SUMMARY

It can seem impossible for those caught up in violent conflict and its consequences to find space to imagine what peace might look like – let alone start taking the difficult steps to get there. In a ‘hot’ conflict or crisis situation conflict parties may be too focused on dealing with an immediate crisis and struggling to survive. In protracted wars or ‘stuck’ peace processes that from the outside may appear frozen for many years, long-held grievances and entrenched positions make it difficult to consider alternative futures and block potential pathways to dialogue or reconciliation.

Futures thinking methods and approaches can potentially be used at all stages of conflict to help adversaries take a step back from confrontation, envisage what a more peaceful future could look like and think through potential pathways to get there. Looking forward in mediation and reconciliation processes in an intentional way can help shift dynamics and move those processes forward.

Encouraging parties and groups in conflict situations to envisage a longer timeframe, and to consider broader trends, such as economic, demographic or geopolitical change, takes the immediate focus away from conflict dynamics and relieves pressure to find a solution. It provides a safe space to reassess and potentially move away from defensive or maximalist positions and consider alternative possibilities for a sustainable viable long-term nonviolent future that works for all parties.

Futures thinking methods in the corporate sector help businesses identify long-term challenges and opportunities, and make strategic decisions. Their use in fragmented and complex conflict-affected contexts – from South Africa to Colombia, the South Caucasus and the Pacific – shows how they can be adapted to try to tackle some of the toughest challenges of deeply divided societies.

Futures thinking is not a magic formula to resolve conflict, and the impact of futures thinking in peace mediation and reconciliation needs to be further evidenced. But experience to date provides proof of concept and suggests greater attention be given to the potential it can bring to conflict transformation and peacebuilding. There are many different approaches and techniques and, as yet, no agreed terminology. More clarity on how different components and activities – used alone or in combination – can contribute to a peace process would provide valuable guidance to those seeking to apply futures work in conflict-affected contexts. This publication sets out to do that by providing a new typology of futures thinking practice.

Drawing on case studies of where futures thinking has been used in practice in peacebuilding it also outlines the benefits and challenges of implementing a futures thinking process in conflict settings and provides some pointers for designing processes suited to the context.

KEY FINDINGS

• More conscious awareness of the sometimes hidden links between futures thinking, mediation and reconciliation can add value. Futures thinking, mediation and reconciliation are necessary, and ideally complementary, supports of a fair, inclusive and forward-looking peace process. Recognising and understanding the dynamics between them, and how they impact on each other can help to proactively maximise the connections for mutual support, or at the very least to avoid negative unintended consequences.

As a starting point, peace practitioners need to be alert to the range of initiatives that may foster dialogue and reconciliation taking place in different spaces and at different levels in a given context. Good analysis and ongoing monitoring is needed to assess whether current positions or actions in one area of the conflict/peace process are affecting others negatively or positively, to take steps to develop linkages between initiatives or actors, and to ensure that there is complementarity between them where possible.
Supporting conflict parties and societies to imagine their shared future can help maximise the potential of mediation and reconciliation processes to influence it. Mediation and reconciliation are inherently future-focused: they aim to find mutually-acceptable solutions that will enable parties to live together without violence. But this orientation is often implicit, intuitive and can be limited in scope where parties are caught up with immediate challenges or redressing past grievances. Fear of what the future might bring can also restrict the options that parties are willing to consider.

Futures thinking applied in a conscious and purposeful way provides a way to look forward intentionally, question current assumptions and compare different possibilities. Looking to the future in more structured ways responds to the realities of peace process and reconciliation timeframes, which typically span years and generations. Futures thinking can provide a bridge between mediation and reconciliation that strengthens the connection between the two.

Using futures thinking can help unblock stalled processes, shift dynamics and open up new possibilities. When parties are at an impasse it can be helpful to reframe the conflict and look at it from different angles. Features of futures thinking that can help generate fresh ideas and open up possibilities for dialogue include:

- **Lowering the bar**: futures thinking 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.
- **Timeframe and trends**: looking ahead in the long-term can enable participants to consider wider trends that will affect all of their futures, such as economic and demographic shifts, the climate crisis, or regional or geopolitical dynamics.
- **Confronting realities**: a process can show stakeholders what a future might look like if they do not resolve the conflict and encourage them to address dangers they have been avoiding.
- **Providing new options**: focusing on scenarios or visions allows parties to think in terms of possible futures rather than their current preferred futures and explore and compare new options.
- **Strategic approach**: in considering alternative futures and their possible impacts, parties can ‘stress test’ current positions and trajectories, consider previously discounted options and develop or adjust strategies for pursuing their goals and averting undesirable outcomes.
- **Supporting diversity and inclusion**: developing multiple scenarios for the future from different perspectives relies on diverse participation reflecting a wide range of experience, interests and ideas. Younger participants, for whom the future is most relevant, are especially important.

Relationship building: Futures thinking exercises can help groups with varying amounts of power and different interests build an understanding of each other’s needs, priorities and interests, and why they hold certain positions. It can also help make connections across different levels of the conflict system.

Wider influencing: disseminating possible scenarios or emerging ideas, or simply communicating that a futures thinking process has taken place, can generate a sense that different futures are possible and broaden engagement and buy-in.

Futures thinking can play a positive role at different points in a peace process and at different levels. It can be embedded in a negotiation or mediation process, indirectly feed in, or operate separately, or with single or fragmented parties. When and how to introduce futures thinking into a peace process will depend on the actors involved and the stage and intensity of the conflict. It can be used:

- As a preventive measure to engage conflict parties in dialogue and identify undesirable futures before violence breaks out.
- To help reinvigorate a peace or reconciliation process by providing a safe and creative ‘breathing’ space where parties can step back from entrenched or polarised positions and consider new ideas or test proposals for dialogue. This rethinking often happens separately in one party.
- At the point of adopting a settlement: by developing a vision that can also be shared with the wider population of what the future could look like based on the agreement compared with possible futures without it.
- To road test practical ways forward in implementing a peace accord based on periodic review of progress.

The design and process of futures thinking initiatives matter and need to be adapted to context. There is a wide range of futures thinking methodologies and approaches, which serve different purposes. A set of guiding questions to provide an orientation for dialogue may suffice. Where more structured methods are adopted, they will need adjusting to the specific context. A custom-built approach can be designed, drawing on and adapting different approaches. A number of methods can be used in sequence or together.

Making an informed choice should be guided by an understanding of the different approaches and what they offer, their strengths and weaknesses, and what is needed in a specific context or culture. Involving stakeholders in the conflict in planning a futures thinking exercise can help ensure this, and overcome reservations or other barriers to participation. Clarity and transparency are important to ensure the purpose of the futures approach is understood by conflict parties and wider society, who might otherwise feel confused or threatened by it.
Futures thinking is not a panacea for resolving conflict or a substitute for other approaches to peacebuilding. It is an additional option that can complement and enhance other peacebuilding efforts, but it cannot alone address the drivers of conflict. It also faces many of the same challenges and limitations as other approaches such as lack of trust, defensive inflexible postures, apparently irreconcilable positions, recourse to threats and violence, spoilers, etc.

Analysing the barriers and limitations of different models and approaches is therefore crucial when considering whether and how to introduce futures thinking in a context.

Sharing more experiences of using futures thinking in conflict contexts, will aid understanding of its potential and build confidence in its value. There are already sufficient theoretical and empirical grounds to be confident that the interaction between parties and the ideas generated by a futures thinking process have the potential to make a difference and move negotiation or reconciliation processes forward.

Developing a more substantial body of evidence for its efficacy, including attention to the impact and outcomes of different processes will contribute to an understanding of what is more appropriate for different situations – and the contextual factors to take into consideration when designing and implementing a process.

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, dialogue 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 for and capable of dealing with difficult conversations or surfaced 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.
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