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**ABRA WORKSHOP ON ENGAGEMENT OF ARMED GROUPS IN PEACE
PROCESSES**

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In thinking about the experience documented in the Accord on “Engagement with Armed Groups in Peace Processes” would like to suggest 8 issues which need to be explored by armed groups, and with armed groups, if one wants to consider the possibility of developing alternative strategies to armed force, including dialogue and negotiations.

1. Is there a belief in the necessity of force? Often governments and armed groups have a common belief that the availability of force is necessary to maintain or change social and political systems or achieve political and social goals. If there is a belief in the necessity of force, in what circumstances does it then seem appropriate to think of dialogue and negotiations? Some armed groups follow an exclusively military strategy, perhaps based on their analysis of the situation. Others try to follow a mixed strategy using both armed force and a political strategy through participation in negotiations and perhaps electoral politics. The lesson from the experience of such groups is that at some point the two approaches are not compatible and a choice has to be made.

2. What options exist for achieving social change? Most armed groups are seeking some kind of social change. They have often resorted to force because they find that there is great inequality of power between them and their supporters and those who resist change. They resorted to force to try to change the balance of power. Is there an alternative strategy that does not rely on power and have the capacity to pursue such a strategy. The group needs to assess the possible effectiveness of different approaches. They need to consider the limits of different strategies including the use of force. It is striking that the question is often asked “What has been achieved by dialogue and non-violence?” but the question is seldom asked about the limits of violence. There are few examples of violence solving conflicts but many examples of violence making the conflict worse.

The options for bringing about social change have to be considered in terms of how far they are consistent with the intended goals. In other words are the means consistent with the ends. Often it appears that they are not – for example when the people who suffer most from the violence are the very people in whose name the conflict is being waged.

3. What is the relationship between armed groups and the people

In planning its strategy and actions the armed group has to consider the views of the community and the impact of their actions on that community. The armed group needs at the least the tacit support of the community. Are the armed groups seen as the champion of the community or have they become oppressors? As the conflict escalates the

tolerance of violence also escalates and the community in time may be asked to tolerate an intolerable burden. There may be a struggle for the hearts and minds of the local community between the forces of the state and the armed groups. In most situations the community will probably continue to be more sympathetic to an armed group that has emerged from the community than to the state which may seem remote and not really interested in the concerns of local people.

The armed group must also consider its relationship with the local community if it is considering a strategy based on negotiations and dialogue. The local community may be encouraging the group along this path but in other cases the armed group may be more ready to make such a change.

4. What part do ex-combatants play as agents of change?

There is a tendency to assume that combatants are committed to the necessity of violence but in fact they often are the advocates of an alternative strategy. They see the costs of military struggle and the limits of its effectiveness because they are directly involved. They also are in a better position to propose alternative approaches because they have status and credibility from their military experience. They are more able to speculate about alternatives and retain the respect of their comrades.

6. How does the legacy of the violence impact on choices for the future?

One of the limitations of violence is that it leaves a legacy of pain and hurt and grievance on all sides. The emotions associated with these experiences influence how all those concerned feel about the conflict and the way they evaluate future options. Some people may be more committed to a settlement of the conflict while others may feel that no settlement is possible unless the past is dealt with and there is some measure of justice. The past will not only affect the decision to engage in a political process and the process of the negotiations but it will also affect the rebuilding of society if a settlement is reached. It has been said that if the past is buried it is like a landmine left after the conflict waiting for someone to stand on it.

7. If a settlement is reached what are the problems of implementing the agreement?

Many parties to a conflict are aware that a settlement may not be the end of the conflict. One or more of the parties may try to modify the agreement or try to avoid implementing it. Therefore in considering a shift away from the use of force the armed group will not only have to consider if it can reach a fair settlement by peaceful means but if it can be implemented. Otherwise, as has happened in a number of conflicts, the credibility of one of the parties is damaged when the settlement is not implemented. An armed group faces a particular problem in these circumstances because they may be under pressure to revert to a violent strategy to try to ensure that the settlement is implemented but they also realise that this will lead to a return to war. It is therefore important, even at the stage that negotiations are being considered, to have confidence that the settlement will be honoured and to think about how the settlement can be monitored and enforced.

8. What arrangements would be possible to monitoring the implementation of a settlement?

While experience of peace processes shows that there are many problems during the process of implementing the agreement, there is limited insights into how to manage these problems. If a party is slow to implement its commitments is this a sign of incompetence, disinterest, lack of support within their supporters or duplicitousness? Or is there some other reason? There is an additional factor in situations where the conflict concerns only one part of the country because the government is also dealing with many other issues while the local parties are focused on the local situation. There are also instances where the government has changed and the new government does not want to carry out the commitments of its predecessor. One solution is to look for guarantees from the other parties and from international institutions but ultimately parties may still default and the only solid guarantee is that it is in the parties interests to implement the agreement.

What then is the contribution which civil society can make. Little attention has been given to monitoring the behaviour of the parties but this could be an important and useful role for civil society institutions to undertake. Monitoring is usually only applied to compliance with a ceasefire agreement but it could be used much more widely in relation to the implementation of commitments under the settlement and to the general contribution of each party to post-settlement peace building. One lesson to be drawn from cease-fire monitoring is that the monitoring body may be slow to confirm that breaches have taken place because of the danger that the breach will put the ceasefire at risk. However ignoring violations also undermines the credibility of the ceasefire. The ceasefire monitoring body often has authority and can apply sanctions to a party which guilty of violations but this can actually contribute to the reluctance to acknowledge violations because the monitoring body is then under pressure to impose sanctions. A less authoritative body without the capacity to impose sanctions would be in a better position where it could only “name and shame“ violators. Parties would not want to be criticised publicly but the publication of violations would not automatically put pressure on the continuation of the ceasefire.

Similar insights could be transferred to a body monitoring compliance with the settlement and peace building. 3 elements would be required.

- a) An acceptable institutions, preferably from civil society could be identified or created and agreed during the negotiations.
- b) The powers of this body would be agreed. It is suggested it would have broad powers of access and the capacity to speak to all sections of society including the parties to the agreement. It would not have the power of sanction but it would have the right to discuss its findings with the parties and work with them to resolve any issues of non-implementation which are identified.
- c) There would also need to be precise commitments by each party with timetables laid down in the agreement. Sometimes because it is so hard to reach an agreement rather vague commitments are included with no specific time limit for carrying out those commitments and then it is difficult to monitor whether the commitments have been complied with.

- d) In addition a statement of the responsibilities of each party and, importantly, all sectors of society for post-settlement peace-building and expectations of how those responsibilities would be carried out. Ideally this would also be agreed during the negotiations but if this is not practical then they could be proposed by the monitoring body and hopefully agreed with the parties themselves.

On this basis, then the monitoring body could take up its work knowing that it had a clear agreed mandate which gives it some security. In return the parties would be aware that they were under greater scrutiny but would also themselves know what is expected of them and what are the limits that they have accepted. In this way it might be possible that the agreement might be implemented more effectively.

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