ground rules to improve the quality of the conversation also helped to mitigate safety concerns. For example, they agreed to be straightforward in expressing differences of opinion; to assume good faith of others; to be disciplined and punctual; to be willing to learn; to respect others’ right to speak; and to exercise tolerance and confidentiality.

For more details on this process see the TSP Supplement to this paper.

• The shift to online or hybrid processes also means having to adapt for scenarios and other processes that require sustained collaborative work, particularly in terms of group ownership and relationship development.

Ways to address these challenges include:

- Considering whether and how to factor groups not participating in the process into the substance of discussions, e.g. including them in scenarios development or subsequent outreach and dialogue initiatives;
- Designing a process that is manageable in terms of time commitment and provides a conducive and dedicated space that encourages full engagement when present, which helps to address commitment challenges;
- Safety measures include carefully choosing and protecting the location of venues (for example, meeting abroad in a neutral third-party location), restricting what documentation is shared electronically, and ensuring the content of discussions is not shared publicly unless agreed by all participants.

46. See Bojer Transformative scenarios process pp. 4–5, and Kahane Transformative scenarios planning.
47. Kahane ‘New stories can generate new realities’ p. 3.
49. Interview with TSP facilitator on 19/11/21.
C. Limitations to the impact of futures thinking processes

- **A process may not engage other stakeholders in the wider society.** Futures thinking processes do not automatically or directly drive action or impact in societies. Dissemination and follow-up activities are therefore important, assuming lessons learned from the process are not confidential and there is agreement that outcomes can be shared.

- **A process may not achieve its goals or disappoint some stakeholders.** Hopes may be dashed, wasting time, energy and resources that could have been used elsewhere. It is important not to raise unrealistic expectations. Efforts must be made to understand that conditions are conducive and goals clear, realistic and transparent. Contingency plans also need to be developed in case of changes in the environment as well as potential problems related to the process itself.

- **A process may be overtaken by political or other developments or events.** Rapid changes in the (conflict or external) environment may mean that a process is interrupted or that scenarios become obsolete soon after their construction. Even so, investment in relationships will not necessarily be wasted (although some may be broken) and other indirect impacts may continue. For example in the Hong Kong case explored in Example 5, the plan for building on a pilot workshop to create safe and trusting spaces for similar dialogues was hindered by a new national security law enacted by China, which imposed restrictions and penalties on channels for civic engagement. Even so, the relationships and capacity to think about the future gained by the participants will not have been lost and hold potential for the future. For more on this process see the Examples Supplement to this paper.

**WAYS TO ADDRESS THESE CHALLENGES INCLUDE:**

- Understanding the context to ensure enabling factors are in place;
- Setting clear goals for the process, including in terms of extent and modes of dissemination;
- Being prepared to adapt where necessary; recognising that outcomes from a futures thinking process are both tangible and intangible.

**EXAMPLE 11**

**CONFIDENTIALITY VERSUS OUTREACH IN THE SCHLAINING PROCESS**

The Schlaining process described in Example 8 was held under the Chatham House Rule, making it a challenge to reach out beyond the dialogue process. Usually a short press release after each meeting was the only public communication about the dialogue. There was often an imbalance, with some participants wanting to communicate more publicly about the discussions and others being more cautious.

Being thoughtful and selective about what and how to communicate about the dialogue was important in creating a safe space for speculative and creative thinking during the meetings. Fears that sharing ideas from the speculative futures exercises in the public arena would be misinterpreted or undermine the dialogue meant only limited numbers were exposed to the process and the ideas it generated. Mutual understanding and relationships were strengthened among participants, but this did not translate into mutual understanding among wider constituencies.

The ideas were, however, fed into thinking beyond the process and contributed to outputs such as the Abkhaz ‘Key to the Future’ and the Georgian ‘Road Map’ developed by political actors on either side, some of whom participated in the Schlaining workshops.

For more details on this process see the Examples Supplement to this paper.

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50. Participant in workshop on 15/12/21.
3.4. RELATING FUTURES THINKING TO THE CONFLICT CYCLE: WHEN IS IT USEFUL AND FEASIBLE?

This section considers the relationship between futures thinking and conflict dynamics in two ways. Futures thinking is related to stages of conflict. It is also related to the possible evolution in parties’ thinking and positions, where they move from self-interested problem-solving to a shared vision of the future.

3.4.1. Futures thinking linked to conflict stages

Emergence of tensions and hostilities: People working on conflict transformation and peacebuilding need to be alert to future possibilities even before disputes and conflict emerge. Projecting into the future, it is possible to foresee that current issues, such as resource shortages or inequality, will become serious sources of conflict if they are not addressed. Both early warning of future threats of conflict and approaches to conflict prevention have received serious attention in conflict studies and to a more limited extent in policy circles.\textsuperscript{51}

Experience to date does, however, identify a problem: political leaders and international agencies are often reluctant to use financial and political capital to address concerns that may never happen. Political will is a key requirement for early warning to translate into early action. Methodologies from futures thinking practice may help to meet this challenge. Engaging key stakeholders in analysing possible futures can be a way of building the political will to avoid undesirable futures as explored in Example 12.

Polarised intransigence: At this stage, when positions are very entrenched and parties are heading ‘together into the abyss’,\textsuperscript{52} rethinking often happens separately in one party, as can be seen in the Irish Republican Movement [see Example 13] and the National Party in South Africa [see Example 17]. In addition, intermediaries can introduce futures thinking as a way to surface the limitations of current militancy or stubbornly held positions when attempting to open up channels between parties and move towards multi-party dialogue.

DIAGRAM 4: FUTURES THINKING IN THE CONFLICT CYCLE

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\textsuperscript{51} See, for example, the United Nations and World Bank 2018 report which argues for a shift away from responding to and managing crises and toward preventing conflict sustainably, inclusively and collectively: \textit{Pathways for peace: Inclusive approaches to preventing violent conflict}. Washington DC: World Bank.

\textsuperscript{52} The phrase ‘together into the abyss’ stems from Glasl, Friedrich. 2009. \textit{Konfliktmanagement. Ein Handbuch für Führungskräfte}. Bern: Haupt.
EXAMPLE 12
WORKING WITH POLICYMAKERS TO ADDRESS THE CONFLICT IMPLICATIONS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

EcoPeace Middle East, a tri-lateral organisation that brings together Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli environmentalists, promotes cooperative efforts to protect the shared environmental heritage of the region and the management of water resources: ‘Conflict in the region is a threatening situation made even more desperate by the climate crisis, inflaming extremism and instability in the most water-scarce region on the planet.’ As well as addressing current issues about access to water resources, it works with local communities and policymakers to analyse and raise awareness of future challenges that could exacerbate regional tensions. EcoPeace is also involved in identifying technological advances that may contribute to finding the cooperative solutions required. In this way EcoPeace seeks ‘to advance both sustainable regional development and the creation of necessary conditions for lasting peace in our region’.

EXAMPLE 13
ABANDONING THE LONG WAR IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Irish Republican Movement developed its strategy of the ‘Long War’ on the basis of a partial futures analysis. They reasoned that they were motivated by an ideal, a United Ireland, and that the UK government was only in Northern Ireland to satisfy its material interests. They believed that when it became politically costly for the British to remain in Ireland, they would leave. On that basis the Movement built a strategy of persisting in their military campaign to inflict costs on the UK. This involved a war of attrition against the British army aimed at causing as many casualties and deaths as possible so as to create a demand from the British people at home for withdrawal, and a bombing campaign aimed at damaging British financial interests and curbing long-term investment in Northern Ireland. The goal was to sustain the war and gain support nationally and internationally for its ends.

Over time, Irish Republicans came to see that their analysis was partial. Internal debates were not couched in futures thinking language and one would not expect the Republican Movement to articulate publicly a direct critique of the Long War strategy. However, statements and documents from the 1980s and early 1990s leading up to the IRA ceasefire show new questions and approaches being considered which are in line with a reappraisal of the future, and a contrast to the earlier position. They became aware that inflicting pain through military means was actually counterproductive: it was especially impacting on the Unionist section of the population, who, as a result, increased their pressure on the UK government to remain in Northern Ireland. Effectively, their Long War was making it more, rather than less, difficult for the UK to leave. Until then, Republicans had deemed the Unionists irrelevant to UK withdrawal, but now they realised that it would be more effective to engage with them. For example, in 1991 a republican participant in ceasefire talks, addressing his own community said: ‘If we are to ever resolve the situation in Ireland [...] there must be a rapprochement with the Protestant community in the North. And before there can be that rapprochement we, as republicans, must seek to understand and empathise with the Protestant community.’ They also realised that Unionist consent would be needed for a change in the constitutional position of Northern Ireland. This new strategy led to a ceasefire and the opening of talks between the Nationalists and Unionists as well as the British and Irish governments.

53. See The Irish Republican Army Green Book or training manual for a description of their strategy.
55. For example, a document from 1987 says: ‘We believe that loyalism derives an artificial psychological strength from the British presence, from the Union.’ See: Sinn Féin (1987) A Scenario for Peace.
56. For example, A Summary Guide to the Sinn Féin Peace Proposal published in 1994 states: ‘Britain’s arguments for remaining in Ireland as: responding to “the democratic wishes of the Unionist majority”; to avoid a “bloodbath” in the event of British withdrawal.’
**Negotiation and dialogue:** Futures thinking can contribute by bringing new ideas to the process or as a means to examine or test proposals that are being offered and considered. If a number of futures are identified, these can be compared with each other. Ways to introduce or connect futures thinking into negotiations are discussed in relation to the Mont Fleur example in the TSP Supplement to this paper. See also here for some pointers on using futures thinking methods as an orientation to inform probing questions.

**Adoption of settlement:** At the point of agreeing and adopting a settlement, the parties need to gain support for it from their constituencies and the wider public. One way to approach this might be to offer a vision of the future based on the settlement in contrast to possible future(s) without it. This is a critical moment to check that the settlement deals with the underlying issues in the long term and likely future developments. Too often, settlements have been an attempt to satisfy the interests of powerful veto holders rather than craft a sustainable future for all stakeholders.

**Post-settlement:** The outcome of a negotiation or reconciliation process is only a framework which leaves many details to be developed during its implementation. Conflict between the parties does not disappear at that point but is continued through political bargaining rather than military means. This implies that negotiations will continue beyond the concluding of a settlement. So, there is also often a need to review progress and decide how to proceed. The organisers of the Dinokeng Scenarios in South Africa were keen to promote broad public engagement in this phase.\(^{58}\)

### 3.4.2. Potential progression from self-interested problem-solving to shared vision

A futures thinking process may help parties move towards identifying an agreed future which is acceptable to all concerned. Diagram 5 sets out the potential progression in parties’ thinking and approach: starting from a situation where the parties in conflict perceive current reality and the potential future solely through the prism of their own interests, they may move to a point where they share a vision of the future.

The diagram is a simplified representation of a complex process; in reality, parties’ understanding of, and approach to, the future will not be a neat, linear progression from one stage to the next. Also, the area of convergence does not mean that those involved think alike. They may have different and separate views. Even if they do not have a consensus on a shared future, they may agree to work together to look for mutual understanding, respecting each other’s interests, concerns and aspirations. They may be willing to help each other to find ways to realise their preferred divergent futures without, as far as possible, compromising the futures desired by each other. Looking ahead and considering their current vision and strategies to achieve that vision, each party realises that they are unable to achieve their desired future unaided (a stalemate, hurting or otherwise) and in that context they begin to consider working together to find a way out of the current situation. Doing so may, but not necessarily, lead to a growing recognition of the other parties and the emergence of respect and reconciliation, even while an agreed outcome has not been achieved. So futures thinking can lead the parties to engage with each other prior to any reconciliation.

It should be noted this may not be a shared future (within the confines of one state or country): the parties may agree that on balance the best solution is to live separately from each other. If this is an agreed decision, no matter how disappointing it may be for some involved, the separation is more likely to be amicable and to contain the seeds of future cooperation. A good example is the velvet divorce between the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

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58. For information see the Dinokeng Scenarios website.
EXAMPLE 14

BUILDING A SHARED FUTURE POST-SETTLEMENT

The Shared Island Initiative launched by the Irish Government in 2020 aims ‘to harness the full potential of the Good Friday Agreement to enhance cooperation, connection and mutual understanding on the island and to engage with all communities and traditions to build consensus around a shared future.’

A cross-government initiative, it involves working across the island of Ireland with the Northern Ireland Executive and the British Government to address strategic challenges facing the whole island and includes substantial investment in developing the all-island economy deepening North/South cooperation, and investing in the North West and border regions.

The initiative makes no presumption of what will be the future constitutional/structural relationship between the different parts of the island. It fosters constructive and inclusive dialogue and a comprehensive programme of research to support the building of consensus around a shared future on the island. A series of Shared Island Dialogues brings people from across the island together to discuss key concerns for the future, opportunities for cross learning and understanding, and how the full potential of cooperation through the framework of the Good Friday Agreement can be taken up. The series is intended to provide a focus for people to engage on an inclusive basis on a shared future on the island, which can be a starting point for broader and deeper discussions in civil society. The inclusion of often under-represented voices in the peace process such as young people, women and ethnic minorities is a priority for these discussions. In addition, a comprehensive research programme aims to provide high quality evidence-based analysis across a range of areas to inform government policy priorities and public discussion on building a shared island and consensus around a shared future.

For more information, see the Shared Island Initiative website.

EXAMPLE 15

MOVING TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING AND AGREEMENT IN TSP PROCESSES

Experience from TSP processes illustrates the degree to which the process can help move parties towards a better understanding of one another’s positions and potentially a mutually agreed outcome. In the Mont Fleur case, the entire group of South Africans participating in the process (referred to as ‘scenario team’) strongly advocated making choices that would influence South Africa’s trajectory towards the Flight of the Flamingos scenario, which held that there was potential for a successful outcome to the crisis. They viewed this as the optimal scenario, and broadly agreed on the conditions required for success.

In Colombia, there was no such agreement. In its report, the team explicitly stated that all participants agreed that the four scenarios were all possible, but that they ‘neither recommend nor express preference for any particular one’. But the TSP did result in some agreement on the significance of working together. The team highlighted that their agreements were ‘most valuable because they were arrived at by way of difference. It was the first time that a group of such dissimilar people had listened to each other, showing respect and tolerance in order to accept and give credit to the others’ ideas. This allowed us to acknowledge the possibility of reaching agreement without sacrificing our principles, and led us to conclude, in all humility, that enormous improvements and profound changes were needed to achieve the common good.’

For more details on these cases see the TSP Supplement to this paper.

59. Shared Island Initiative website.
60. Kahane Destino Colombia.
61. Ibid.
## Diagram 5: Journey from Self-Interested Problem Solving to Shared Vision

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STEPS</th>
<th>AREA OF DIVERGENCE</th>
<th>AREA OF CONVERGENCE</th>
<th>AREA OF DIVERGENCE</th>
<th>COMMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Shared vision</td>
<td>Shared vision</td>
<td>Shared vision</td>
<td>Shared vision may entail an agreement to have separate futures. Separate futures based on a shared vision allows for a peaceful transition and ongoing cooperative relationships and convergence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Alternative scenarios</td>
<td>Alternative scenarios</td>
<td></td>
<td>Visions accept possibility of different futures than currently assumed, some more acceptable to one side or other. Consequences of each can be assessed to identify a mutually acceptable future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Forecasting (separately)</td>
<td>Joint forecasting</td>
<td>Forecasting (separately)</td>
<td>Forecasting identifies future threats and opportunities and tests current assumptions against possible futures. It may force a switch to identifying alternative scenarios. Forecasting may be undertaken separately or jointly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Exclusive visioning</td>
<td>Mutual interest</td>
<td>Exclusive visioning</td>
<td>Parties’ initial visioning may be seen through the prism of their own interests, so are likely to be divergent. It is difficult to move from self-interested problem solving directly to mutual interest problem solving without some stimulus such as appreciation of future consequences of continuing the zero-sum strategy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Self-interested</td>
<td>Self-interested</td>
<td></td>
<td>Each problem solving action by the conflicting parties has an impact on convergence/divergence. Such actions are often zero-sum – gains for one are a loss for the other.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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3.5. LINKING FUTURES THINKING TO PEACE ARCHITECTURE

As illustrated by the examples of futures thinking processes, there is no standard model for futures thinking processes or for their relationship to peace processes. Futures thinking efforts have taken different forms and vary in how they relate to participants in the conflict and to formal mediation or reconciliation processes. This can be imagined as a continuum, from futures thinking embedded fully in the mediation/reconciliation processes to futures thinking completely detached from other efforts related to peacemaking and peacebuilding. Options to consider, from most embedded to most separate, are outlined below:

Embedding futures thinking in a process. Time may be set aside in a negotiation or reconciliation process for participants to undertake a futures thinking exercise, the results of which can inform ongoing discussions. This may take place jointly between all parties or separately for individual parties, with the awareness of other parties. This represents a shift in the nature of the proceedings from negotiations or bargaining, so it is important to be clear about the change of modalities.

Introducing futures perspectives into formal multi-party talks in a structured way. This can be done through briefings on future trends or presentation and review of futures which have been developed outside the process, by the parties or others. This is not dissimilar to the common practice whereby parties in talks receive briefings, usually from outside experts, on other matters that are relevant to their deliberations, such as economic assessments, land distribution schemes, constitution drafting or transitional justice models.

Introducing a futures orientation into ongoing dialogue. This can be done by any of the parties or by facilitators, but bringing up the future is not the prerogative of specialised practitioners. Any participant in mediation or reconciliation processes, including both stakeholders and intermediaries, can broaden the discourse with a pertinent question or observation about the future. It then serves as a framework for raising questions, in response to statements or positions adopted by parties. Questions might include, for example:

- ‘How will your proposals be feasible if there is a shift in regional alliances?’
- ‘Is your proposal consistent with probable demographic changes?’

- ‘What will be the cost of your proposals and will they be affordable?’
- ‘What are your underlying assumptions about the future that inform your positions and proposals?’
- ‘How justified or realistic are your assumptions about the future?’
- ‘Is the future we are working towards the future that seems possible or the future as we would all like it to be?’
- ‘Is the optimum worth working for?’
- ‘What would a future in which the needs of all are addressed look like?’

Raising such questions is a valid intervention in its own right – it helps to test assumptions and explore ideas rigorously. Posing such questions may also help lay the ground for more structured futures work, by generating interest in doing so – or even creating a wish to explore or construct possible futures for deeper consideration.

For example, the kind of reconciliation that the parties may have implicitly settled for may be a kind of reconciliation that is based on grudging acceptance of co-existence. Alternatively, it could be grounded on the basis of sharing and cooperation. The parties might decide to consider what that would look like and if they wished to work towards it. It may seem difficult to get from the present to that idea, given the current distrust, grievance, hostility and pain. Still, it might be possible to encourage parties to engage with it as a thought experiment and then use backcasting to work backwards from that potential future of cooperation to identify the necessary steps linking that future to the present. If parties are able to imagine and work through such steps, then prospects for a process of real reconciliation can be significantly increased. In this way, a futures perspective can underlie an entire reconciliation or mediation process.

Organising initiatives less directly related to formal talks. Like other informal ‘Track 2’ processes, these may sometimes have the tacit approval of the negotiating parties and involve as many shades of opinion as possible, including those close to the parties in talks. They can introduce relevant concerns from their parties into the futures thinking process and offer insights from the futures process to the talks. Engagement in such futures thinking processes can also strengthen relationships and benefit formal talks.

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63. For an outline of the fundamentals of backcasting, see: John B. Robinson (1990) Futures under glass: a recipe for people who hate to predict. Futures 22(8), pp. 820–842.
A visioning exercise around one aspect of ‘grudging acceptance of co-existence’ in post-agreement Northern Ireland shows how taking a longer-term view of a situation can help shift mindsets away from the past and present and instil hope in the possibility of change.

Public processions by unionist and nationalist organisations (referred to as ‘parades’) have long been an important part of culture in Northern Ireland. Various parades have been highly contentious at times, particularly some unionist/protestant parades viewed by their supporters as festive occasions that celebrate their history and culture, while others may perceive them as intimidating, hateful and triumphalist. Following widespread intercommunal violence and public disorder in Northern Ireland, the Parades Commission was established in 1997 as an independent, executive, public body with a mandate to consider all public processions and related protest meetings deemed contentious or offensive.

In 2003, some 10–12 people working with the Commission engaged in an informal visioning exercise on the future of parading in Northern Ireland. Most were field workers with the Commission at the time, though two Commissioners and the body’s Executive Secretary also took part. The visioning exercise stemmed from an observation from earlier engagement that it might be useful to place the body’s work in the wider, longer-term context of peacebuilding within Northern Irish society. This is easily lost sight of during an intense parading season. Participants were invited to visualise what the future of parading in Northern Ireland could or should look like, whether the Commission was working in this direction, and how this could be enhanced. It also touched on whether the Commission’s activities were facilitating ‘visioning’ among communities by encouraging them to think about what the future could entail. The exercise aimed to stimulate dialogue and expand people’s horizons, not to facilitate agreement on the desired future or on the Commission’s vision of the future.

The Commission had not engaged in such a visioning exercise before and doing so generated new insights. Participants noted that the body generally did not facilitate visioning among people and communities involved in and affected by parading. Doing so would be important as people in Northern Ireland, it was said, tend to focus on what the situation has been from year to year and realities of the present, rather than looking ahead to consider ‘what could be’. This can instil a sense of resignation as people get stuck in the belief that real change is impossible. It was also observed that lack of clarity on how the Parades Commission sees the future could fuel insecurity and intransigence among communities: if they suspect or perceive the Commission to be working towards curtailing or even eliminating parades, this could negatively affect their attitude towards the body in general and their approach to specific parades.

The discussion concluded that visioning helps actors design and target their activities by setting out a clear direction towards the desired future. Participants considered the exercise very useful in facilitating understanding of the views and positions of others in the Commission and in developing a common vision of the future. The process also seemed to serve an (unintended) motivational purpose in encouraging those present to reflect on why they were involved in this work.

For more details on this case see the Examples Supplement to this paper.
Facilitating separate initiatives, whose findings may be fed into formal talks and/or public discourse. At the detached end of the continuum, futures thinking processes can be applied to specific conflict situations without any involvement or agreement of the conflicting parties, directly or indirectly. An eminent persons group, civil society, or business interests who have a futures thinking unit are possible initiators of such an exercise. Some will try to ensure that they have a diverse range of inputs into the process, not only to ensure they take all perspectives into account but to demonstrate their impartiality. They may then take their insights to individual parties or may be invited to present them to the formal negotiations, as was the case in the South African example below.

Irrespective of what option is preferred in terms of linking futures thinking to processes of political dialogue, mediation and reconciliation, the next three pointers need to be considered across any option from a peace architecture point of view.

**EXAMPLE 17**

**IMPACT OF SCENARIOS IN 1980S SOUTH AFRICA**

In the 1980s Anglo American, the South African mining conglomerate, established a scenario planning function under Clem Sunter. At that time, the Apartheid regime was coming under pressure not only from Black South Africans but an international boycott. Sunter and his colleagues developed a presentation entitled ‘The World and South Africa in the 1990s’ which offered two scenarios for South Africa: the ‘High Road’ of negotiation leading to a political settlement and the ‘Low Road’ of confrontation leading to a civil war and a wasteland. While conceding at the time that the ‘High Road’ might be improbable, he said that ‘the whole point of our process is to put on the table improbable futures’.64

The presentation was widely publicised and Sunter was able to present it to President FW de Klerk and his cabinet in 1986 – a time when negotiations seemed particularly far-fetched, and a state of emergency had been in place since 1985. It had a major impact on the members of the government and the President, helping them to start thinking differently and empowering the process of change from within. As a former government negotiator has observed: ‘It might have been pragmatic thinking, but at least they listened.’65

The fact that the presentation was developed by a pillar of the business establishment that had supported the National Party government in resisting international sanctions may well have influenced its reception. The ‘messengers’ were trusted even if one future they were envisaging would take into account the interests of the whole population, not just the white minority.

As Sunter said in a 2021 interview ‘we did take the high road in releasing Nelson Mandela’.66 He was also able to visit Mandela in prison to discuss the future a month before his release, and he reported that Mandela said he had read the book and took particular note of the ‘High Road’ scenario.

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64. Clem Sunter’s Low Road to anarchy a 50:50 call after SA’s unchecked looting, rioting, in BizNews 13 July 2021.
65. Interview with former government negotiator on 01/12/21.
EXAMPLE 18

TYPES OF OUTREACH FROM TRANSFORMATIVE SCENARIOS PROCESSES

To facilitate dissemination of the set of scenarios generated by the Mont Fleur process in South Africa, a 14-page report was published in two national newspapers, a 30-minute video was produced with cartoons and presentations by those who had participated in the process, as well as a summary booklet and pamphlets. Team members presented and discussed the scenarios with many different groups, including the national executive committees of the ANC and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC); the National Party; government departments; financial institutions; major corporations; trade unions and civil society organisations. Other important results from Mont Fleur included the creation of informal networks and new understandings among influential people across the political spectrum, a shift in language and thought, and a broader awareness among diverse societal actors of choices to be made and their possible implications.67

Similarly, the Destino Colombia scenarios were distributed as an insert in major newspapers and magazines and through articles and editorials, radio shows, a video broadcast on national television, and large public meetings in all the region’s capitals. Participants also engaged in strategic conversations across government, business and community groups. In its report, the team explicitly stated that all participants agreed that all four scenarios were possible, but that they ‘neither recommend nor express preference for any particular one. What we do agree on is that it is necessary for us Colombians […] to find the time and space to carry out an intense conversation, a serious analysis of the future of our country.’

For more details on these processes see the TSP Supplement to this paper.

67. See Kahane Transformative scenarios planning.

Weighing up the pros and cons of linking futures thinking into the peace architecture depending on the context. It was evident from the experiences and views of interviewees that there is no single effective location of futures thinking within the peace architecture. This is because there are trade-offs between the benefits and risks of embedding futures thinking initiatives too closely in mediation and reconciliation processes, and equally when the initiatives are too detached. The two processes can potentially compromise one another.

Some argue that distance from formal processes is necessary for the effective use of some approaches to futures thinking. This allows the participants to stand back from present positions and risk thinking speculatively. Some distance also reduces the risk that an unsatisfactory futures thinking process, in which there is little openness between the parties, will contaminate relationships in the formal process. On the other hand, if the process can be organised effectively closer to the peace process and the parties involved, then they will benefit from having thought through the implications of different futures and can take ownership of the ideas and options generated. The futures thinking processes are also more likely to take into account the real concerns of the parties to the conflict and any new developments in the conflict.

Overall, it is important to recognise that the direct influence of futures thinking processes on political dialogue is hard to establish and subject to debate. For example, opinions differ on the extent to which the Mont Fleur process influenced the negotiation process in South Africa, as discussed in the TSP Supplement to this paper.

Ultimately, the positioning and form of the futures thinking process depends on the attitudes of the parties to the conflict and careful preparation is necessary to recognise and adjust to any concerns they may have.
Example 20

Strategic Revision Through Scenario Work

In 2013, Conciliation Resources supported a scenarios exercise undertaken by leadership of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) as part of the Kenya-facilitated peace talks with the government of Ethiopia. The series of discussions contributed to a recalibration of the group’s strategy, enabling the leadership to reflect on their immediate demand for a referendum on self-determination for the Somali Region of Ethiopia (also known as the Ogaden), which led to the development of a roadmap and transition to peace plan to address the issue and help move the process forward during the talks and outside of talks.

Similarly, a 2018 process undertaken by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue with clashing opposition armed groups in Libya focused on how they saw the country in five years’ time. This helped participants to see they had more in common than that which divided them.

3.6. Using Futures Thinking to Work with Single or Fragmented Parties

Futures thinking processes may involve working with one side, or fragmented parties, in potentially moving toward a shared vision. This can help them to address and resolve internal differences of opinion and dissent and develop a common strategy. Similarly, when a number of groups share some goals, but do not necessarily agree on their precise form or how to get there, a futures exercise can help them think through likely outcomes and potentially facilitate greater alignment between them. These groups are unlikely to undertake such a process in the normal course of negotiations and dialogue, but it is not uncommon for intermediaries in mediation and reconciliation processes to support parties to do this, away from their engagement with other parties, and at any point in the conflict cycle.

Working separately with single or fragmented parties can be a valuable precursor to mediation between parties or to help ‘unstick’ a process. Where a peace process is ongoing, working with groups or subgroups in this way can also potentially inform the mediator of different and shifting positions and indirectly put pressure on the negotiating parties. At the same time, intermediaries in mediation and reconciliation processes may need to avoid being regarded as partial because of their work with one side of the conflict.

Example 19

Political Will - Limitations on the Influence of Informal Processes on Negotiations

In the 2000-2007 Schlaining informal dialogue process between Georgian and Abkhaz interlocutors (described in Example 8), a number of participants held high-level political or official decision-making or negotiation roles, but they all took part in their personal capacity. Some of those involved spoke of a futures thinking approach enabling participants to broaden the range of issues discussed and to probe ideas and the climate for how those ideas might be received, in ways that could feed into the political negotiations process. It was found to be helpful in getting the parties to move away from short-term bargaining and point scoring.

However, in the absence of political will to find a solution there are limits to how much an informal dialogue process can influence parties’ engagement, even when key individuals in decision-making positions take part directly. Their participation also sometimes led to tensions with their colleagues when they returned home. In the broader context of a fragile formal peace process, a conflict dynamic exacerbated by complex geopolitics, and internal changes of political leadership, the notion of peaceful transformation began to lose credibility. The strategic calculation of the parties did not lead them to view their best option as a negotiated solution requiring some form of cooperation and compromise. These wider political developments ultimately led to the end of the Schlaining Process, and the 2008 resumption of violence in South Ossetia made reaching a settlement in the Georgian-Abkhaz context an even more distant prospect.

For more on this process see the Examples Supplement to this paper.

68. Interview with mediation support practitioner on 23/11/21.
69. Interview with mediation support practitioner on 23/11/21.
Some of the benefits of working with single or fragmented parties are highlighted below, along with challenges and limitations and potential mitigation measures.

**Benefits**

- Provides space without the pressure of negotiating with an opponent to speculate, challenge assumptions and rethink positions and strategies
- Enables inclusion beyond just party leaders or those directly involved in negotiations, e.g. party members or key representatives of a party’s constituencies, including women, young people or members of a diaspora
- Can help draw out differences within the group and interrogate positions
- Allows single or fragmented groups to develop a degree of alignment and sufficient strategic unity to move forward
- Helps to develop capacity by engaging with one group first. This can be especially useful where there is a significant power imbalance between parties
- Can provide a stimulus to coming together across divides later. Curiosity to see what another group is doing may emerge

**Challenges/limitations**

- Without input from a wide range of perspectives, including those of adversaries, options may not be explored fully or critically, potentially leading to development or entrenchment of irreconcilable positions
- Risks creating another elite-captured space (e.g. business community, civil society leaders) if the process is not sufficiently diverse
- Can potentially entrench or fuel more fragmentation as differences and perspectives are surfaced or crystallised
- Relies on being able to reconcile differences and agree on a position and strategy. Could lead to [further] splintering within a group
- Where capacity of one party is being supported, other groups’ faith in the impartiality of the process may be diminished

**Ways to address these challenges**

- Introducing outsider – including opposition – perspectives, to test the group’s assumptions and positions;
- Supporting and encouraging parties to include a range of stakeholders to bring different experiences and perspectives beyond the leadership;
- Supporting parties to work through differences and identify potential areas of common ground or agreement that can be built upon;
- Considering how a mediation process is perceived and ensuring that support to one party does not compromise impartiality (for example, assistance by a non-governmental organisation may not compromise a process, whereas support from a facilitator or mediation team might be seen to do so); strategising with the party or parties on whether and how to communicate about the futures thinking process to adversaries, their own constituencies, and the broader public.

Some of these measures are more relevant to some challenges than to others, i.e. not all are equally suitable for all challenges listed here.
3.7. PROCESS DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

This paper has sought to demonstrate how futures thinking can be used to address some of the toughest challenges of deeply divided societies. For practitioners seeking to apply futures work in conflict-affected contexts, some key factors for consideration when designing and implementing a structured process are set out below.

More in-depth analysis of how different methodologies have been applied in practice, their outcomes and the challenge and limitations can be found in the Examples Supplement to this paper. Further information on the transformative scenarios process (TSP) methodology, along with case examples from South Africa and Colombia, is available in the TSP Supplement.

POINTERS FOR DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING A STRUCTURED FUTURES THINKING PROCESS

Futures thinking approaches can be adopted informally, as an additional lens or angle that form part of existing mediation, reconciliation and peacebuilding initiatives. A process can also be more structured, and treated as a standalone that can then inform other processes, formal and informal, in a conflict context. The following pointers to be mindful of relate to the latter:

- Before embarking on a futures thinking process, ensure sufficient human and financial resources are in place for it to be sustained.
- Identify who is best placed to design, implement or support such a process. This may include a mix of local and external actors.
- Be clear about the objective of the process – decisions about participants and how to structure the process will flow from clarity about what it is trying to achieve.
- Consider the many available futures thinking options carefully in relation to the context, including stage in the conflict cycle, intensity of the conflict, relationships to the peace architecture and already existing initiatives.
- Make contingency plans in case of external political or other developments that may impact on the process. Be prepared to adapt.
- Carefully consider issues of inclusion and representation when identifying participants: who needs to be part of the process and what are their profiles/capacities? Is there sufficient diversity in the group? How can and should the absence of relevant parties be addressed?
- Identify and take mitigating steps to overcome barriers or resistance to participation; consider motivations, agendas and concerns – and how those concerns might be allayed.
- Understand that introducing a futures perspective into dialogue between or within conflicting parties entails a shift in mindset which can seem threatening.
- If a futures thinking exercise is embedded in a negotiation or reconciliation process, be clear about the different requirements and modalities of each process.
- Handle any process with sensitivity. Introducing new information and airing challenging ideas in a clumsy way may lead to resistance to a futures approach and rejection of its insights.
- Ensure the process is a safe space for all (physically and psychologically) and be prepared and capable of dealing with difficult conversations or surfacing negative emotions.
- Know the context and be sensitive and respectful of diverse cultures, religions, languages and genders when interacting with participants.
- Be aware of the risks and take steps to avoid legitimising political agendas that perpetuate or fuel power imbalances or enable co-optation of less powerful actors.
- Build in sufficient time and activities to facilitate trust and relationship building between the participants themselves and between participants and those convening or supporting the process.
- Consider how venue and modes of delivery will affect the dynamics and outcomes of a process, e.g. where a shift to online or hybrid working is required or preferred. Will the process be most effective in-country or outside?
- Consider whether and how outcomes and insights from the process will be shared and with whom (e.g. with participants in peace talks and/or with broader society) and build this into the process from the start.
FUTHER READING AND RESOURCES

Futures thinking

Further reading and resources on specific futures thinking processes can be found in the footnotes of the report and on some of the websites listed below.


Edwards, Charlie. Futures thinking (and how to do it ...). London: Demos.


Kahane, Adam (2017) Collaborating with the enemy: How to work with people you don’t agree with or like or trust. Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.


Relief Web (2021) UN Secretary-General, Addressing Peacebuilding Commission, says New Agenda for Peace ‘is our platform to update promise’ of saving future generations from war. Press release, 22 October.


Reos Partners (2021) Facilitating breakthrough on peace: Adam Kahane in conversation with President Santos, 19 October.


Song, Min Ji (2021) What if uncertainty is the path to peace? Blog post, 8 October.


Websites

Alerta Democratica: The project

The Dinokeng Scenarios: 3 Futures for South Africa

Futures Thinking, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), New Zealand.

Mont Fleur process: 3-part video

OECD Strategic Foresight

Policy Horizons Canada. Foresight Training Modules

Reos Partners: Transformative Scenarios

UNESCO Futures Literacy: An essential competency for the 21st century

Reconciliation and mediation

For further resources on reconciliation please see Conciliation Resources’ Reconciliation in Focus publication.


Du Toit, Fanie and Angelina Mendes (2022) *Reconciliation in practice: Selected observations about the assumptions informing practices of reconciliation.* *Reconciler,* no. 1. Mary Hoch Foundation, Think Peace Learning and Support Hub, and Mary Hoch Centre for Reconciliation.


Isoaho, Eemeli and Suvi Tuuli (2013) *From pre-talks to implementation: Lessons learned from mediation processes.* Finland: CMI Martti Ahtisaari Centre.


APPENDIX:
INTERVIEWEES AND WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

Interviewees
Adam Kahane, Director, Montreal, Reos Partners
Ali A. Hersi, Somalia Country Director, Saferworld*
Anna Iles, Associate Director Futures, Business for Social Responsibility
Andy Carl, Independent Advisor on Peacebuilding
Cat Tully, Founder and Managing Director, School of International Futures
Ciaran O’Toole, Department Director South East Asia and the Pacific, Conciliation Resources
Colleen Magner, Managing Director, Johannesburg, Reos Partners*
David Lanz, Representative for Dialogue Promotion, International Crisis Group
Florence Swamy, Executive Director, Pacific Centre for Peacebuilding
Harriet Martin, Mediation Advisor, United Kingdom Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office
Jenny Vaughan, Managing Director Human Rights, Business for Social Responsibility
Joanne Crouch, Research Manager, Somalia Stability Fund*
Katia Papagianni, Director of Mediation Support and Policy, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue
Laurie Nathan, Mediation Program Director, Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame
Mark Bradbury, Executive Director, Rift Valley Institute
Mille Bojer, Director, Geneva, Reos Partners
Min Ji Song, Political Affairs Officer, United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs
Mô Bleeker, Special Envoy for Dealing with the Past and Prevention of Atrocities, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs*
Priscilla Hayner, Member, UN Standby Team of Mediation Advisers
Raphaelle Guillou, Special Advisor, Dialogue Advisory Group
Roelf Meyer, Director, In Transformation Initiative
Salma Yusuf, Steering Committee Member of Women Mediators across the Commonwealth; and key draftsperson and process lead, Sri Lanka’s first National Policy on Reconciliation.
Teresa Whitfield, Director, Policy and Mediation Division, United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs

Those marked * also participated in the online workshop

Additional participants at the mid-term online workshop, 15 December 2021
Aden Abdi, Africa Department Director, Conciliation Resources
Carl Stauffer, Senior Expert, Reconciliation, United States Institute for Peace
Jonathan Cohen, Executive Director, Conciliation Resources
Juan Diaz-Prinz, Interim Director, Inclusive Peace Processes and Reconciliation, United States Institute for Peace
Kristian Herbolzheimer, Director, International Catalan Institute for Peace
Liana Kvarchelia, Co-Director, Center for Humanitarian Programmes, Abkhazia
Manuela Restrepo, Senior Consultant, Bogotá, Reos Partners
Mauricio García-Durán, Professor on Forgiveness and Reconciliation, Javeriana University, Cali, Colombia
Miriam Coronel Ferrer, Professor of Political Science, University of the Philippines
Negusu Akilu, Coordinator, Destiny Ethiopia Initiative, Forum of Federations Ethiopia
Simon Keyes, Professor of Reconciliation and Peacebuilding, University of Winchester
Government of the United Kingdom – Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)
FCDO participants included Advisers, Heads of Profession and diplomatic staff working on conflict, security, stability and mediation and peace processes in various capacities and contexts.

Conciliation Resources convening and facilitation team
Clem McCartney, CR Associate and consultant
Michelle Parlevliet, CR Associate and consultant
Rachel Clogg, Senior Advisor
Sally Holt, Head of Accord
Teresa Dumasy, Research, Advisory and Policy Department Director
Valeria Minisini, Research, Advisory and Policy Assistant
Conciliation Resources is an international organisation committed to stopping violent conflict and creating more peaceful societies. We work with people impacted by war and violence, bringing diverse voices together to make change that lasts.

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