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MEDIATING SELF- DETERMINATION CONFLICTS

Report



MEDIATING SELF- DETERMINATION CONFLICTS

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INTRODUCTION

This report brings together learning from the initial phase of a three-year partnership between Conciliation Resources and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation (SPF) looking at how a transformative approach to peace mediation can help prevent, manage or resolve self-determination (SD) conflicts. The project draws together analytical and practice elements around mediation of SD conflicts. The aim is to 'translate' academic knowledge and summarise and package learning focused on the following questions, among others:

- What distinct mediation and peacebuilding challenges do SD conflicts present?
- What options and approaches can peace practitioners use to help address them?
- How can mediation and peace support processes better connect across different groups, levels and spaces in effectively addressing SD conflicts?

BOX 1: DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

Working definition of self-determination conflict

A political dispute (sometimes violent) where at least one party – usually but not always a minority – seeks more powers to freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. Arrangements for SD can be internal, involving autonomy over certain aspects of governance within the territory of an existing state, but short of secession; or external involving territorial secession resulting in complete political and legal independence or unification with another state. SD conflicts include situations where SD is an issue even if parties do not use the term SD or call it a SD conflict. SD need not be the sole or initial cause of conflict.

'SD group' refers to a group that potentially has a SD claim, even though they may not frame it as such.

'SD unit' is the territorial entity to which the claim to SD relates.

Peace practitioner is used here as an umbrella term for a range of peacemakers and peacebuilders including those involved in mediation, negotiation and dialogue processes, directly or in a support capacity. They may include individuals associated with the UN, regional organisations, states acting individually, or with (international) non-governmental organisations, including those engaged in private diplomacy.

Why focus on SD conflicts? – Conflicts arising from or resulting in self-determination (SD) claims have for decades consistently accounted for half the conflicts in the world¹ and pose specific mediation and peacebuilding challenges. Driven by perceptions of historical oppression, exclusion, exploitation, and injustice, which those affected feel powerless to change, they often conclude that the only solution is some form of autonomy. These claims in turn challenge majority communities' sense of the integrity of the state. SD conflicts often pivot on deep-rooted socio-psychological issues of identity and belonging and are emotionally charged. Framing of claims in relation to territory and the linking of historical narratives of victimhood to political arguments for SD are among the factors that make them particularly hard to resolve.

Modes and persistence of conflict – SD conflicts are often seen as strictly binary as central governments generally consider it their first duty to preserve the territorial integrity and unity of the state they represent, and groups seeking SD are often willing to fight and die for independence, which they see as the only alternative to continued domination and repression by the centre. Hence, SD conflicts are often fought with great violence and sacrifice on all sides. Moreover, the asymmetry in armed forces between governments and SD groups often leads to the use of irregular tactics of warfare, sometimes seen as terrorism, which has frequently met with disproportionate responses by governments. Taken together, this tends to lead to highly protracted conflicts imposing significant suffering on civilian populations. The longer they go unresolved the more complex and intractable they become as layers of grievance and claims build up and dynamics and positions shift over time.

Relevance of legal claims – Parties in SD conflicts easily get stuck in entrenched and often mutually exclusive positions centred on a clash of fears of, on the one hand, assimilation into the state, and on the other, the state's disintegration. Misconceptions around SD, which parties on either side may equate with secession, can feed into defensive positions. While 'conflicting rights' often dominate parties' narratives of conflict, there is no recourse in the international system to adjudicate on or enforce SD rights. These dynamics set SD conflicts up to appear impossible to resolve, with parties' red lines assumed to be too polarised and entrenched to enable space for negotiation or dialogue.

The challenge – Peace practitioners need to find ways to support and encourage opposing parties to move away from zero-sum dynamics, overcome blockages to constructive dialogue and identify governance arrangements for SD that meet the needs and interests of all within a state's jurisdiction. To do this requires

engagement with diverse communities and constituencies – beyond negotiating elites – to identify avenues for addressing SD issues that put affected populations at the centre of their own conflict resolution processes and shift the underlying conflict dynamics. A more interdisciplinary approach is also needed to work towards solutions. In particular, the relationships between SD and peace and mediation processes are inadequately analysed and under-developed in terms of identifying effective approaches. New, imaginative approaches, skills and tools in addressing SD conflicts are also required in a changing global political environment and evolving mediation landscape. This includes increasing recognition that peace processes are not linear and mediation occurs in multiple spaces – official and unofficial – and at different levels.

BOX 2: METHODOLOGY

A short review of relevant, interconnected and sometimes overlapping bodies of literature relating to the research questions helped identify knowledge gaps and informed the areas of practice we focused on. A series of learning exchanges between Conciliation Resources and SPF programme staff and Catalan colleagues generated insights, ideas and examples of creative peace and mediation.² A Joint Analysis Workshop was also convened with international and local mediators, people associated with conflict parties, civil society, and experts/practitioners working on SD, human rights and peacebuilding. The aim was to create connections across sectors, enable the sharing of information, experiences and lessons, test assumptions about conflict resolution in SD conflicts, and help identify mediation challenges and options. The report also draws on practical resources, particularly the Handbook on prevention and resolution of self-determination conflicts which provides a menu of good practices that states, communities and mediators may find instructive in their efforts to prevent and resolve conflicts involving issues of SD. The aim is not to replicate but to flesh out how the guidelines can be implemented in practice.

Audience – The primary audience is peace practitioners: external and internal and in official and unofficial roles, including in the policy sphere. It may also be useful for conflict parties – governments and groups making or facing (potential) SD claims – and broader constituencies or societies where SD is an issue. It is also relevant for academics, researchers and practitioners in related fields such as human rights and international relations who have been, or are currently, involved in or working in contexts where SD is an issue underlying conflict.

What the report does – The report summarises initial findings drawing on learning from Conciliation Resources' and SPF's long-term engagement in a range of situations where SD is an issue (expressly or implicitly, and irrespective of forms)³ and from other practical experience of peacebuilding and mediation. The aim is to 'set the scene' by laying out current challenges and approaches to addressing SD conflicts in policy and practice.

Part 1 sets out and explains the legal and political framework within which peace practitioners currently operate when engaged in situations where SD is an issue. It:

- Provides a brief introduction to terminology and concepts related to SD and some of the questions and challenges that these can present.
- Highlights some shortcomings of the current international framework for addressing SD conflicts and considers how existing and new approaches and options may help remedy this.
- Identifies common underlying factors to be aware of when engaging in SD conflicts and some of the variables and features associated with them.

Part 2 considers some options and trends in negotiated agreements for settling SD conflicts. It:

- Highlights some advantages and drawbacks of various models and the trade-offs for conflict parties and international stakeholders.
- Encourages improvisation and agility in seeking solutions, including consideration of more flexible or less explored arrangements.

Part 3 suggests approaches and provides examples of practice within the current framework. It:

- Sets out principles and guidance for peace practitioners engaging in SD conflicts.
- Identifies specific barriers and sticking points in negotiating and resolving SD conflicts.
- Provides some insights into how they may be navigated, drawing on experience of peace and mediation practice.

Part 4 explores how initiatives in different spaces and levels interconnect – or can do. It:

- Explores how official and unofficial mediation and peace practice at different levels can help 'fill the gap' in SD conflicts where a formal high-level process is absent, suspended or making little progress.
- Highlights the need for strategic engagement by different actors, including peace practitioners, individually and collectively, and for more coherence among them.
- Encourages peace practitioners to reflect on their own (potential) roles in an evolving peace and mediation landscape to help societies resolve conflicts over SD.

1. UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL LEGAL AND POLITICAL FRAMEWORKS

As a starting point when engaging in a context, peace practitioners need to be aware of the concepts and terminology related to SD and some of the questions and challenges that these can present, as well as the characteristics and dynamics that underlie and drive different types of SD conflict.

1.1. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

What is SD?

The concept and substantive content of SD is the subject of much debate in politics and law and among scholars and practitioners; it is often a source of confusion, including among those seeking it, states responding to (potential) claims, and peace practitioners assisting parties to resolve conflicts where SD is an issue. In practical terms it raises many questions: under international law 'peoples' have the right to SD, but who are they and in what ways they are permitted to realise SD, both in international law and in practice, under what conditions, and for what reasons?

Box 3 provides a very brief overview of the evolution of the international normative framework, which can help analyse and address SD conflicts. However, this framework does not provide 'the' definition of self-determination.⁴ While the instruments to establish the United Nations and human rights framework provide a right to SD, they do not spell out what constitutes 'a people' entitled to that right or how that right would be exercised. SD essentially evolved as a remedial concept for addressing past problems and wrongs and handing control back to people from the countries concerned. The framework was quickly applied to the process of decolonisation across Africa and Asia, facilitating a non-violent transition in many countries, but it has significant shortcomings in terms of its relevance and implementation in practice in the post-colonial era – not least because colonial boundaries do not reflect the boundaries of 'peoples' that are in any case diffused into each other. This presents challenges for trying to address SD conflicts now, as situations or issues are shoehorned into a framework of approaches and principles developed to answer different questions in a different era. As one workshop participant observed: 'The conceptual framework is limiting as it keeps us stuck in the same debates and problems.'⁵

The lack of clarity around the meaning and limits of applications of the concept of SD, what entities can rely on it and what situations come under its purview, often leads to misconceptions that feed into conflict dynamics, for example where parties equate SD with a right to secession. A group may believe that they can self-constitute, then rely on the right to SD, and receive international support for their independence struggle, as if it was a colonial entity. While groups claiming the right may see it as a panacea, governments see it as a threat as they fear disintegration of the state.

Inadequacy of the legal framework provides parties with space to interpret norms to support their claims. As a result, they easily become deadlocked in a dynamic of 'conflicting rights', which distracts from the practical question of whether it is helpful to have SD and in what form. Both parties rely on opposing arguments, invoking rights and saying that the law requires it. Groups get very absorbed and struggle to understand the right, but there is no adjudication or enforcement mechanism in the international system they can turn to. Meanwhile, states keen to preserve the existing political organisation and integrity of the state invoke the principle of territorial integrity, which refers to inviolability of the borders and the geographical jurisdiction of the state, including territory under its effective control and possession. This positioning ignores the fact that the scope of the principle of territorial integrity is confined to the sphere of relations between States⁷ so does not prohibit secession which is what those who invoke 'the principle of territorial integrity' seek to avoid and, simplistically, foreclose.

Similarly, sovereignty is invoked as means to prevent secession and to avoid international 'interference' from those wishing to assist in a situation where SD is an issue. This is driven by a conception of sovereignty that says it must be located in one place only – the central government. But sovereignty essentially relates to the power to decide what rules (i.e. jurisdiction) apply over a particular matter, space or people. Sovereignty is not monolithic; it can be layered and complex and can be divided and shared between or within states. When you start to unpack sovereignty and discuss with groups what it is they want to decide or, more exactly, enjoy the power to decide over, solutions can be found that do not need to involve secession, as explored in Section 3.2. The concept of sovereignty can also be invoked by states as a means to prevent secession because it suggests you do not need to secede in order to have these powers. Sovereignty is therefore not a trump, there are limitations to it, and it does not equate with independence.

BOX 3: INTERNATIONAL NORMATIVE FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO SD CONFLICTS⁶

Under the UN Charter, all states are equal in their sovereignty and must respect other states' jurisdiction over their territories and populations. The Charter also requires states to cooperate in maintaining peace and security, including respect for human rights. According to Article 1(2) the purpose of the UN is to: 'develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace'.

Expression of SD as a category and a right is also articulated in Article 1 common to the two international covenants for human rights adopted in 1966. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights provide that 'All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.' States must promote the realisation of this right in conformity with the provisions of the UN Charter. Thus, SD is inextricably linked to peace and development – core objectives of the UN Charter.

SD was further elaborated in the context of decolonisation, and later applied to cases of foreign occupation and racist regimes such as Rhodesia and South Africa through the UN General Assembly resolutions of 1514(XV) and 1541(XV) of 1960 affirming that complete compliance with the principle of SD is required to ensure decolonisation. In 1970, UN GA resolution 2625(XXV) adopted the Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Co-operation among States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations. The Declaration identified three modes of implementing the right of SD: 'The establishment of a sovereign and independent State, the free association or integration with an independent State or the emergence into any other political status freely determined by a people'. These modes of implementation are essentially remedial.

Post-Cold War interpretation broadened the meaning further, linking SD with the evolving notion of democratic sovereignty, whereby the legitimacy of authority depends on the consent of the governed and public trust in state institutions. In short, SD has evolved along two lines of distinction:

- **External SD** involving secession resulting in complete political and legal independence. The right to establish a separate state in cases of colonialism, a racist regime or foreign occupation, has subsequently extended to apply – in exceptional circumstances following exhaustion of all alternatives – where a people suffers sustained repression to an extent equivalent to one of those three categories where the will to secede is clearly expressed. However, claims to remedial secession remain highly contested and few cases have met this threshold. The Republic of South Sudan did so in 2011 – but only by virtue of consent by the central government – becoming the newest member state of the UN following a deliberate, negotiated process and agreement followed by a referendum with near unanimous support. For some, the 2008 Kosovo declaration of independence should arguably also qualify (despite strong contention) on the combined grounds of the abject illegitimacy of imposed Serbian authority with ongoing repression, the exhaustion of effective alternatives, and the evident threat to international peace and security, as well as the will of the people expressed by an overwhelming majority in a referendum.

Breakup of confederations, such as the USSR and Yugoslavia, where the constitution of the confederation allows member states to exercise their SD can also result in the formation of newly independent states, even if force is sometimes an element.

- **Internal SD** has evolved to mean the enjoyment of SD rights by a people within the territory of an existing state, i.e. short of secession. This broadly entails autonomy over certain aspects of governance, often related to minority identity such as language, religion, and culture, political participation, public administration, economic and social development, policing, and justice, and transfrontier relations. These situations are amenable to management or resolution within existing or modified governance arrangements within the same state, through mechanisms like federalism or other forms of decentralisation. Central state authorities generally maintain control over core areas such as frontiers, monetary policy, defence, and taxes, but in some cases arrangements may enter these spheres – perhaps to be shared – stopping short of independence or statehood. Non-territorial arrangements for self-governance can also meet demands for recognition of linguistic, religious, or other identity rights, as in the case of language communities in Belgium. These are more suited than territorial arrangements for dispersed populations, i.e. where members of a cultural community are not all concentrated in one geographical area or region.

Independence itself is increasingly a myth in a changing world order where complex interdependence predominates including for states and their constituent elements. Similarly, SD cannot be enjoyed in isolation; it is always realised with or in relation to others – such as a geographic frontier which depends upon recognition and respect of the adjacent entity/ies.

The lack of clear guidance in the international legal framework on the legitimacy of SD claims and of an effective recourse mechanism for their settlement means that standards are inconsistently applied. Responses tend to be politicised – based on which party is more powerful rather than what is the most appropriate SD arrangement for a situation – and almost always prove inadequate.⁸ The creation of a global or regional recourse mechanism as a ‘focal point’ to mediate SD claims and prevent or resolve violent conflict could potentially help address this issue. Such a mechanism could be mandated to assess claims and/or to engage or intervene before groups turn to violence using a proactive, problem-solving and assistance-oriented approach. It would potentially provide a basis for leverage with states and may also prevent unrealistic claims if it is clear they won’t get international support.

Beyond the binary

Moving away from a binary logic of unity versus secession opens up new possibilities. Post-Cold War developments linking SD with the evolving notion of democratic sovereignty, the will of the people and autonomy over certain aspects of governance allow for a range of internal (and external) SD options, as set out in [Box 3](#). Today, the right of groups to govern themselves is increasingly intertwined with human rights norms, in particular the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples. Having control over matters affecting them is a fundamental principle of minority and indigenous peoples’ rights and this can be achieved through different forms of self-governance.⁹ The standards set parameters and create rights without threatening sovereignty or territorial integrity. These rights frameworks can therefore be helpful in terms of delivering autonomy arrangements even if claims are not necessarily framed as a right – bearing in mind that some states have an ideological resistance to the concept of group rights and do not recognise minority or indigenous communities, while others restrict recognition to a select few. Using language of democratic participation and self-governance can help a state engage on SD issues without feeling threatened as further discussed in [Section 3.2](#).

An approach based on the ‘will of the people’ that responds to situations where groups have insufficient control over aspects of their own affairs and/or wish to realise aspirations for their identity, is less inherently conflictual than explicitly invoking the right to SD and can be addressed with a range of solutions. SD then becomes the means to achieve an end rather than an absolute goal which is to be achieved according to strict criteria and which often tends towards secession as the maximalist option providing the greatest degree of SD.

If SD is regarded as a process, it can be incremental and iterative, with more flexibility, and it is possible to have a discussion around the content, as discussed further in [Section 3.2](#). Paradoxically, many groups assert the right to SD framed as secession in order to get to the process whereby people can determine their future. Once the process is in place, they don’t necessarily need to assert the right, particularly if it is a secession claim. As one experienced mediator observes: ‘In the context of mediation, process is everything. This allows groups to see that SD can come in different forms, which creates more space.’¹⁰ However, while there are cases where internal solutions have gradually become accepted by secessionist units, this is nevertheless a very difficult process, particularly where a protracted conflict has polarised things to an extent that independence is seen as the only option.¹¹

1.2. UNDERLYING FACTORS AND VARIABLES IN SD CONFLICTS AND CLAIMS

When engaging in situations where SD is an issue, it is essential to understand the factors underlying claims and what drives violence. The type of SD conflict – in terms of who is involved, their characteristics (indigenous, religious or linguistic minority, etc), relationships to territory, experiences of occupation, etc – affects the underlying problems or concerns fuelling tensions and informs approaches for addressing them. Table 1 sets out some common factors and variables influencing conflict dynamics and claims for peace practitioners to aware of. The list is non-exhaustive and factors and variables may change over time.

TABLE 1: FACTORS AND VARIABLES DRIVING OR INFLUENCING SD CONFLICT DYNAMICS AND CLAIMS

<p>Group grievances / fears</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grievances relating to past or ongoing exclusion and discrimination (political, economic, social), repression, violence, protracted military conflict, forced displacement, etc. • Grievances and fears relating to protection, maintenance and development of identity (cultural, religious, linguistic, etc).
<p>Borders / territory</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ill-fitting boundaries underlying conflict as a legacy of colonialism or result of migration. Groups sharing an identity often span one or more international borders, e.g. the borders between Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia. • A group has a historical (and ongoing) relationship with a clearly defined territory, e.g. the German-speaking population in Italy's South Tyrol province. Variables include community size and concentration, extent of control over territory, symbolic value, and level of economic development. • Existence of a pre-existing state where a group is concentrated, e.g. Kingdom of Tibet pre-dates the People's Republic of China. • Complex layers of claims within a unitary state, including minorities within minorities, e.g. fears of the Buddhist minority in the Patani region of Thailand¹² where the Muslim majority is seeking SD. • Indigenous claims over land and natural resources clash with those of a majority within a state or other groups such as settlers, e.g. cumulative impacts from industry and development on the hunting and fishing grounds of the Beaver Lake Cree Nation in Alberta, Canada. • Indigenous peoples are a minority within a minority, e.g. indigenous groups in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). • A group is not concentrated in one territory but is dispersed – either within the current unitary state, e.g. the Roma population in Hungary, or across a number of states, e.g. the Roma in South East Europe. • Combination of territorial concentration and dispersal, e.g. Kurds in Turkey. • New challenge – digital replication and recognition of states when the territory is at risk of becoming uninhabitable, e.g. Tuvalu.
<p>Governance structures / capacity / type</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A group with a (potential) SD claim enjoys significant <i>de facto</i> control of a contested territory, including established structures, institutions and relationships with the population, e.g. the breakaway region in Moldova, Transdniestria. • A group enjoys a degree of non-territorial self-governance, i.e. control over language, education or cultural matters affecting them, but the state resists territorial autonomy, e.g. ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia and Romania. • A group enjoys a degree of self-governance (territorial or non-territorial) but may lack the capacity and/or resources to implement effectively, e.g. the interim regional government of the BARMM. • A rebel group or militarised faction has a degree of <i>de facto</i> control over a contested territory but no officially recognised authority, e.g. the Islamic State in the West African Province in northeast Nigeria. • A state controls a territory but governance is inadequate. Neglect from the centre is common in border regions where minorities live, e.g. Nepal's Tarai borderland where the Madhesi and other groups live.

State model / attitude / approach to SD

- Openness to forms of internal SD, e.g. where the state has made prior concessions toward other claimants resulting in SD arrangements. These may be asymmetric, such as having different arrangements for different groups, e.g. India's wide variety of arrangement with many provinces.
- Examples of SD in a broader geographic region may provide a model for or encourage other claims, e.g. decolonisation in Africa.
- The existence of a legal mechanism for granting further SD, such as a provision in a peace agreement/ constitution, e.g. Article 39 of Ethiopia's 1994 constitution.
- The type of regime (democratic, authoritarian, oligarchy, etc) affects how opposition groups are treated and space for civil society, e.g. Stalin was able to impose the creation of union republics and autonomous republics on ethnic lines, but they all came under the central control of the Communist Party.
- The overall approach to managing diversity affects attitudes to SD, e.g. Mali inherited the French Republican model which does not recognise minorities.

Power dynamics

- Asymmetry where the entity seeking SD is not recognised by most of the international community and is kept weak and isolated by the 'parent' state, e.g. Abkhazia.
- Kin state or relationships with neighbouring/other states, including former colonial powers, strengthens the power of the weaker party, e.g. Russia's influence in parts of the former Soviet Union.
- Conflict is between two kin states, e.g. each community in Jammu and Kashmir has a kin state in either India or Pakistan.

Presence / extent of armed violence

- Largely non-violent low intensity conflict with few fatalities but regular incidents of violence, e.g. Southern Thailand.
- Not characterised as armed conflict by the state/externals despite violence, e.g. Cameroon.
- Non-violent: tensions have not escalated into violence (e.g. Catalonia), or violence has ended (e.g. the Basque Country).

Time

- A protracted conflict may be the catalyst or breaking point for a group to seek SD and particularly independence, e.g. South Sudan.
- Protracted SD conflicts build up layers of history and grievance; dynamics and claims evolve, e.g. Jammu and Kashmir.¹³
- Violence may be relatively recent (even if the conflict itself is not) but very intense, e.g. Cameroon.

Calls for SD typically follow long experience of disrespect or disregard of the rights, needs, interests and aspirations of a group or population.¹⁴ Tensions often arise where groups are (or feel) restricted in the expression of their religious, linguistic or cultural identity and/or disadvantaged in terms of accessing public services and other resources and opportunities within society. It is hard for those who share a different identity to others within the state to make accommodations, much less surrender obligatory positions or practices, particularly those related to cultural or religious observances. Grievances and

claims may be directed towards the state's authorities, but inter-group tensions are also common especially where a majority group enjoys privileged status within the state – symbolically or instrumentally. Where a group feels threatened in its identity or alienated from mainstream society, self-exclusion and potential identification with more extreme or separatist positions may follow. This, in turn, can fuel mistrust of the group by others in society, leading to further polarisation. Table 2 provides a broad typology of typical group aspirations and the various demands groups frequently make to achieve them.

TABLE 2: GROUP ASPIRATIONS AND DEMANDS

Aspirations	Common demands
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Status – recognition as a distinct group – in relation to territory, political representation/power, etc; recognition of legal status of a group. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation or strengthening of autonomous status (territorial or non-territorial). • Self-governance in their own language (e.g. through territorial or cultural autonomy). • Recognition of their religion and acquisition of legal personality. • Creation of a separate state. • (Re)unification with kin in another state.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security vis-à-vis identity – protection of cultural, linguistic or religious identity and physical integrity, including from external threats to a particular way of life (e.g. as a result of economic development, resource extraction, changes in land tenure, etc). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical protection of communities from violence and intimidation. • Protection of communities and property against third parties. • Equal opportunities to express and transmit culture, language, religion and traditions, including via: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Protection of cultural/religious heritage; ▪ Support for cultural/religious practices; ▪ Accommodation of language or religion in the public domain (e.g. in education, through plural legal systems).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to development and social and economic opportunities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removal of barriers to access and participation, including barriers to consultation and participation in planning and development. • Creation of remedial policies (e.g. affirmative action to remedy disadvantage in political or economic life).

2. OPTIONS AND TRENDS IN NEGOTIATED AGREEMENTS

As discussed in [Box 3](#), solutions for internal and external SD include territorial and non-territorial forms of self-government. These range from limited self-governance arrangements – e.g. over a specific aspect like language – to wide competences across critical areas of governance, to the creation of a new sovereign state.¹⁵ They encompass different forms of shared or devolved governance, including all kinds of power sharing and forms of effective participation at central level, as well as various models of decentralisation.¹⁶

Territorial autonomy involving self-governance of a demographically distinct territorial unit within the state has been a classic means of settling SD disputes outside the colonial context as it devolves to minority groups the power to exercise direct control over affairs of special concern to them while the central state maintains power over other matters of concern to the whole state, including on the territory of the autonomous region,¹⁷ as in the case of Aceh, for example. Such arrangements imply original decision-making power at local or regional level; they differ from decentralisation, which facilitates local implementation of decisions taken at the centre.¹⁸ These are, however, much resisted by governments, which often see territorial approaches as a first step towards creating a separate SD unit.¹⁹

Arrangements can be asymmetric, i.e. different groups within a unitary state enjoy different forms or degrees of self-governance, enabling the state to accommodate a wide range of identities and interests. This is the case in the United Kingdom, which has devolved different types of power at different times to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Distribution of competencies will vary as discussed in [Box 3](#). SD claimants and mediators often believe that the more powers and functions they have the more autonomy they will enjoy, but this is not necessarily the case. It depends on what those competencies are and their relative importance. There is also a question of whether the entity is actually capable of exercising broad powers and similarly guaranteeing the rights of non-dominant groups, as discussed in [Section 3.2](#).

EXAMPLE 1

The free association model enjoyed by the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau in relation to the US is an option that could work for Bougainville. The compacts of free association provide for foreign affairs powers to be exercised by the three former territories, each of which has enacted its own 'independence' constitution. Despite the US retaining significant powers over the former territories, they are regarded as independent for the purposes of UN membership. While a similar arrangement for Bougainville would stop short of independence as Papua New Guinea (PNG) would retain some powers, e.g. over currency and international civil aviation, Bougainville would have more control than now over its foreign affairs and would be able to join the UN.²⁰

Governance options for SD are well known – or information about them can be easily accessed, at least – and there is now considerable practice for addressing SD claims which has often involved international mediation. However, there is a need for a better understanding among peace practitioners of the advantages and drawbacks of various models, the trade-offs (for conflict parties and international stakeholders), how they have played out in practice, and the factors influencing those outcomes. Improvisation, agility and adaptation is also required in practice to respond to the demands, needs, and interests of all parties involved (including minorities within self-governing regions) based on what is reasonable, proportionate and ultimately acceptable to the parties in the situation.²¹ Appropriateness and consequences will vary enormously according to context. Arrangements need to emerge from negotiations and analysis of the pros and cons of different options in a particular context.²² [Section 2.1](#) highlights some options and trends in terms of how SD has been addressed in negotiated agreements and highlights some less explored arrangements that may warrant further study and consideration.

2.1. EXAMPLES OF ADDRESSING SD IN PEACE SETTLEMENTS²³

Autonomy – SD claims have on rare occasions been settled through agreements to separation through agreed secession (e.g. Eritrea) or dissolution (e.g. the Czechoslovakian velvet divorce following the breakup of the Soviet Union). However, research indicates that the most common solution to intra-state conflict is granting parties autonomy arrangements (often territorially and ethnically defined) that preserve the state's territorial integrity and that this has contributed to sustainable solutions in several secessionist conflicts.²⁴ Quite maximalist autonomy arrangements have been achieved where strong references are included in agreements to guarantee territorial integrity. For example, the solution for Aceh was to extend extensive powers of self-governance, while confirming Indonesia as a unitary state.²⁵ Even where the concept of SD is not raised expressly, the central government will often seek to build provisions guaranteeing territorial integrity into the agreement, as is the case with Hong Kong, which is declared 'an inalienable part of the People's Republic of China.'²⁶

Federalism – Sovereignty can be layered and deconstructed through federal-type solutions. Myanmar represents a case of moving towards federalism following over a decade of negotiations during which the word federalism for the central government was taboo, whereas the ethnic armed groups were willing to trade secession for federalism. It was possible to work with the regime to explain that there is a right to SD but also demonstrate how the exercise of this right through federalism could be a win for the central state by maintaining unity of the state. The 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement includes references to both federalism and SD among its basic principles for implementation. In practice, the ethnic armed groups ended up joining the state union as their way of exercising their right to SD as enshrined in the 1947 constitution.²⁷ Since then, the military's February 2021 coup d'état and resurgence in violence has ended the peace process and dramatically reshaped the country's conflict landscape.²⁸

It should be noted that while federalism has become something of a go-to option for SD claims over the last couple of decades, federal-type solutions can be difficult to achieve politically. It is also an expensive and complex system of governance and there are very few examples of transition to federalism in post-conflict contexts.²⁹ This may be because conflicts were between one specific region and the state and did not directly affect the governance of the rest of the country.³⁰ Because federal models are conditioned by their specific history or development it is also hard to draw transferable lessons from other contexts. More creative thinking in heterogeneous states to include options like non-territorial autonomy that applies to the individual can be helpful.³¹

Balancing claims – Formulating an agreement so that both sides can claim their view and legal position has been preserved in the settlement is a way to overcome mutually exclusive positions. For example, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement on Northern Ireland confirms Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom and addresses the issue of the conflicting aspirations of the peoples of Northern Ireland and specifies how its status might change in the future on the basis of consent. The issue is addressed in the Agreement by an implementation mechanism and procedures for determining the will of the people in Northern Ireland through a poll.³²

Deferral – More incremental and flexible approaches including interim settlements are increasingly accepted, enhancing the range of possible solutions.³³ Options for deferral include:

- Deferring the issue for a future date, which assures both sides that this is not the final agreement and, in the meantime, they may enter into negotiations on a substantive settlement or establish an agreed interim phase of autonomous administration until negotiations can take place. Although this does not resolve the SD issue it provides acknowledgement there is an issue to be settled. Risks, particularly in asymmetric conflicts, include: 'freezing' the situation on the ground if parties do not enter serious negotiations, as in the case of Transdniestria; or further enhancing the position of the party that benefits from the status quo, which may then lead to attempted consolidation of de facto independence over time by those seeking secession.
- Agreeing on SD as an outcome, but deferring implementation. This can involve situations where SD is granted or confirmed, but the government and SD entity have not agreed on the outcome of the act of SD. The interim period allows time for campaigning for one solution or another. The parties may effectively agree to test the possibility of continued union during a period of federal or autonomous governance. For example, in the case of South Sudan, the 2002 Machakos Protocol granted autonomy for an interim period of six years, after which a referendum would be held. In cases where it is clear that SD, and almost inevitably secession, will occur, the deferral allows for planning for the post-referendum period, as in the case of Eritrea's secession from Ethiopia. With any deferral of the implementation of autonomy, it is important that there is a clear timeframe for the issues to be addressed and an independent mechanism for doing so.³⁴
- Supervised independence, whereby a newly independent entity gets international recognition in exchange for accepting permanent or temporary limitations on the exercise of its sovereignty. This was implemented in Kosovo via unilateral but supervised independence.³⁵

Conditional SD is another technique for addressing the SD dimension, which can be external or internal. In the case of Gagauzia, for example, the right to external SD depends on an external event outside of its own control occurring – that is, a change in the status of Moldova as

an independent state. Internal conditionality refers to the acceptance and implementation of certain requirements of governance. For example, the 2001 agreed principles on a referendum for Bougainville include weapons disposal and 'good governance' as conditions.³⁶

Influencing factors – The design of the agreement adopted is likely to depend on many factors, including the longevity of the conflict, the balance of power between parties and the power and agenda of external actors, including ex-colonial powers.³⁷ Other factors to be aware of when considering options include costs and complexity, and governance capacity as discussed in [Section 3.2](#).

Sustainability – While autonomy arrangements have contributed to sustainable peace in several secessionist conflicts, some federations have disintegrated and some territories seceded. This is often because the region always saw autonomy as a 'halfway house' – which is why central states are often wary of such arrangements.³⁸ In some situations, devolution of state powers increases the strength of identity-based regional parties that then legislate in favour of some groups over others. Likewise, situations arise where a core ethnic region is significantly more powerful and populous compared to other federal units and exerts influence over the central government. These factors need to be considered and can be mitigated against to some extent.³⁹

2.2. CONSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES⁴⁰

Approaches to secession – One way of addressing SD issues is to enshrine the right to secede directly in the constitution. Uzbekistan, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Ethiopia and Liechtenstein are unusual in expressly recognising a right to secession and outlining a process to achieve it. This is not a panacea, as illustrated in the discussion on sticking points in the peace talks between the [Ethiopian Government and the Ogaden National Liberation Front \(ONLF\)](#). The problem in this case was that the group did not accept the constitution, which they regarded as a colonial imposition.

Conversely, one in four constitutions either expressly prohibit secession⁴¹ or do so implicitly by characterising the state as indivisible, as is the case in France. In addition, provisions restricting association of political parties based around independence typically outlaw acts of individuals or organisations contrary to concepts of territorial integrity, sovereignty and national unity – effectively prohibiting calls for independence.⁴² Some states also prohibit formation of political parties around identity. While perhaps not ideal from a social cohesion perspective, under international law formation of a political party along communal identity lines should not be impeded unless they resort to violence or conflict with the right of others.⁴³ Such provisions are critical for political and popular mobilisation. In cases where a political party's manifesto includes independence or some other form of SD, election results help to ascertain the level of support among voters and can be instrumental in making the argument for a referendum on independence.

Belonging and values – Provisions which frame how the political community is defined or delineated and who is included or excluded also send a strong message to those living within a state's jurisdiction. Proclaimed values of state and society may privilege those associated with some groups over others, e.g. the preferential treatment of Buddhism in relation to other religions in Sri Lanka's 1978 constitution. Where groups feel excluded or treated as second-class citizens or as minorities to be accommodated rather than equal partners within the state, the desire for separation may well be fuelled. Formulations that refer to concepts like democracy, equality and pluralism send a more inclusive message. For example, the 2022 draft constitution of Chile which was rejected by referendum states that it is 'a social and democratic state based on the rule of law. It is plurinational, intercultural, regional and ecological.'

Public power arrangements – Aside from express references to SD, constitutions often include provisions that organise the spatial arrangement of public power and articulate the powers of the centre and the sub-units. Where autonomy arrangements are enshrined in a constitution, double entrenchment, whereby the autonomous community has to consent before the constitution can be changed, provides protection.⁴⁴ For example, constitutional provisions concerning Bougainville mean that any amendments would require a two-thirds majority vote in the Bougainville legislature.⁴⁵ A weaker form of constitutional protection is offered when federal institutions or the institutions of the sub-units can be changed by a super-majority in the legislature of the central government.⁴⁶ As with a peace agreement, a dispute settlement mechanism should be included to address questions of legal authority and conflicts over the exercise of that authority.⁴⁷

Supranational relationships or ambitions are also a form of SD that can be expressed in constitutional provisions. For example, Ukraine's constitution asserts 'the European identity of the Ukrainian people and the irreversibility of the European and Euro-Atlantic course of Ukraine.'⁴⁸ This explicitly provides for Ukraine's future to be towards the European Union and so defining national SD as part of the international community.

Timing constitutional reform – Rising tensions over SD claims can often lead to constitutional renegotiation before or after violence has erupted. While some argue that peace agreements should clearly define the constitutional design of the post-conflict state, (e.g. the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement for Bosnia and Herzegovina included a constitution that remains in place today), processes can potentially be divided into phases so that constitution-making follows the termination of a conflict through a ceasefire or other agreement. This may create opportunities for broader participation in the latter phase, including diverse members of the community or communities seeking SD, as discussed in [Section 3.2](#).

3. PRACTICE INSIGHTS: PEACE AND MEDIATION SUPPORT IN SD CONFLICTS

The problem/challenge – A number of common sticking points and barriers specific to SD conflicts prevent parties' constructive engagement. The framing of SD claims may feed into polarised positions and zero-sum dynamics and is frequently related to disregard for, ignorance of and misunderstandings about what different forms of SD involve and their potential consequences. Factors underlying state reluctance to engage meaningfully with SD claims include fears of a domino effect and eventual state disintegration, lack of understanding of rights frameworks and of the practical options for SD, and a desire to maintain the status quo, including power over economic resources.

In asymmetric conflicts, especially, the dominant power often has little incentive to engage. The desire for recognition of status and claims, disagreements over terminology, as well as victim narratives on both sides, also cause blockages. Peace practitioners need to find ways to support and encourage parties to overcome these barriers which the lack of consensus around the concept of SD make more difficult. They also face challenges around diversity and the need to engage with a broad spectrum of different perspectives, aims and agendas with regard to SD – beyond those of the negotiating parties. Table 3 highlights some of the most common factors that can make SD conflicts particularly hard to navigate.

TABLE 3: COMMON STICKING POINTS AND BARRIERS TO CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT IN SD CONFLICTS

Groups with a (potential) SD claim
<p>Framing claims</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Framing of SD claims feeds into zero sum dynamics, e.g. where groups frustrated by a lack of symbolic recognition or inadequate responses to their claims jump to calls for independence. • Groups misunderstand what different forms of SD involve and overestimate (independence) or underestimate (forms of internal SD) what they can deliver. • Groups do not recognise the potential of SD as a process and think that any concession/agreement will be the end of their struggle and are thus unwilling to consider internal SD options. • Groups fear that internal SD arrangements can easily be revoked by states and so they pursue independence.
<p>Complexity and diversity of conflict parties, constituencies and communities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wider communities' understanding of SD and ambitions and preferred strategies (violent or non-violent) are not reflected in political demands or negotiating positions. • Separate or fragmented groups have conflicting aims and agendas based on different needs and interests or different understandings of SD. • States exploit divisions where there is no single/coherent opposition position. • Internal conflict between groups on a territory such as clan rivalries and local disputes is not necessarily related to SD but adds an additional layer of complexity.

table continued over...

States parties, constituencies and communities

Fears and misunderstandings around SD and human rights

- Fears or misconceptions around SD, which they equate with secession and as a threat to state sovereignty and territorial integrity. Even where groups do not frame claims as SD or as demands for independence, governments nevertheless perceive them as such and resist on that basis.
- Fear of a slippery slope from internal SD to independence claims if a group is granted some form of self-governance.
- Fear of setting a precedent for further claims from other groups, replication of demands in other regions and further disintegration of the state.
- State resistance to rights frameworks – including ideological opposition to the notion of group rights, including minority and indigenous peoples' rights – that set out options for self-governance.
- Lack of understanding of rights frameworks, including fear (or claims that) granting rights for one group will threaten the rights of others.

Power dynamics

- Asymmetric contexts where there is no incentive for the powerholder to engage because the risks outweigh the benefits – even though there may be high costs for the power holder in not engaging to reach a mutually acceptable solution.
- As powerholders, states prefer to 'manage' a SD conflict by reducing violence rather than attempting to resolve it.
- Isolationist tactics, e.g. limiting trade or diplomatic contacts, are used to keep opponents weak.
- The party with a (potential) SD claim fails to strike a deal while the usually more powerful state is weakened, believing that they will achieve their aims if they hold out long enough.
- State reluctance to relinquish economic power including control of natural resources.

Denial of conflict and resistance to outsider engagement

- States resist internationalisation of a conflict (often by invoking sovereignty) as they do not want the UN or other intergovernmental organisations or states to intervene.
- States deny the existence or significance of a conflict, e.g. by characterising it as a law and order problem.
- The listing of an opposition group as terrorist by the national government or international system prevents engagement between parties and creates challenges for third party support.

Diversity and representation

- Government positions do not represent wider constituencies or populations and resist inclusion of other perspectives that may not be in line with their aims and strategies.

Both / all sides

Polarisation and entrenchment

- Parties articulate what they don't want (i.e. what they fear), then 'dig in' for reasons related to layers of grievance or a dysfunctional peace process.

Recognition and status

- Opposition groups want recognition of their status as politically independent leaders before engaging in dialogue with states.
- States fear any engagement with the opposition implies recognition of a claim.
- Victim narratives on both sides require recognition of past wrongs before dialogue can make progress.

Terminology

- Disputed terminology blocks engagement, e.g. disagreement on the name of a territory where a group is situated.
- Sensitivity around terms such as 'reconciliation' that have negative connotations for one side.

What can peace practitioners do? Effective peacebuilding and mediation practice can be adapted to respond to the particular dynamics of SD conflicts. It may be possible to work directly with parties in SD conflicts to address fears and misunderstandings underlying their resistance to engaging peacefully with their adversaries. Peace practitioners can help pinpoint and find creative ways to circumvent sticking points and seemingly intractable problems preventing or blocking a formal peace process, including by enabling wider societal engagement that brings in other perspectives and approaches. They can also work with parties in preparing for or undertaking negotiations and help build capacity for governance where this is already enjoyed to a degree or (more) is sought. Engagement with different groups – separately or together – needs to be carefully choreographed and communicated. Peace practitioners also need to be aware of their own positions and how they are perceived by others. The following sections set out basic principles that should guide peace practitioner engagement with conflict parties, constituencies and communities and share some insights and examples from practice.

3.1. PRINCIPLES AND GUIDANCE FOR ENGAGEMENT

These principles and guidelines are applicable to engagement with conflict parties individually, as well as situations involving dialogue across divides. They apply to many conflict situations, but the particular characteristics of SD conflicts, including complexity and layers of claims and their often emotionally charged and protracted nature make them especially challenging. The following are highlighted as things to look out for, consider, and prepare for when engaging in situations where SD is an issue.

Early engagement

Experiences of (perceived) systematic discrimination, disadvantage and violence serve to fuel SD claims which may in time become accompanied by violence. Preventive engagement before violence (re)erupts and positions become more entrenched as the result of violence is particularly pertinent in such conflicts. Tensions around SD claims and identity-related grievances can quickly evolve and escalate if they are ignored or responses fail to meet the needs and interests of claimants.⁴⁹

Conflict mediation at an early stage, including the local level, can make arrangements more likely to succeed in the long term by building confidence among all sides.⁵¹ Early warning and effective early engagement is all the more essential in the current global climate of growing inequality, failures of participation, including restrictions on the right to vote even in established democracies, the dangerous normalisation of bias and prejudice, and a rise in hate speech fuelling violence which is often directed at marginalised and minority groups.⁵²

EXAMPLE 2

The demands of the Tuareg people in Mali – who share a language, culture and nomadic lifestyle distinct from the rest of the population – have developed over time. Having been convinced of the possibilities of greater autonomy, they agreed to decentralisation. But this was only administrative, not political, and when it failed to meet their needs and expectations, three further rebellions saw increasingly ambitious objectives and demands and an exponential growth in the depth of mistrust between the parties. When the 2014-2015 Algiers peace process got underway their demands were more akin to confederation i.e. two independent entities that would have some common elements.⁵⁰

Principles of equality and participation

Taking proactive measures that uphold the human rights of all living within a state's jurisdiction, including minorities and indigenous peoples, can build trust between communities and the state and address forms of inequality, injustice and exclusion from power that commonly underlie SD conflicts, so preventing or helping to resolve them.⁵³ Such measures should ensure representation and effective participation of communities in public and economic affairs, as well as influence over matters affecting them – which may involve finding adequate agreed self-governance arrangements.⁵⁴

Effective participation and representation are not only essential for addressing grievances and making SD arrangements work but are also fundamental to processes of conflict prevention and resolution. Enabling a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including civil society, local peacebuilders, and affected populations to engage on the substance and procedure of negotiations is particularly important in SD conflicts, for example where arrangements prioritise power sharing between elites.⁵⁵ It is also crucial that directly affected populations have a say where arrangements will have a substantial impact on them, e.g. where secession or another form of territorial self-governance will create 'new' minorities within their borders.

Particular attention is required in post-conflict settings, where tensions between minority and majority communities may remain a flashpoint.⁵⁶ Ensuring broad participation in peace talks is hard, and where the process of arriving at an agreement has been narrow, greater efforts will be needed at the implementation stage to ensure broad representation and effective participation, particularly of those communities most directly affected.⁵⁷

Complexity, diversity and change in SD conflicts

The spectrum and diversity of views and multiple layers of perspectives and claims are often amplified in SD conflicts. This is partly due to their long-term nature and the different groups, factions and divisions that develop over time. Peace practitioners may be faced with multiple – and sometimes competing – claims and positions expressed by different identity groups within a state's jurisdiction, all with their own experiences, needs and aspirations. A situation may involve one or more claims within movements or groups seeking some form of SD. SD claims may also arise within a territory that already enjoys some form of SD, whether as a self-governing entity or one that has itself gained independence. This complexity is frequently the result of the imposition of ill-fitting colonial boundaries, as in many African, Southeast Asian and Pacific contexts. The dissolution of the Soviet Union likewise led to complicated layers of claims as states like Georgia (re)gained independence, but other previously autonomous republics did not, such as Abkhazia, where many had been unhappy about their experience as an autonomous republic within Georgia and did not see themselves as part of an independent Georgia.

States parties to SD conflicts are also not monolithic. The state is not synonymous with national governments and there may be opportunities for engagement on SD issues with sectors and institutions (security, justice, religion, education, culture, etc) at different levels even when central government is resistant to the concept of SD or related rights claims. For example, civil servants may be more open than political leaders to pragmatic dialogue – free of political rhetoric – aimed at reaching solutions, while local governments can also be more open to negotiating practical solutions to SD claims. In other cases, though, the position of the state is quite inflexibly concentrated in a principal leader (president or prime minister). In such instances, it is important to seek direct contact with her or him, as any arguments in favour of a settlement will otherwise likely be misrepresented when channelled upwards from the interlocutors engaged by the mediators.⁵⁸

In cases where the conflict is less with the government than the state, this can pose particular problems. In the Catalan context, for example, while it is possible for those with SD claims to engage with politicians, it can be a struggle to do so with other parts of the state, e.g. with the judiciary in cases of political repression. Political actors may have limited leverage or might hide behind the power of the courts or police. The media also play an influential role in building a narrative in support of Spanish State unity and nationalism, generating negative attitudes against Catalans seeking SD and justifying political repression.⁵⁹ Openness to dialogue and negotiation around SD can also shift with changes in political leadership.

Wider constituencies and populations, including diaspora, on both or all sides of a conflict may hold diverse views and positions with regard to SD issues, including the nature of claims being made, nation state models, and approaches to managing diversity more broadly. Sectors of society that advocate a different approach or model for SD to that put forward by main conflict actors may be marginalised or vilified by powerholders pushing a certain position. Working with political constituencies and wider populations can help amplify alternative voices and may help change narratives. Even where civil society space is restricted, this can contribute to change further down the line.

Peace practitioners should seek to engage not only with moderate and pro-peace voices that can support a peace process, but also those that advocate or perpetuate violence as a strategy to reach their SD goals, such as non-state armed groups (NSAGs) or protest movements. In SD conflicts it is common for such groups to be classified by national or international systems as terrorists, bandits or rebels or for the conflict to be characterised as a law-and-order problem, thus criminalising them. But ignoring or excluding them interferes with the ability of third parties to support them in a way that could help resolve conflicts and can also cause them to become more extreme, whereas inclusion in a peace process can have an important neutralising function.⁶⁰ Even longstanding violent movements can work out the conditions for such change, as in the case of separatist group Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) in Spain discussed in [Section 3.2](#). Peace practitioners should also attempt to engage with those – in government and on the street – who advocate repressive measures against those who make such claims.

Generational differences can influence positions and, in some cases, can significantly shift dynamics and reorient claims of groups seeking SD. For example, age rather than factors like ethnicity, education or geography is now the main driver of calls for a referendum on Scottish independence.⁶¹

The passing down of historical narratives of grievance and victimhood over the generations is also significant in many SD conflicts and may require different approaches according to generation. See, for example, how memory work in Georgia and Abkhazia is engaging with younger people as discussed in [Example 4](#).

A host of national and international stakeholders may also be directly involved in or influence conflict dynamics in a context where SD is potentially an issue. Kin and 'patron' states, former colonial powers or third-party international mediators such as regional inter-governmental organisations (RIGOs) may be particularly influential in such cases. Being aware of common SD-related dynamics and considering whether and how to engage with other stakeholders is therefore vital, as explored in [Section 4.2](#).



Understanding the context

Peace practitioners need solid understanding of the context where SD is an issue including local grievances, government concerns and their underlying dynamics. For example, in the peace process between the Ethiopian government and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), the chief negotiator on the Kenyan facilitation team was very knowledgeable about the group's grievances and the evolving context. This helped to build a trusting relationship with the ONLF during the negotiation and work through internal nuances as he understood the changing nature of the political climate and the context. [Annex 1](#) summarises key elements on which factual and subjective information should be sought in SD conflicts, including with respect to demographics, jurisdictional matters, key actors and groups involved, their relationships and power dynamics.

Good analysis can support contextual knowledge. An intersectional approach to analysis is particularly important in SD conflicts. Identity is multifaceted, fluid and subject to change, with various aspects coming to the fore depending on the context and in reaction to outside influences. Where groups feel threatened, marginalised or discriminated against, they may mobilise around a shared cultural, linguistic, or religious identity.

Positioning may change as situations evolve. For example, in India, the Telegu-speaking people, a seemingly homogenous group seeking autonomy from the State of Madras, became quite sharply divided once this was achieved. Intersectional analysis can reveal multiple identity markers, how they intersect and the experiences of individuals or groups in connection with systems of power.⁶² Stakeholder and power analyses can also help unpack the rights and claims of different constituencies and how they interact with the rights and claims of others as a basis for balancing the needs and interests of different groups and reconciling differences.⁶³ A conflict systems approach can complement other analysis by focusing on the patterns of interaction between stakeholders and conflict drivers and entry points to reduce violence and resolve conflicts. This can be useful in SD conflicts in untangling not only underlying structural causes, but also the role of 'intangibles' like emotions and symbols relating to identity, historical grievance, loss, and victor/victim narratives on both sides, which can present a major barrier to conflict resolution in these cases. Gendered analysis is also crucial to understanding power dynamics fuelling conflict, and in relation to solutions, for example, where new governance arrangements are dominated by male elites, as discussed in Example 3.⁶⁴

EXAMPLE 3

In Bougainville there has been a widely stated desire for independence. Many male ex-combatant leaders now hold significant power in the government either as elected members of parliament, advisers or government officials. A senior leader of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army was elected as the Bougainville President in 2020 on a platform of delivering independence for Bougainvilleans. The mandate given through his election reinforced the feeling among ex-combatants that their political positions rely on delivering that promise. Independence is central to their narrative around rehabilitation, redressing the injustices of the past and compensation for the sacrifices made during the Bougainville conflict in pursuit of SD. This precludes an open and inclusive discussion among wider society, including women and girls, about what independence would mean in practice, including in terms of connections with PNG. The majority of people are more focused on livelihoods, access to services and the day-to-day practicalities of transforming relationships within Bougainville and with PNG than on political status issues.⁶⁵

Understanding drivers and tactical use of violence is also crucial in often-protracted SD conflicts. This includes what drives a group to resort to violence at a particular juncture e.g. less powerful parties may do so where there is impasse in asymmetric SD conflicts; and how parties use violence strategically to advance claims and shift a process or garner external support for their cause e.g. from a kin state as discussed in [Section 4.2](#).

Over-simplifying complex and multi-layered challenges in SD conflicts can lead to interventions on the proclaimed reasons for conflicts, rather than on the carefully identified and analysed structural causes of conflict.⁶⁶ Limited analysis and assumptions may be due to lack of information about or connections with a conflict, but also arise from outsiders' reluctance or inability to recognise nuance; either way, the end result is distrust. In addition to ensuring their own analysis is as comprehensive and accurate as possible, peace practitioners can play a role in supporting others by sharing information and approaches. Civil society, local mediators and insider mediators can all help bridge knowledge and situational awareness gaps, play an important early warning function, and facilitate access to new partnerships for others including third party outsiders such as the UN and RIGOs.⁶⁷

Relationship building and long-term engagement

Peace practitioners need to be able discuss parties' strategies and positions with them and sometimes challenge them in order to facilitate peace dialogue. Acting as a 'critical friend' bringing in different perspectives and asking hard questions can be difficult in SD conflicts where parties' attitudes tend to harden around maximalist positions regarding levels and types of autonomy. Long-term engagement, building respect from the ground up by working with local partners, and developing links and working with political leaders and civil society actors in SD conflicts can help build trust and relationships with parties that enable those rigorous conversations.

As many SD conflicts are so protracted, peace and mediation processes need a long-term outlook in order to try to address parties' entrenched and polarised positions and work through practical options as well as emotive aspects of resolution. SD claims tend not to go away if the solution does not meet the real needs and interests of those bringing them, and pushing to reach an agreement may be counterproductive. Often parties need to work through what they do not want before they are ready to discuss what they do want and what is feasible. Sustained engagement requires long-term and adaptive funding, but this increasingly goes against the grain of many donors' short-term funding horizons.⁶⁸

Adaptability

Unanticipated geopolitical disruptions or other shocks such as natural disasters can have a devastating impact on years of careful and painstaking work for peace in a context. Not only do peace practitioners have to address practical challenges in terms of how to continue operating, but they also have to understand the emotional impacts. In SD conflicts – and depending on the nature of the shock – these may be related to feelings of loss of dignity or threats to identity, as well as economic empowerment or political rights. While it may initially seem that any progress has been wiped out, such shocks can also bring unexpected opportunities for resolving SD conflicts by opening up new space for dialogue. In the case of Aceh, the 2004 Tsunami, while not the sole vector of peace, created common ground and acted as a powerful catalyst in talks between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Indonesian government that were already under way.⁶⁹ In Kashmir, unexpected developments have upended peacebuilding processes but have also engendered new relationships and possibilities, as discussed in [Example 4](#).

EXAMPLE 4

The Indian government's revocation of Kashmir's autonomy and special status under the Indian constitution in a surprise move in August 2019 led to a complete breakdown in the already stalled peace process and sent India-Pakistan relations plummeting to a new low.⁷⁰ Kashmiris who had wanted to accommodate some Indian control were undermined and hardened their stance. Responding to this situation, the Sulah (peace) Dialogue process – a track two process involving former military and diplomatic officials, journalists and civil society activists from India and Pakistan as well as both sides of the Line of Control dividing Kashmir – had to adapt and to convene separately on either side with the aim of maintaining and extending channels of dialogue. Over time, sustained engagement helped think through entry points with Kashmiris and interlocutors from India and Pakistan and re-enabled some space for discussion around political participation and conflict resolution. It has also been possible to identify other spaces for collaboration not focused on Kashmir, e.g. on climate change across the India-Pakistan border in Punjab.⁷¹

Assessing information and claims

The challenges of multiple overlapping claims – to the right to SD and what the claimants want to with that right – raise questions for peace and mediation support actors in terms of what constitutes a legitimate claim: who is entitled to what form of SD and who gets to decide? In order for peace practitioners to fulfil their role in supporting parties to come to an agreement, they need to assess those claims and how representative they are of the wider community. It is therefore important to understand the politics of the situation, including where internal or external political leaders or others are seeking to instrumentalise SD for their own ends. A claim might on the face of it provide legitimacy, but be hiding an externally driven agenda, e.g. where a kin state is involved as was the case with Russia's invasion of Ukraine discussed in [Example 13](#).

Assessing SD claims also goes beyond negotiating a particular demand, such as control over a specific resource like land. Many other grievances often lie behind such a demand, which need to be acknowledged and considered in order to identify workable and sustainable solutions to address them.

To help parties navigate disputes over the validity of claims while avoiding perceptions of bias, peace practitioners need to listen carefully, source accurate information and genuine perspectives, and triangulate different views and opinions. Good analysis, long-term engagement and being embedded in a situation as discussed above are instrumental in assessing the true nature of claims, the factors that inform them and the motivations behind them. Engaging with wider sectors of society can also help prevent 'invalid' claims or those with little chance of success, including by helping people think through their positions, 'translating' SD norms in ways people can understand, and raising awareness of various governance options and their practical implications, as discussed further in [Section 3.2](#).⁷²

Psychosocial dynamics of SD conflicts

Psychological dynamics underlying conflict are as important as the structural issues and require attention throughout peace and mediation processes. The visceral nature of SD claims and the role of more 'intangible' and emotive issues of history, loyalties and grievance as conflict drivers cannot be ignored. How they are handled can either facilitate or obstruct a process.

Parity of esteem – For those seeking SD – and particularly in asymmetric conflicts – the need to be heard and for their grievances and claims to be recognised and taken seriously is often paramount. For example, focusing in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict exclusively on the relationships between Georgia and Russia ignores the agency and interests of the Abkhaz, and their choice to claim independence, making them feel unheard and disparaged.⁷³

Without parity of esteem and respect, groups do not feel able to enter into dialogue: it is hard to listen to 'the other' before they feel heard themselves.⁷⁴ Parties may dig into current polarised positions or adopt more radical ones as they feel stuck in a battle over the validity of claims rather than trying to reach a solution with their adversaries.⁷⁵ Gaining greater autonomy through internal arrangements does not necessarily address the problem, as those seeking SD may still feel like a second class group and believe they will only gain true equality with independence.⁷⁶

Groups may also fear that the state, which will always hold a majority and power, will take away or downgrade existing internal autonomy arrangements. In Catalonia, for example, many people view their existing autonomy as unstable, which breeds feelings of uncertainty and insecurity and fuels the sense that independence is the only way to really achieve respect and parity of esteem.⁷⁷ Psychological impacts can be devastating where this happens, as illustrated by the Indian government's revocation of Kashmir's autonomy status, discussed in [Example 4](#).

Conflict parties often enter talks with a deep sense of mistrust based on fears, historical biases and prejudices, and a deep-seated sense of injustice. In SD conflicts where the need for respect and recognition is so central, creating a space that can provide a modicum of trust and empathy between parties can help move a process forward. This may start with building trust in the dialogue or mediation process itself and in the mediator or other individuals or team supporting the process.⁷⁸ Encouraging parties to recognise their opponents' demands as valid – even if they say they do not agree with them – can enable engagement, as often happens when parties drop opposition to their inclusion on the agenda for negotiations.⁷⁹

Trauma and loss – Violent conflict or authoritarian rule causes trauma for populations and for those involved in negotiation. Parties and populations on both sides of a conflict may experience feelings of loss relating to the past, present or future (i.e. a fear of future loss). For SD parties and groups, these may be associated with loss of historical autonomy or dashed hopes of regaining such autonomy when a foreign occupation ends, as was the case in many parts of the former Soviet Union. For the rest of the people in the state, there may be a sense of being diminished if territory is lost even if most people did not have any identification with that area. These feelings are even more pronounced where key sites and foundational moments in the national identity are in that territory, as can be seen in the Serbs' sense of connection to the site of the battle of Kosovo 1389.⁸⁰

Individual and collective trauma can be ongoing and intergenerational and can block a process where those affected find it hard to contemplate a different future.⁸¹ Peace practitioners need to acknowledge this and make space in processes to accommodate it. The risks of treating a process as simply transactional are exemplified in experience from the 2014–15 peace process in Mali, where the desire of the mediators not to dwell on history and to focus on getting to an agreement meant that emotions were ignored when they emerged in the process. This contributed to a lack of buy-in and subsequent failure of the agreement. The process would have benefited from track one, 1.5 and two processes to enable discussions about history and the reasons for SD demands and to educate the wider population in this regard.⁸²

The strength of emotion behind SD claims and the way people talk about the conflict and potential solutions often correlates with the extent to which people have been directly affected by violence and repression. In Bougainville, for example, feelings on the region's political status tend to be more visceral in the central and southern parts of the region, where the violence has been most intense, while those less affected by violence tend to have a more objective approach to conversations about the future.⁸³

A sense of loss is common where one of the drivers of the desire for SD is to link with and (re)join a kin community in another territory. For example, the Tuareg in Mali seek to reunite with their brethren in Algeria, Niger and Burkina Faso. This longing can be particularly difficult to counter as the strength of feeling may pre-empt any consideration of the benefits of life in the present state even when the standards of living and wellbeing are higher than might be possible in a new entity.⁸⁴

Peace practitioners need to be sensitive to symbolism and pay attention to the intangible – including to the things left unsaid.⁸⁵ They need emotional intelligence to allow grievances and claims to be expressed and, rather than ignoring emotion, to respond with empathy rather than sympathy.⁸⁶ Participants need space and sufficient time to tell their stories – sometimes repeatedly. As one experienced negotiator notes: 'You need to be patient and bear in mind they are the angry ones who are getting back what is rightfully theirs.'⁸⁷ Peace practitioners also need to be careful to avoid setting off emotional triggers which requires careful use of language and terminology. In the Georgian-Abkhaz context, for example, talking about reconciliation is problematic for the Abkhaz who interpret Georgian use of the term as implying a return to the way things were, i.e. reintegration into Georgia. In the Philippines, the word 'independence' is a trigger for the government, whereas on the Bangsamoro side the priority has been acknowledgement of their separate identity within the framework of the Philippine state – and legitimising of the name Bangsamoro.⁸⁸

This existential challenge to identity may be widespread, if repressed, among the whole community, not just those who have suffered directly from the conflict and unless the difficult discussions around these emotions are facilitated, public attitudes will continue to act as a brake on attempts to negotiate settlements that will be acceptable to all. The arts can play a significant role in surfacing the issues and stimulating discussion and reflection through theatre, the visual arts, comedy, music and songs.⁸⁹ In addition to those directly affected, psychosocial support may also be provided to parties or wider communities outside of a peace and mediation process and may be completely separate or linked. Demand – or openness to – such support will vary by context. For example, in Cameroon, mediation and peace support actors encountered a general openness to talking about psychosocial issues among stakeholders, including requests from several organisations to support such work. Especially among the English-speaking population, the impact of indiscriminate violence and suffering has compounded the general experience of marginalisation. Psychosocial support has become an element of process design in several dialogue initiatives, for example among young people.⁹⁰

A visitor at the Corridors of Conflict: Abkhazia 1989-1995 exhibition in Tbilisi, October 2019, listens to an oral history recording from the Memory Project archive.
© Keith Barnes/Conciliation Resources



Historical narratives: dealing with the past and looking forward

Dealing with the past (DwtP) involves measures to address past injustice and harm while at the same time creating a fair society in the present and better prospects for sustainable peace.⁹¹ It is particularly necessary, but also challenging, as past events are often referred to or instrumentalised in SD conflicts to justify positions and strategies. Identity-driven historical narratives are often inextricably linked to political arguments for SD, e.g. through notions of 'fighting the oppressor', existential fears around group identity or survival of 'the nation', or competing narratives of who committed the first or worst atrocities in the SD conflict.

Peace practitioners, including donors, often believe that dealing with the past is too difficult, sensitive or divisive. Similarly, some groups seeking SD believe that the past can only be addressed once their SD ambitions are achieved. For example, in Bougainville a prevailing view among the population (particularly amongst former combatants) is that dealing with the past can only come after independence. But in many SD situations, there is no escaping the fact that the past is very present in current political and public discourse, is always at the back of people's minds, and is blocking progress to

settlement. Peace practitioners need to find ways to engage with historical narratives and identity issues and help create space in which they can be addressed. What is possible or appropriate will depend on the local context, the stage and type of conflict, and on what people in that context are willing to accept.⁹² It is therefore important to explore, assess and work with the particular understandings and approaches that are present, including by drawing on local institutions and customary practice specific to the sociocultural context.⁹³

One approach, described in Example 5, is to support affected societies to develop less polarised historical narratives, based on more accurate information and aimed at restoring a more objective picture of the past. This is sensitive, painstaking and inherently political work and can be resisted or seen as betrayal of interests where monolithic conflict narratives are challenged. Generational dynamics, i.e. what is being passed on and learned by younger people, are also important, and engagement and messaging may need framing according to age. For example, young people may know very little about the past or mythologise the struggle of the previous generation, so the challenge becomes less about addressing inherited past grievances and more about how to educate young people about different lived realities and experiences.

EXAMPLE 5

The Memory Project, supported by Conciliation Resources, involves documentation of Georgian-Abkhaz relations from 1989 to 1996. The project aims to provide space and bring new voices into a discussion about dominant (opposing) narratives and provide access to more holistic, less exclusivist historical accounts and memories. Partners on either side of the conflict work separately to collect new oral history accounts and collate archives of existing print, photo and video materials that can fill gaps and enable a deeper understanding of the recent violent past and reflection upon it. Some archive materials have been shared with wider circles in presentations or exhibitions. In the course of the work, Memory Project participants found that many young people knew very little about the history of the conflict. For example, Georgians displaced during the war were often reluctant to talk about the past with their children, leaving a younger generation with little access to information, as well as no access to perspectives from the other side. In Abkhazia, many people resist such memory work as a perceived threat to entrenched narratives that support the push for Abkhaz independence.⁹⁴

Addressing deep political and societal divisions involves not only acknowledging and dealing with the past, but also envisioning and working toward a fair and inclusive future. It is possible for peace practitioners to work on the past, present and future simultaneously. While it is important not to become mired in the past, a balance must be struck between looking back and looking forward. Peace practitioners can help by acknowledging past wrongs, seeking to understand how groups came to adopt current positions and enabling people to build on past experiences and use this history as a prompt for reflection on what a better future would look like.⁹⁵ 'Futures thinking' methodologies provide a useful tool to help parties question assumptions, compare possibilities and imagine alternatives for a more peaceful future, which do not deny the feelings that drive the demand for and the resistance to SD, but look at how they could be accommodated in future arrangements. Methods that look a long way into the future – years or decades – and consider broader trends such as economics and the environment are particularly suited to SD conflicts where parties are stuck in polarised and entrenched position.

Shifting the focus away from the immediate dynamics of conflict and onto scenarios or visions allows parties to think in terms of possible, rather than necessarily their preferred futures and explore and compare new options. In considering alternative futures and their possible impacts, parties can 'stress test' the perceived costs and benefits of separation, internal SD or intermediate arrangements; and equally, consider previously discounted options and develop or adjust strategies for pursuing their goals and averting undesirable outcomes.⁹⁶

3.2. PEACE AND MEDIATION SUPPORT IN SD CONFLICTS: EXAMPLES AND LESSONS FROM PRACTICE

The problem/challenge – As illustrated in Table 3, processes can get stuck due to entrenched and often mutually exclusive positions in SD conflicts. Especially in cases of extreme repression, groups may jump to SD – and particularly calls for independence – out of frustration, even though it may not be the most effective way to meet needs, be realistic in terms of chances of 'success' (including international recognition) and may play into the zero-sum dynamics of SD vs territorial integrity. States may be resistant to any or certain forms of SD (particularly external) and refuse to engage; even where groups don't frame claims as SD, governments may nevertheless perceive them as such and resist on that basis. Even in relatively democratic states, governments can be unresponsive or repressive in the face of SD claims; the level of democracy does not equate with positive attitudes to SD.⁹⁷

What can peace practitioners do? Working separately with single or fragmented conflict parties can be a valuable precursor to mediation or help unblock a process. Peace practitioners can work inclusively with conflict parties and wider communities with potential SD claims to help them analyse their current positions and likely outcomes, (re)frame and articulate positions and demands, and pursue their objectives strategically and peacefully through dialogue. They can also support states and wider populations to engage constructively with those bringing SD claims. Where a peace process is ongoing, working with groups separately can also potentially inform the mediator of different and shifting positions and indirectly put pressure on the negotiating parties. In the absence of a functioning peace process, it helps to keep interaction and dialogue alive.

This section provides some examples of approaches and techniques from practice for engaging with conflict parties, constituencies and wider communities, including some of the benefits and challenges of working with single or fragmented parties.⁹⁹

EXAMPLE 6

In Kashmir, the discourse around conflict resolution is mainly dictated by India and Pakistan. This does not include complete SD for Kashmiris, although many Kashmiri groups are seeking recognition of their own identities and share a common desire to find solutions to self-governance issues. Awareness of the spectrum of options for SD is ever present in the background, but concrete developments currently seem like a distant prospect. Some level of dialogue and internal interaction within different Kashmiri groups has been possible even in the most difficult circumstances and has been a significant influence in encouraging exploration of options for political compromise. Maintaining intra-group dialogue has been a key component of this process.⁹⁸

Accompaniment of groups with a potential SD claim

Peace practitioners often accompany opposition groups to help them clarify needs, aspirations and demands and think through aims and options, including the consequences of invoking or advancing specific claims and terms related to SD. Many factors influence the framing of SD claims and accompaniment can support groups with a potential claim to pinpoint what they really want and then find the most effective and peaceful way to get there. This may also require navigation of the underlying emotive and symbolic elements, e.g. relating to identity, historical grievance and loss that can present serious obstacles even where a 'logical' solution is found.

Accompaniment can also help SD opposition groups untangle normative and legal issues relating to their claims, as illustrated in Example 7. Although as one peace practitioner observes: 'More often than not politics trumps law: a legal opinion tends to only have as much sway as the political actors want to give it.'¹⁰⁰

Given the often-multiple layers of SD claims, peace practitioners may also need to accompany groups who are – or fear they will become – minorities in a self-governing territory. For example, the SPF is working with Buddhists living in the Muslim-majority Patani region of Southern Thailand who fear the impacts on them if the latter's calls for territorial

EXAMPLE 7

Conciliation Resources' work with the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), as part of peace talks with the government of Ethiopia facilitated by the Kenyan government (2012–18), contributed to a recalibration of the ONLF's strategy. Support for ONLF leadership to reflect on their immediate demand for a referendum on the exercise of the right to SD for the Somali Region of Ethiopia (also known as the Ogaden), as provided by Article 39 of the 1994 constitution, contributed to the development of a Roadmap and Transition to Peace Strategy to address the issue and help move the process forward during the talks and outside of talks.¹⁰¹

During the lengthy and 'stop-start' peace process, the parties had reached an impasse over the Ethiopian government's demand that the ONLF accept the constitution as the framework for negotiations. The constitutional issue had important substantive implications, but was also of symbolic importance; the ONLF argued that the region's right to SD predated the 1994 constitution hence their rejection of the constitutional framework. An expert legal opinion commissioned by Conciliation Resources eventually helped to break the two-year deadlock by providing sufficient 'constructive ambiguity' for both sides to agree to re-enter the talks process.¹⁰²

autonomy are granted, including the possibility they would become subject to Sharia law. SPF's support focuses on providing spaces for Buddhist and Muslim engagement in which they can negotiate their positions as an alternative to violence.

Accompaniment may run into practical difficulties where opposition SD groups are proscribed. For example, Conciliation Resources faced difficulties working with the ONLF which was designated as a terrorist group until 2018; these included risks to staff travelling to Ethiopia and limitations on support for some ONLF activities. Restrictions can be addressed creatively and pragmatically, for example, by enabling international travel for NSAG members to attend peace talks outside the context.

Fragmented or multiple opposition groups and movements

Opponents will readily exploit divisions among those seeking SD, or who may have a claim, where they lack a single coherent position. Peace practitioners can help such groups to address and resolve internal differences of opinion and dissent and develop a common strategy. Similarly, when a number of groups with a potential SD claim share some goals but do not necessarily agree on their precise form or pathways to achieving them, they can be supported to recognise commonalities, work through differences and potentially facilitate greater alignment.¹⁰³

EXAMPLE 8

An exercise with a group of leaders of diverse Bougainvillean factions enabled the exploration of different options for SD while also bridging deep divisions between the opponents and supporters of secession. While there were multiple fractures between proponents of different forms of SD, Bougainvilleans and external advisers to the various factions worked with leaders of the factions across the Bougainville political spectrum to identify the range of main options together. These were then evaluated against 20 factors to be considered in assessing the best possible option. It was agreed that the middle option – a deferred and binding referendum with a high level of autonomy until the referendum took place – was most workable. Both sides were comfortable with this option. For those seeking independence, the referendum provided the possibility of secession, while those seeking internal forms of self-governance were confident that either the majority would vote against independence or that by the time the deferred referendum was held, a consensus among Bougainvilleans would be reached on the future political status of Bougainville. The outcome was shared with the then newly elected bipartisan Bougainville People's Congress and agreed to by unanimous consensus. The details of that outcome became the 'combined Bougainville negotiating position', which then set the agenda for the subsequent two plus years of negotiation and for the key elements of the peace agreement.¹⁰⁴

State parties are also likely to point to the lack of a single coherent opposition from group members living inside and outside the territory, especially where political leadership is based abroad or where long-term diaspora are out of touch with what is happening in the context. For example, the main Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora believe the Sri Lankan Tamils are entitled to independence because of past oppression and are pushing for external SD based on a rights-based discourse, whereas those within the country are more open to internal forms of self-governance.¹⁰⁵ Engagement with multiple armed groups beyond the main opposition with a SD claim can take place separately or together within or outside the context.

Taking a systemic 'whole country' approach to engaging with conflict parties as well as constituencies and wider populations provides peace practitioners with an overview of different needs, interests and aspirations for SD. They can then enable strategic discussions within – and potentially between – different groups around whether to push for reform of state governance as a whole or to take a piecemeal approach with each group bringing their own specific demands.

EXAMPLE 9

In Cameroon, the government has used divide-and-rule tactics to govern and, in the context of the conflict, keep the opposition weak. Some peace practitioners have adopted a multitrack approach to the peace process aimed at understanding and engaging with divisions at different societal levels. For example, there is a perceived polarisation between the population in the two Anglophone regions, which have their own cultural, social and economic traits. A general fear of dominance of Northwestern over Southwestern has been stirred and exploited by the government. Moreover, people easily label themselves and others: as separatists, unionists, decentralists and federalists, thereby adding to societal divisions. As a result of armed violence and polarisation, community-level tensions have also been on the rise, with inter-community conflicts escalating, for example between farmers and pastoralists. Beyond the conflict in the Anglophone regions and the specific tensions related to it, the multitrack approach also aims to incorporate what is happening in the rest of the country into the analysis. Some Anglophones argue that unless the country as a whole becomes more democratic, their problems will not be resolved, while others prefer to pursue their own demands regardless of what happens in other regions of the state.¹⁰⁶



Residents walk past a destroyed car following fighting between the military and Anglophone separatists near Buea, Southwest region of Cameroon, May 2019. © Giles Clarke/UNOCHA via Getty Images

Engaging with state parties in SD conflicts

Peace practitioners can support states to overcome their fears and mistrust of groups with SD claims and help convince them it is in their own interest to engage in meaningful dialogue even when they are more powerful and in a position to use coercive methods against the opposition. Asymmetry is a factor to varying degrees in situations where SD is an issue, including where a *de facto* independent territory is isolated internationally and weaker as a result. Peace practitioners can use problem-solving and interest-based approaches to work with the dominant party to reframe the conflict and look at it from different angles. Futures thinking can be a useful tool to do this. For example, a process can show government stakeholders what the future might look like if they do not resolve the conflict and encourage them to address fears they have been avoiding.¹⁰⁷ Supporting parties to think through the impact of external influences, such as the backing a kin state or other powerful states, or other geopolitical developments can also affect a state's willingness to engage with SD claims, as discussed in [Section 4.2](#).

Supporting state parties to develop negotiation capacity can also be beneficial to a process. While the weaker party has an interest in thinking about their strategy and reaching out to external actors because they want to strengthen their position, this can sometimes put the stronger party on the back foot, for example, where

parties seeking SD come to the table with research or arguments that the dominant party is not prepared for. This may have a detrimental effect on the process if it leads to instinctive rejection of the arguments or delays as they then consider the implications of what is being proposed, attempt to build internal consensus on a position and develop a response. Intentionally building more time into a process for parties on both sides to build knowledge and work through options can be helpful.

Strategic use of terminology and creative language can also help address states' fears and concerns. For example, in the Georgian-Abkhaz context following the 2008 war involving Georgian and Russian forces in South Ossetia, and the Russian recognition of Abkhazia's independence, the EU coined the term 'engagement without recognition'. This referred to EU relations with Abkhazia in an attempt to reassure Georgia of the EU's support for its territorial integrity. This was important in creating the space for constructive change, although in practice it has had limitations.¹⁰⁸

Where states are resistant to the concept of group rights, it is possible to work towards solutions that respect human rights, including minority and indigenous peoples' rights, without explicitly naming or invoking them. Starting with the principle of participation and 'the will of the people', including control over matters affecting them, can be more effective in enabling states to engage where SD is an

issue because it avoids the potentially contentious terminology of SD or rights. Using broader language of peace, humanity, inclusion and democracy can also be more acceptable to parties. For example, the references by former Indian prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, to inclusive Kashmiri identity (*Kashmiryat*), humanity (*insanyat*), and democracy (*jamuryat*) in relation to the resolution of the conflict in Jammu and Kashmir resonated with many on either side of the conflict.¹⁰⁹

States can also be supported to change their language and public messaging about the opposition who may have previously been vilified as terrorists or enemies of the state. In Colombia, for example, President Santos created space for dialogue through a 'linguistic ceasefire' which involved recognising the confrontation with the FARC¹¹⁰ as an armed conflict and a shift away from calling the FARC terrorists and towards describing specific actions as terrorism.¹¹¹

While powerful states can be encouraged to move away from entrenched positions, shift the parameters of a conversation and start to build trust between parties, they will be very aware of the risks of criticism from within their own constituency, who also have to come to understand the potential benefits of a new approach. This may require emotional as well as political intelligence by both the leaders and their supporters. It is in the nature of SD conflicts that symbolic shifts, including with regard to recognition of the 'other', are important, but also difficult. States can be encouraged and supported to develop confidence-building measures (CBMs) and gestures like political declarations and apologies that demonstrate recognition of the opposition party's circumstances, narratives, or priorities.¹¹² Both can potentially break down barriers or serve as turning points in an engagement, leading to a more productive exchange and the generation of new, constructive ideas.¹¹³ For example, in the Georgian-Abkhaz context, a unilateral gesture on the part of Georgians to help the Abkhaz restore cultural archives destroyed during the war in the 1990s had symbolic impact. A small number of copies and originals of materials that many in Abkhazia perceived to be destroyed deliberately by Georgians during the war have been transferred to Abkhazia from Tbilisi through a mechanism agreed during informal dialogue. While it is still not widely known, good will from seeing Georgians being invested in helping them restore their cultural and historical memory has impacted attitudes among some parts of Abkhaz society.¹¹⁴

Engagement with local and regional governments on SD issues may also help address tensions where groups are seeking more control over their own affairs, but the national government is resistant to discussing governance issues. For example, arrangements may be agreed in relation to local environmental or planning issues (e.g., where indigenous peoples' land rights are threatened) or enabling access to services in a way that respects cultural differences, such as arrangements for provision of education in minority languages.

Strategic introduction of ideas and options

Peace practitioners in a SD conflict can support parties to (re)build relationships and communicate with one another towards finding their own mutually acceptable solutions. They can also introduce options and solutions, including models of SD, that can inform that process. These are not mutually exclusive. Mandates will depend on the organisation or individuals involved and the specifics of the conflict situation. Those mediating or facilitating a process will need to consider whether their role can encompass engagement on substantive ideas and options or should focus solely on facilitating dialogue to enable parties to reach their own agreement. In either case they need to be clear about the parameters of their roles, what they are trying to do and why – and communicate that to the parties involved, as well as to others operating in the peace and mediation field in that context.

Where conflict parties, including governments, lack knowledge, experience or imagination, introducing a range of SD options and related lessons early on that are not already embedded in the discourse may help spark ideas and stimulate progress. However, where parties get stuck in a position it is often not from lack of awareness of SD options. While states can be very defensive and unwilling to even talk about SD, for parties seeking SD, a 'what did we fight for?' narrative is a common barrier to considering the possibility of alternative perspectives or options. If parties are not ready, they may resist suggestions and dig in on their current positions. Understanding what people are ready to hear – and when – is therefore essential when it comes to challenging assumptions or positions or suggesting alternative options or approaches. At the same time, parties with SD claims all too often fail to strike a deal in situations where the usually more powerful party is weakened. Holding out for maximum aspirations can mean they end up with little or nothing in the long run if the balance of power shifts again. In such situations it can be helpful to introduce the risks of playing the long game, particularly in volatile geopolitical environments.

Peace practitioners need to carefully consider which spaces ideas and examples can be brought in at what point. If they are perceived to be pushing for a particular option or outcome, they also risk loss of trust or reputational damage which will negatively impact future engagement. Those affected by conflict may more willingly accept ideas from third parties they have longstanding relationships with, but any third party must nevertheless be careful not to burn bridges. In the Bougainville case, for example, Conciliation Resources is wary of being perceived as trying to shape or influence the narrative and discussions around what independence may look like and how it could be achieved. Conciliation Resources is careful not to engage directly on the issue, but instead focus on supporting processes that allow the parties and their constituencies to analyse issues, consider different perspectives and move the process forward with due consideration to conflict risks.¹¹⁵

Supporting parties' engagement with constituencies and wider communities

Peace practitioners can help parties connect with their constituencies, movements and wider communities, including diaspora, to: inform development of SD claims, tactics and strategies; maintain constituencies' support; and communicate their positions during a mediation or dialogue process. For example, Conciliation Resources worked with the Kenyan team and the ONLF to broaden participation in the peace process with the Ethiopian Government by engaging with the diaspora and refugees. A series of consultations with cadres and supporters allowed the ONLF to update them on the status of negotiations and reassure them that they were committed to pursuing the core aim of SD. Access to the Somali Regional State was severely restricted at that time, making broader engagement there more challenging.¹¹⁶

The case of ETA in Spain illustrates how an armed group engaged in an extensive internal consultation before going public with the decision to disband in 2018. Discussions involving more than 2000 members and individuals with links to the movement were sometimes difficult but enabled ETA to understand the priorities of different constituencies within the movement, which helped pro-peace elements gain the acceptance of sceptics or dissenters.¹¹⁷

Existing self-governing entities – which may be seeking, or be in the process of transitioning to, greater autonomy – can also be supported to connect with their supporters and communities. Peace practitioners can create or support channels and mechanisms for policymakers to engage with their constituencies and to foster public discussion regarding governance arrangements. As with any such engagement, the legitimacy of the process relies on a genuine commitment to listening and integrating diverse perspectives into policy, as discussed in Example 10.

Engaging directly with civil society and communities

Peace practitioners can also work directly with diverse groups in society outside party leaderships or structures – such as SD movements, other civil society actors and conflict-affected communities – to understand needs and interests and potentially to help them strategise on issues relating to SD.

Working with civil society actors on the side of the government in SD conflicts can help shape the atmosphere and the discourse in the wider community, insert ideas into government thinking, and build relationships with future government or state leaders.

EXAMPLE 10

There are perceptions in Bougainville that political decisions are made by a small political group who do not represent the diverse needs and voices of the people. These perceptions are partly due to a deficit in information sharing and broader engagement of the public in the political space. Communities in Bougainville have little opportunity to engage in conversations about what independence means for them in practical terms. The ABG has set up some spaces for consultations and dialogue, including a Bougainville Independence Ready Mission programme. This programme is designed to support communities and the public service to achieve 'independence readiness' by 2024 regardless of how the political dialogue with the government of PNG progresses. The ABG is also implementing a Bougainville Transition Dialogue initiative (a partnership between the ABG, UNDP and the Peace and Conflict Studies Institute Australia) that provides a mechanism for messaging between the government and communities but is challenged in how this influences strategies pursued by the elite. Conciliation Resources helped the ABG set up the Bougainville Leaders Platform, designed to allow space for sharing ideas, creative thinking, input and buy-in to the government strategy. This space has not worked as intended and was replaced by another mechanism – the Consultation Forum – which has functioned more as a platform for validating formed government positions rather than a forum for nuanced analysis of what independence will mean in practice.

This limited dialogue space exacerbates feelings of exclusion from decision making felt among the population. It also creates a risk that decisions made by the political elite lack broader support and legitimacy, thus undermining the sustainability of the outcomes of these decisions. Limited public participation also feeds into frustrations over the perceived slow progress in pursuing the SD goal, the significant investment of resources in participating in negotiations with the PNG government, and the perceived disproportionate focus of the ABG on negotiations at the expense of public service delivery in Bougainville.¹¹⁸



For example, the Schlaining Process dialogue, supported by Conciliation Resources in the context of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict pre-2008 illustrates how learning from a mixed dialogue group, including politicians and civil society, has been shared more broadly to stimulate thinking and encourage practical change in other spaces, including government.¹¹⁹ See [Example 11](#) for more details.

Different modes for public participation may also be considered, in particular those that allow for constructive and inclusive public discussion such as citizens' assemblies and public meetings.¹²⁰ For example, the Opsahl Commission was set up in 1993 as a 'citizens inquiry' involving hearings across society to explore possible ways forward for Northern Ireland. National dialogues can provide a space for civil society and communities to peacefully air grievances, express claims and to discuss fundamental questions such as identity and belonging, distribution of resources and wealth, and power relations.¹²¹ For example, Yemen's national dialogue was carefully designed to be as widely representative of all sectors of society as possible, which involved complex calculations in relation to groups and numbers. Nothing was off the table, including SD, despite Yemeni government efforts to remove it. The process was inevitably imperfect but did enable a process

of sharing and catharsis as a basis for deliberative dialogue.¹²² However, experiences and outcomes of national dialogues are mixed and discussion is needed among peace practitioners and stakeholders in relevant contexts to identify the conditions that need to be in place to ensure such dialogues do not exacerbate conflict dynamics or cause harm to participants.¹²³

Support for civil society can also be challenging, but even more important, in SD contexts where civil society is weak or disparate and there are no obvious interlocutors or where civic space is restricted. Political oppression, perpetuation of criminal narratives against SD groups or movements and curbs on freedoms of wider populations can make engaging with them difficult. Outside involvement by third party governments and (I)NGOs may also be resisted or prohibited. In the Patani case, for example, the Thai Government's limitation of civic space means those with claims have nowhere to talk freely about their future (including politics, rights, etc) and the trend of co-option of civil society organisations makes it very difficult for them to operate. The multi-level, multi-stakeholder approach taken by SPF as described in [Example 12](#) helps address this problem by developing a web of relationships at different levels inside and outside the context and taking advantage of any opportunity to engage and influence positively.

Capacity building

Comparative learning – Supporting conflict parties, broader constituencies and communities to explore the meaning of SD and viable options helps broaden the conversation and may inform different strategies and outcomes. Groups may be keen to maintain indigenous approaches and create a ‘homegrown’ system, but comparative practice can also provide ideas and generate new insights. Parties can be introduced to options they may not have been aware of or previously considered such as non-territorial solutions addressing education, cultural and language issues that can potentially meet a group’s needs while also allaying state concerns about territorial integrity. Models of free association, as discussed in [Example 1](#) or innovative approaches such as arrangements that effectively make borders irrelevant may also be less familiar. For example, enabling travel and trade across the Line of Control (LoC) dividing Kashmir generated unprecedented collaboration and optimism for a shared future among Kashmiri people across the LoC divided along lines of religious, regional, and cultural identity.¹²⁴ However, while offering opportunities for contact and improved relationships, such initiatives can threaten those who fear the consequences of weakening lines of demarcation.¹²⁵

It is also important to be aware of the history of discussion of a particular model or option in a context or region and the reactions it invokes. In some cases, options introduced may not fall far from those already on the table or previously resisted, but may be acceptable depending on how they are framed or on the messenger. People may be more willing to accept a message from an outsider with experience in other conflicts than from their own leaders.

While no two situations are the same, it can be useful to explore how a particular model or option has played out in other contexts; how stakeholders found ways to talk about the really thorny issues that block dialogue in SD conflicts and how they managed to take things forward. This can show that options, including those short of maximal claims, could actually be most effective in their own case. Direct comparative learning can be particularly useful. For example, in Bougainville, bringing in a key figure involved in the peace process leading up to South Sudan’s independence contributed to thinking that led to a dialogue between the ABG and PNG governments, co-facilitated by Conciliation Resources. Insights from the South Sudan experience helped convince parties, who were focused on the referendum itself, of the need to look ahead to what might happen post-referendum, including the need for a negotiated settlement.¹²⁶

Study visits are one mechanism frequently used for knowledge exchange across conflict contexts and situations involving SD.¹²⁷ ‘When you live within a conflict affected society there are deep divisions and it is typically difficult to think outside of the conflict

pressure cooker.’¹²⁸ Removing people from their contexts can enable broader thinking and receptivity to fresh ideas and create internal dialogue. Study visits are also a good way to build relationships. However, they may be used to reinforce existing presumptions and do not necessarily lead to change, while scaling up is always a challenge.

Building governance capacity – Experience and capacity for governance varies among groups seeking more control over their own affairs. Some may have claims but no governance experience; others may already exercise a degree of self-governance in a contested territory or be in the process of transitioning to such an arrangement. In other cases, they may enjoy significant control, including established structures, institutions and relationships with the population, etc. This is the case with many protracted conflicts where entities are essentially functioning as states within the limitations of their unrecognised status in the eyes of the ‘territorial’ state and internationally.

Feasibility questions around independence, governance and international relations are often invoked as reasons for not supporting a group’s SD claims as discussed in [Section 4.2](#). However, it is hard for groups to build capacity without already enjoying powers of self-governance, and building that capacity takes time; hence they need support. The situation may be further complicated where former NSAGs are transitioning to political power. Populations expect results, but the individuals may not have the necessary governance experience or skills; the institutions and processes to execute decisions may not be in place and financial resources lacking. For example, a lack of integrative features that would encourage maintenance of ties with Indonesia and a lack of capacity have proved problematic since Aceh’s special autonomy status was agreed.¹²⁹ The agreement granting Aceh this status proved to be an impossibly broad settlement that the entity was unable to implement and that was later re-calibrated unilaterally by the government of Indonesia.¹³⁰ Similarly, limited ABG capacity has contributed to a failure to meet the high expectations of autonomy held by Bougainvilleans when the peace agreement was negotiated.¹³¹ In contrast, Kosovo had been establishing structures of state including in the spheres of education and tax collection, prior to settlement of its status. However, international governance has delayed the process of ensuring that Kosovo authorities take responsibility for their own failing in delivering policy.¹³²

Governments too may need support on practical issues around transfer of powers including administrative and legal processes, institution building, and provision of resources from the centre. Governments are also bound by constitutional and legislative frameworks, which makes sound legal advice essential throughout a process.¹³³ This is an area where peace practitioners may also be able to provide support.



Supporting dialogue across divides

Where parties to SD conflicts hold defensive or maximalist positions, it is hard for them to agree on parameters for discussion, let alone get to the negotiating table. Working separately with parties on different sides has the power to help change mind-sets, positions and strategies and can overcome preliminary barriers to engagement – but can only go so far. The key to building trust is really listening to what another party says, but this is impossible where groups do not have any contact or exposure to one another’s experiences or views and are not at a stage where they feel ready to hear them.

The challenge for peace practitioners is to create spaces where people feel safe to engage in dialogue processes that can enable and ‘humanise’ interaction, introduce new ways of thinking about problems, and explore ways of preventing, managing and resolving SD conflicts. The best way to do so will depend on the type or level of actors and what they are ready for in terms of engaging with their adversaries. Dialogue may focus on specific aspects of the SD conflict itself or on broader political questions. Problem-solving around areas of common interest can also help break down barriers where adversaries in a SD conflict are not ready to talk to each other about core political

issues. A focus on more neutral areas such trade, science or the environment can enable collaboration and build relationships and momentum based on common commitment to a specific issue. For example, in Kashmir, institutional and practical processes such as educational cooperation or cross-LoC trade between Hindus and Muslims allows confidence building via sustained interaction. The Sulah Dialogue has created space to introduce these local workable practical activities that Indian and Pakistani officials can bring back to the capitals and powerholders.

Environmental, health, and many other issues do not respect borders. Where communities seeking SD are internationally isolated and do not normally get to have a say in relevant forums, they can be included in projects that address wider regional or global concerns. For example, in the Georgian-Abkhaz context water management initiatives in the river basin along the dividing line engage the Abkhaz and facilitate access to more inclusive data across the region. Here, some of the civil society actors who facilitate regular dialogue across the conflict divide, and are aware of the sensitivities involved, work closely alongside thematic experts and help manage the politics and presentation of this to their own societies.¹³⁴

Political instability and transition in situations where SD is an issue requires an open strategy for dialogue, including the ability to scale down or up according to political appetite. Turnover of participants adds to the challenge and can make achieving consensus and building on previous dialogue sessions difficult. A balance must be struck between continuity and the realities of the context. For example, at times the Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue has focused on information sharing and been an exercise in empathy; at others, it has been possible to extend it to joint political analysis and/or problem solving. This has also depended on who has been willing and available to attend from either side for a given meeting. It also depends on whether there is appetite to bring more contentious or dissenting voices into the dialogue.¹³⁵

Communicating about a dialogue or mediation process

There are inherent tensions between creating safe spaces for open and honest dialogue and the need for public outreach and transparency about the fact that a process is taking place, what is under discussion and the implications for parties' positions, claims and potential outcomes. The fears, defensiveness, polarised positions and deep mistrust associated with SD conflicts can make communicating about a process especially sensitive. Public communications around sensitive high-level talks on SD need to be carefully managed by the mediators or facilitators and the parties themselves.

Supporting parties' communications – Peace practitioners can assist conflict parties to agree on parameters and methods of communication to constituencies and the wider population in advance. Messages may need to be tailored to different parties taking into account their particular fears, needs and aspirations, but should not be at odds with one another. It may be necessary to explain to wider audiences why messages are being communicated differently to the other side. For example, in the [Schlaining Process dialogue](#) participants on either side held their own positions, but worked hard to coordinate messaging to their different constituencies. In this case, differences in approach between participants wanting to communicate more publicly about the discussions and others being more cautious also needed to be navigated as the process unfolded.¹³⁶

Third party positioning and communication – Peace practitioners can be seen as partisan and favouring a particular side or outcome in an SD conflict, particularly where they support one or more groups, but not others. Working with single groups, usually intentionally, increases confidence and capacity, which affects power dynamics. While third parties may be open to working with all parties, states may resist external support for fear of internationalising the conflict or may not feel they need it as the dominant party. For example, Conciliation Resources became involved in the Ethiopian/ONLF peace process at the invitation of the Kenyan facilitation team. The Ethiopian government, however, declined Conciliation Resources' offer of negotiation support, although it did receive some technical and secretarial support during the negotiation process. Peace practitioners therefore tend to provide more support to opposition parties with SD claims which are more likely to be the weaker negotiating party, lack capacity and experience and have limited access to resources or diplomatic relations. They then risk being labelled as sympathisers or advocates, especially where sharing a group's analysis is interpreted as support.

Complications can also arise where donors (including states) who are either engaged directly or fund peace or mediation work take clear positions on the geopolitics of the conflict. In other cases, outsiders are often erroneously assumed to hold certain positions. Having an insider/outsider role working through long-established partnerships in a context (as Conciliation Resources and SPF do) can help to build a trusted reputation, but the longer this engagement exists the more opportunities there are for negative perceptions, rumour and innuendo, which can sometimes be surprising and requires close perception management.¹³⁷

How peace practitioners communicate to different parties and sectors of society about what they are doing is therefore key. Where they are working with more than one party or at different levels, this needs to be carefully choreographed and communicated. Different strands of work need not be directly connected, but an overall strategic vision and a plan for communicating about different relationships and activities is necessary to address sensitivities and avoid perceptions of partiality. Building and maintaining relationships with as broad a range of stakeholders as possible – including governments and diverse sectors of society on all sides, as well as external actors, including diaspora and influential states – helps ensure channels of communication are open when peace practitioners need to communicate about their positions.

4. DIALOGUE AND MEDIATION IN SD CONFLICTS: CONNECTIONS AND INFLUENCES

4.1. INTERNAL DYNAMICS – CONNECTING ACROSS LEVELS AND SPACES WITHIN A SD CONFLICT CONTEXT

The problem/challenge – Mediation and dialogue takes place at many levels and in different official and unofficial spaces in conflict-affected contexts and involves a range of actors: from local level peace dialogues, through national level initiatives such as formal peace processes or national dialogues, to international diplomacy.¹³⁸ This complex reality has been variously characterised as a 'web',¹³⁹ 'ecosystem'¹⁴⁰ or 'map' of relationships.¹⁴¹ It is now recognised that elites processes need to be more balanced and interconnected with what is happening in these other spaces¹⁴² and that a multitrack approach is needed throughout the conflict cycle.¹⁴³ The move away from a linear concept of peace processes also recognises that there is no 'end point' and that making and sustaining peace is a continuous process of 'perpetual peacebuilding' involving negotiations and renegotiations.¹⁴⁴ This multiplicity of initiatives requires a more connected approach between the tracks – or revision of the track hierarchy concept altogether – to allow for more flexibility¹⁴⁵ in addressing SD conflicts.

What can peace practitioners do? Supporting different peace and mediation processes and nurturing connections between them can help transform conflicts. By adapting their own roles to realities on the ground, peace practitioners can help fill the gap in SD conflicts which typically include situations where a formal process is absent, suspended or making little progress and where space for political or broader dialogue within society may also be limited. Strategic engagement can enable alternative, possibly multiple peaceful 'transitions' or 'pathways', while something also needs to 'hold' these multiple processes together in complex contexts where SD is an issue. Informal dialogues can be especially useful in SD conflicts where one or more parties have little appetite for a mediated process or when groups are deemed illegitimate or operating under a sanctions regime. More focus on the local level, including working with insider mediators, can help address local grievances that could spark future SD conflicts¹⁴⁶ and can facilitate greater long-term support for agreed arrangements.

Linking to high level processes

Recent years have seen a strong push for more representation and inclusion of often excluded groups in high-level and official processes, with a particular emphasis on women and young people.¹⁴⁷ Despite a move away from an approach focused solely on how the lower tracks can feed up into elites processes at the 'top table', these challenges remain a significant part of the puzzle in many situations where SD is an issue. Common problems in such situations include reluctance of negotiating parties in high-level talks to reflect other perspectives which may not be in line with their SD aims and strategies, as well as lack of effective mechanisms for bringing in different voices to higher-level processes. Centre-periphery dynamics also contribute to marginalisation and exclusion of voices where communities seeking SD are located in border regions, while decisions are made at the centre through political and peace processes. Some groups or cohorts within them such as young people may be disillusioned with traditional models of inclusion at a central negotiating table and prefer to make their voices heard in other ways e.g. through campaigning or advocacy.

Mid-level actors such as civil society groups, faith communities, academics or the business community are often involved in track two dialogue or mediation initiatives. In some cases, this is because they have access to decision makers; in others, they will not necessarily be connected to, or able to influence, high-level political actors such as SD opposition groups or governments. However, overlap between participants in both high-level formal and other informal processes – e.g. where a politician participates in a dialogue involving a broad range of participants – can help bridge this gap across levels. This needs to be carefully managed as involvement in one process may affect how someone is perceived in another. Bringing new thinking or perspectives from one to another can also meet with resistance from those not wanting to look beyond their own entrenched positions.

EXAMPLE 11

The Schlaining Process dialogue, supported by Conciliation Resources in the context of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict from 2000 to 2007, was an informal process that sat alongside, and informed, the formal peace process and other ongoing debates in each entity. It was designed as a safe space in which participants could reframe the conflict to reveal opportunities for addressing areas of disagreement and explore ways in which to find more cooperative approaches to shared problems. Georgians and Abkhaz were equally represented, in spite of the political asymmetry, and this parity of participation helped to address some of the challenges for engagement created by SD. Meetings included participants from a range of backgrounds and levels: politicians, officials, civil society actors, and some who were also engaged in the formal negotiations. The process was held under the Chatham House Rule, but nevertheless those involved have worked strategically to broaden out conversations to reach other sectors of society, and ideas have fed into thinking beyond the process and contributed to outputs developed by political actors on either side.¹⁴⁸

It may also be possible to shift the nature or level of an ongoing process, although this can be problematic as illustrated by the Kashmir example. After building some confidence and linkages with relevant political leaders and important actors in security circles, the Sulah dialogue convened political actors across diverse regional and political persuasions in Kashmir. A calculated risk was taken as the approach faced a lot of resistance from forces that perceived it as undermining their influence. The format was then changed to adopt a low-lying discrete approach for some time with focus on consolidating cross LoC connectivity. External developments also created more obstacles as India-Pakistan relations declined.¹⁴⁹

Coherent approaches

Peace practitioners in SD conflicts can potentially take advantage of entry points to either engage directly (e.g. by facilitating a dialogue process) or support others' work in different spaces (e.g. support for an insider mediator) and make connections where possible and useful. For example, SPF engagement in Southern Thailand involves a web of relationships with a range of national and international actors and processes inside and outside the country.

EXAMPLE 12

SPF's approach in the Patani region of Southern Thailand prioritises accompaniment at multiple levels with both conflict parties and society more broadly. Since 2009, SPF has been working with civil society, including women's groups, community leaders, and political activists, based inside and outside the region, who see SD claims as an alternative to violence. Acting as a critical friend, SPF enables exploration and exchange of ideas, discussion and analysis of political developments, and development of responses to emerging trends. The focus is on linking various segments of Thai society and politics and encouraging a more consolidated pro-peace constituency inside and outside Thailand.¹⁵⁰ Work with those displaced from the Patani region is designed to promote understanding of the causes and dynamics of the conflict and possible pathways out of violence. SPF also engages with the Malaysian facilitated track one peace process, facilitating capacity building and providing support on the process and substance of the talks for all sides, as requested.¹⁵¹

Since different initiatives may have a positive or negative impact on each other the bare minimum is to avoid causing harm. When promoting linkages between different initiatives, it is essential to consider sensitivities around a conflict, based on an in-depth [analysis](#).¹⁵² And while coherence is important, not all initiatives need to be linked; fostering a particular linkage and how it should be done always requires a convincing rationale.¹⁵³

Where different strands of work are kept separate, it is nevertheless important to have an overarching strategy. Conciliation Resources' work in Kashmir, for example, aims to connect dialogues within and across communities and between Delhi and Islamabad – and so eventually resuscitate the high-level process with the inclusion of the wider population.¹⁵⁴ Similarly, in Bougainville, Conciliation Resources works closely with civil society, but has also supported or facilitated dialogue processes and played a mediation or mediation support role at political level. The overall aim is to provide the 'connective tissue' by bringing different people together, helping them understand what is happening in other spaces and providing people with broader perspectives and understanding of different positions. This work can be challenging where the actors involved want to control those spaces and narratives, be they negotiating parties, state officials, mediators or civil society actors. In addition, some actors, including donors, may prefer to work only with power holders and are sceptical about investing energy and resources in others spaces or attempts to connect them. Inadequate resources and support and buy-in from others is also challenging for those pursuing a more joined-up approach.¹⁵⁵

4.2. EXTERNAL DYNAMICS – OUTSIDE INFLUENCES AND GEOPOLITICS

The problem/challenge – In many cases the ‘international community’ is part of the conflict system, especially in post-colonial and other contexts where SD is an issue. External influences and interventions may be driven by self-interest, badly informed, misguided, or ill-intentioned. International trends, including the decline of democracy and a rules-based order, rising populism and nationalism and unilateralism, also affect the approaches, tools and influence available to external third parties in addressing SD conflicts. International interference by states with an interest in the conflict can fuel or even seek to perpetuate violence through kin state dynamics and proxy or hybrid wars. A proliferation of would-be or ‘new’ third party peace practitioners, including states such as China, Qatar, and Turkey, as well as RIGOs, further complicates the picture as each brings their own world views, values, interests, capacities and resources. A deficit of regional or international interest or capacity to help resolve a SD conflict also brings challenges. More coordinated approaches are needed to managing the ‘international community’ and its component parts in relation to what is going on in a conflict and in the area where there are SD claims.¹⁵⁶

What can peace practitioners do? Peace practitioners need to not only reconsider and adapt their own roles to the realities of the geopolitical and mediation landscape, but also consider how they engage with – and can potentially influence or support – other external influences. These include fellow mediators and peacebuilders, but also diaspora, kin states and other interested states and international and regional organisations. This requires attention to how different interventions drive conflict or peace and finding ways to support or reinforce beneficial dynamics and mitigate harmful impacts. Where conflict parties resist international third-party engagement in a track one mediation process, external actors can still play a role through a range of initiatives, including support for insider mediation or dialogue initiatives at different levels, as discussed in Section 4.1. International and regional IGOs can also enable the participation of SD groups without jeopardising state sovereignty.

Geopolitics and external influences

In SD conflicts, outsider interests and influence often play a defining role in the way the conflict is settled and the process for doing so. As noted by one prominent legal scholar and practitioner: ‘The particular content of settlements is still as likely to be shaped by the relative power of the sides and perhaps of the external actors which may be supporting them, as it is required by legal prescription.’¹⁵⁷ Geopolitics and external support can

affect the balance of power by strengthening weaker parties. Those with SD claims often receive support from external actors whether organised diaspora, international NGOs or interested states.¹⁵⁸ This can heighten states’ anxieties about possible secession, but as illustrated in Section 3.2, such support can also potentially encourage parties to consider other options and peaceful pathways toward SD.

Kin and other influential states – A kin state often has the power to make change happen. For example, the Indian government is content to ‘manage’ the conflict with Naga ethnic groups living in north-eastern India indefinitely, waiting for the key and elderly Naga leaders to die, but has little incentive to resolve it. It was only due to the Naga’s past (1970-80s) relationships with China and Pakistan that the government has in the past (from the mid-1990s) felt some pressure to at least keep up the appearance of negotiating a solution to the Naga’s claims. In the past ten years there has been little evidence of real interest in negotiation on the part of the Indian government.¹⁵⁹

Kin states often have a role in incentivising or manipulating communities with (potential) SD claims in the state where there is conflict. But dynamics can be more complicated and groups or movements with (potential) SD claims can also initiate or develop relationships with external actors, including kin states to support their cause. For example, in the Georgian-Abkhaz context, the Abkhaz were the weaker party politically, but as the wedge between Russia and Georgia grew, the Abkhaz position gained more support from Russia. At the same time, although Russia has at times provided much-needed physical security guarantees, there are divisions in Abkhazia about how far they should accept that relationship, and the extent to which it is in their interest. It is not therefore a straightforward question of a state or bloc supporting the weaker actor holding all the power.¹⁶⁰

In some cases, external powers prefer the situation not to be resolved as the status quo preserves their interests, for example access to natural resources that may be curtailed if a SD claim succeeds.¹⁶¹

There are clear limits on the scope and nature of assistance that relevant external states may provide to communities in another state. This should be with the consent of the relevant community and all states involved.¹⁶² In practice, many states do not adhere to principles of non-interference and the extent of their ambition needs to be carefully monitored and analysed, as discussed in Example 13. The case highlights the importance of comprehensive analysis and a clear understanding of all dynamics – internal and external – that can further destabilise a situation.

EXAMPLE 13

The 2014 and 2015 Minsk peace agreements between Russia and Ukraine were intended to stop the fighting and to pave the way for reintegrating into Ukraine the areas in the Donbas region that were under the control of Russia-backed separatist entities. The subsequent negotiations within the Trilateral Contact Group in Minsk focused on defining a 'special status' for these areas as well as an implementation schedule acceptable to all parties. These efforts were to no avail, but the negotiations in Minsk had some success, including in terms of reduced violence, local ceasefires, humanitarian aid, and infrastructure repair. However, the focus on internal dialogue arguably ended up distracting from the existential threat building up and culminating in Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.¹⁶³

One option for consideration that could help defuse inter and intra-state tensions between affected states and communities and encourage peaceful relations between all parties is the creation of an informal consultation mechanism whereby states could raise concerns about the welfare of related minorities; this could be under the supervision of a regional or international actor.¹⁶⁴

Lack of international interest and recognition –

Under-interest from outsiders in a SD conflict can be as problematic as over-interest and interference. As one peace practitioner has observed concerning limited international interest in the *de facto* independent state of Somaliland: 'Being a relatively peaceful, successful nation is not helping our cause as internationals deal well with crises.'¹⁶⁵ Lack of interest or international engagement can be interpreted by some internally as an argument for escalating the political conflict, as in the Catalan case, which is not well known or understood outside the context. Choosing violence has proven to work in some cases: for example, it was only after the Kosovo Liberation Army resorted to violence provoking gross Serbian repression that an international willingness to engage with the crisis by insisting on restoration of autonomy for Kosovo emerged.¹⁶⁶ This demonstrates challenges of leverage and how to move negotiations along where there is no outside support for SD movements.

Issues with international recognition of new states such as South Sudan and Eritrea also have repercussions. An entity may be viable politically and economically but fail due to international treatment; or internationals may cite a lack of economic or political governance capacity as a reason not to recognise them. Capacity building for governance discussed in Section 3.2 can help here, but to really address the underlying issues requires a clearer and more consistent application of international frameworks for recognition of SD claims, including independence.

Supporting other external peace practitioners – In some cases external peace practitioners may be reluctant or lack the connections or knowledge to recognise and respond appropriately to nuance and complexity in a conflict situation where SD is an issue. This is a feature of many post-Soviet contexts involving SD which have a layer of Russian involvement in common, but where the contexts and specific dynamics are very different; as the Ukraine conflict progresses, the important distinctions between the contexts are increasingly in danger of being overlooked.¹⁶⁷

The international community is likely to look at SD from the state-centric perspective of political entities and existing boundaries, which can under-value or ignore the priorities of local populations. For example, most Bougainvilleans do not think of the conflict with PNG in terms of a struggle for better governance options; it is more anchored in a narrative of victim and oppressor, which is difficult to address with practical arrangements. Conciliation Resources has been working with other international mediation support actors and the diplomatic community in PNG to help them broaden analysis and understand and engage with community dynamics and perspectives.¹⁶⁸ Developing a set of relationships with other external actors also extends to official third parties: for example, SPF's engagement with the Malaysian facilitation team in the context of the [Southern Thailand conflict](#).

International engagement dynamics for SD groups

The supranational dimension of self-governance arrangements also warrants consideration when addressing SD conflicts. Groups seeking SD interact with international actors in different ways. For example, in the Basque case, wide consultation with international actors to gauge and seek support for peace was a feature throughout the conflict and a major contributing factor to the end of the armed struggle. ETA's disarmament was facilitated by civil society and other international stakeholders.¹⁶⁹ Organised diaspora may also seek inclusion in international forums. For example,

the Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam, an organisation among the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora with a democratically elected government (the diaspora in each country electing members according to the size of the diaspora in that country), has been making representations to the UN to gain access to the International Criminal Court.¹⁷⁰

Those with self-governance arrangements featuring well-developed institutions, including parliaments in some cases, already have the capacity to engage in international relations to some extent. International institutions can play a role in softening the rigidity of notions of statehood and borders through 'soft recognition' of communities seeking SD that enables them to have a voice in multilateral institutions. Where self-governance arrangements are broad, states can be encouraged to consider modalities for allowing self-representation of relevant communities in international forums without prejudice to state sovereignty. International organisations can also consider the effective representation and participation of such communities, where states decline or are unable to assist.¹⁷¹ SD groups can also be supported to work together to raise the international profile of their situation. A more coordinated way of working together to lobby the UN or RIGOs could provide such groups with new and different opportunities.

4.3. PEACE PRACTITIONER ROLES

Peace practitioners – who does what?

The positioning, mandates and capacities of different actors with regard to SD issues are among the factors influencing who is best placed to do what. Competition between and among global support actors also adds to the complexity of working in a SD conflict, particularly where there may be many coinciding but also competing external interests, as discussed in Section 4.2. Different actors can do different things at different times – or simultaneously.¹⁷² As in any conflict, support actors have to understand their own and each other's mandates, resources and limitations to ensure complementarity and enhance synergies for effective peace support. Effective communication and coordination is critical for strategic division of labour, from technical exchange of information to joint reflection on developments and priorities.¹⁷³ In Cameroon, for example, there has been some constructive division of labour and close collaboration between peace support actors. In view of the polarisation among different stakeholders, this has allowed for engagement with a broad array of local actors across the conflict landscape, inside the country, and in the diaspora.¹⁷⁴

Some of the roles and activities discussed in previous sections may be best suited to an outsider third party mediator or a wider support team, others to mediators who may be embedded in the conflict, and others to those not directly involved in a peace or mediation process, including local peacebuilders or other civil society actors. Holding an insider/outsider position can also enable different forms of engagement – sometimes simultaneously in a context – including direct mediation and mediation support as well as broader peacebuilding activities as discussed in Section 4.1.

Who is best placed to mediate or support a mediation process? Given that SD conflicts are generally so focused on states and status, the UN, regional organisations or states acting individually are not necessarily best placed to take on a facilitation or mediation role (although a number of legacy mandates, for example with regard to the UN role in Western Sahara, remain). State parties' concern for their sovereignty may contribute to resistance to an official international third-party role, while SD parties may assume states – as the UN or regional organisations composed of their member states – will be biased towards territorial integrity and therefore less understanding or supportive of SD claims. Any eventual consent for formal international involvement in talks must be earned and developed among stakeholders. Reluctance to be seen to be supporting SD claims may also affect the kind of peace support states will provide and fund. For example, a 2014 ONLF leadership meeting which was critical for building consensus and unlocking the stalemate on the constitutional/SD issue in the Nairobi talks discussed in [Example 7](#) was regarded by donors as unsuitable for external support due to diplomatic sensitivities.¹⁷⁵

The limitations that SD conflicts present for UN, regional organisation or state involvement open up space for the plethora of (I)NGOs to mediate or support mediation and peace processes. SD groups may find them easier to trust than a state, while states parties to a conflict may be able to accept involvement of a non-state actor as less threatening to their sovereignty. Not having a central mediating role does not preclude the UN or other international actors from providing constructive support to peace and mediation processes where there is consent for such a role, working in partnerships and cooperating with others as appropriate.¹⁷⁶

EXAMPLE 14

One peace support model that has strong potential to be replicated in other peace processes is the International Contact Group (ICG) which has been supporting the peace process in the Philippines since 2014. The hybrid nature of the ICG, whereby diplomats and NGOs work together, has proven to be effective in supporting the peace talks and ensuring they stay on track. International NGOs have technical expertise and also the flexibility to engage with a wide range of actors and explore new ideas; at the same time diplomats provide essential leverage and political and economic support for the peace process. Through the ICG, Conciliation Resources has been able to play a key role in mediating during the talks themselves, providing technical advice to the negotiation parties, and working with partners to ensure the voices of civil society are heard throughout the process and the inclusion of women and indigenous peoples in the transition to peace.¹⁷⁷

Insider mediators – Peacemaking initiatives, including informal processes, are increasingly led by insider mediators, often supported by international organisations, including the UN, in partnership with civil society. For example, the EU recognises the need for more investment and trust in the capacity of community level mediation actors and activities – particularly women.¹⁷⁸ Insider mediators know the context and are well placed to identify enablers and spoilers. They are also inevitably linked to the conflict dynamics.¹⁷⁹ Where they have a strong commitment to an outcome of the conflict, e.g. a preference for independence over other forms of self-governance, they need to consider and be transparent about their own role within a conflict setting. Insider mediators also need to assess their own social, political and security risks, e.g. where they are committed to a process or outcome that might not be popular with (parts of) their communities or where they work with outsiders that are not necessarily accepted or trusted by the community.¹⁸⁰ International peace practitioners can help ensure the safety and security of insider mediators by providing technical and logistical support.¹⁸¹ Providing funding or creating spaces for insider mediators to interact and learn from each other across contexts where SD is an issue are among the ways peace practitioners can potentially provide support.

Peace practitioner attributes and knowledge

Selection processes for mediators or facilitators and the factors that should be taken into account are crucial in SD contexts. Their profile and competencies all affect trust in them and in the process. In practice, capacity is varied in terms of the skills and qualities of the individuals involved. Where there is genuine investment in a process, qualities such as credibility, leadership, and integrity are valued.¹⁸² Other personal characteristics, including identity and power markers will also come into play in determining whether parties will accept and trust a mediator.¹⁸³ Nationality and professional background is particularly significant in SD conflicts. For example, an individual with an IGO or state background (e.g. a former head of state) may not be best placed for reasons of (perceived) partiality with regard to addressing SD discussed above. Some mediators may not be suitable given colonial history – or may be deemed more suitable because of it. For example, Somalilanders have previously looked to the UK. Someone who has been party to a conflict involving SD issues or been involved in its resolution may be deemed more acceptable.

As discussed in [Section 3.1](#) emotive elements including the need to be heard may be particularly prominent in SD conflicts; but psychological dimensions of trust building do not always receive sufficient attention, time and resources in the design and implementation of peace and mediation processes. Peace practitioners should understand the psychosocial dimensions of the conflict and may benefit from training and support in managing manifestations of these dimensions in a process. Insights into psychology can contribute to better practice and help practitioners understand their own psychology including emotional biases and blind spots¹⁸⁴ and that of the people they engage with.

When engaging in contexts where SD is an issue, peace practitioners also need knowledge and understanding of SD dynamics and options – or at least know how to source appropriate expertise – and must understand when it is appropriate to introduce options and ideas to parties, constituencies and wider communities, as discussed [Section 3.2](#).

5. FINDINGS AND FORWARD STEPS

The current state-centric legal and political framework is not conducive to preventing or resolving SD conflicts. There is a big disconnect between what the norms of SD are, what international law says about SD, what peace practitioners believe about it and what communities aspire to.¹⁸⁵

Above all, the framework is not sufficiently responsive to the needs of people affected by SD disputes or their desire for autonomy. These disconnects can feed polarisation and intransigence as parties easily get stuck in mutually exclusive positions of 'conflicting rights', fuelled by competing fears of either assimilation into or disintegration of the state, thereby undermining opportunities to resolve SD conflicts peacefully. In some cases, peace practitioners also lack specialist knowledge of relevant normative frameworks and/or specific dynamics of SD conflicts and options for resolving them.

The framework within which conflicts involving SD claims can be addressed needs rethinking. This will take time and political will. Meanwhile, peace practitioners have to engage with the messy reality and constraints on the ground now. The challenge in the short to medium term for practitioners and policymakers is therefore to: (1) develop standards or mechanisms that can provide some much-needed clarity and consistency in approaches to resolving SD conflicts; and (2) work within the current flawed system, drawing on experience of creative practice to develop more consistent, principled, cooperative and effective approaches to resolving SD conflicts. Some options for both that have been highlighted in this report include:

Navigating legal and political frameworks

- **Supporting parties to recognise when framing positions in terms of rights can be helpful and when it is not.** Conflicting rights discourses often serve as a barrier to dialogue or negotiations, for example where a group insists on a right to SD which it equates with secession, while the state invokes principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. In applying the concept of SD, the challenge is therefore to ensure it is not an obstacle but a mechanism for peace. Depending on the circumstances, this may involve unpacking the content of the right with parties or avoiding the language of SD altogether.

- **Using international standards as a reference point, including minority and indigenous peoples' rights** which provide some parameters and options for self-governance without threatening territorial integrity or sovereignty. It is possible to work towards solutions that respect rights, including the right to SD, without explicitly invoking them, particularly where states are resistant to the concept of group rights. However, in the longer term, normalising the term 'right to SD' would significantly reduce its sensitivity and enable substantive engagement in terms of issues or options.
- **Starting from principles of good governance and using language of democracy, inclusion, participation and 'the will of the people'**, including autonomy over certain aspects of governance, can help states engage on SD issues without feeling endangered. At the same time, working with conflict parties and wider society to demystify the concept of SD by relating it to the reality of the conflict, including the diverse needs, interest and aspirations of the population, can enable more concrete and meaningful conversations.
- **Considering options for strengthening the international legal framework** including the potential for a global or regional recourse mechanism as a 'focal point' to mediate SD claims and prevent or resolve violent conflict. It could be mandated to assess claims and/or to engage or intervene before groups turn to violence using a proactive, problem-solving and assistance-oriented approach. The proposal for a global convention on the rights of minorities setting out entitlements to appropriate forms of autonomy or self-governance would also provide valuable guidance in negotiating suitable arrangements.

Supporting conflict parties to engage in a process

- **Supporting states to help overcome fears of negotiating with SD groups by using interest-based and problem-solving approaches.** Strategic use of terminology and creative language, e.g. introducing sometimes less-familiar and potentially less threatening options such as non-territorial forms of SD, or talking in terms of humanity and inclusion that resonates on all sides, can also influence a state's willingness to engage.
- **Supporting conflict parties with a (potential) SD claim to engage in an incremental and iterative process** rather than focusing on a set predefined goal such as independence. This allows groups the time and

space to analyse current positions and likely outcomes, (re)frame and articulate positions and demands, potentially overcome internal differences, and develop an effective strategy for pursuing objectives peacefully through shorter- and longer-term aims. As part of this process, SD groups can be supported to assess their own strengths and weaknesses, including readiness and capacity to negotiate and (potentially) govern democratically.

- **Introducing a range of SD options and related lessons** that are not already embedded in the discourse may help spark ideas and stimulate progress where conflict parties lack knowledge, experience or imagination. However, where parties get stuck in a position, it is often not from lack of awareness of SD options. Understanding what people are ready to hear – and when – is therefore essential when it comes to challenging assumptions or positions or suggesting alternative options or approaches.
- **Introducing the risks of ‘playing the long game’ to parties**, particularly in volatile geopolitical environments. For example, parties with SD claims may fail to strike a deal in situations where the more powerful state is temporarily weakened, preferring to hold out for one that delivers their maximum aspirations. But failure to reach an agreement may leave them with little or nothing in the long run if the balance of power shifts again in favour of the state.
- **Encouraging all parties to consider what may happen if they do not resolve a conflict**, taking into account longer term trends such as economics and geopolitics. Using tools such as futures thinking can shift the focus away from immediate conflict dynamics and enable parties to consider alternative futures and their possible impacts, including the perceived costs and benefits of separation, internal SD or intermediate arrangements.

Addressing psychosocial dimensions

- **Exploring ways to address psychosocial dynamics in conflicts where SD is an issue**, including parties’ need for parity of esteem, respect and recognition. Creating spaces that can provide at least minimal trust between parties and encouraging parties to recognise their opponent’s demands as valid – even if they say they do not agree with them – can enable engagement and move a process forward.
- **Engaging in emotionally charged dialogue or negotiations with empathy**, avoiding setting off ‘triggers’ and allowing parties space and time to tell their stories. Peace practitioners may need to adapt or develop their own skills in order to do so effectively.

Working at different levels

- **Identifying potential at sub-national levels to address tensions** where groups are seeking more control over their own affairs. Local and regional governments may be less ideologically opposed to SD and more open to practical solutions such as enabling arrangements in relation to local environmental or planning issues (e.g. where indigenous peoples’ land rights are threatened) or access to services in minority languages. Engaging directly in mediation or supporting insider or other mediators at local level can make SD arrangements more likely to succeed in the long term by building confidence on all sides and helping address local grievances that could spark future SD conflicts.
- **Exploring the peace potential of supra-national relationships for groups seeking SD**. This might include forms of ‘soft recognition’ that enable a sub-regional entity to engage in international relations, or support for the development of a SD group’s preventive diplomacy capacities. Support for networking among opposition movements from other contexts can also contribute to more peaceful pathways away from armed struggle. For example, providing a more coordinated way of working together to lobby the UN or RIGOs could generate new opportunities.
- **Consider how a sub-regional approach can help address SD conflicts**. Such an approach can help address the big challenges of the 21st century such as climate change, migration and conflict that need actions that go well beyond the realm of the sovereign state. Understanding the synergies between populations across national boundaries can help stakeholders find ways to cooperate in a pragmatic way to create mechanisms to address SD conflicts and build sustainable peace.

Widening participation

- **Enabling parties’ engagement with their constituencies, movements and wider society** to inform the development of tactics and strategies and develop genuinely representative positions; win or maintain constituencies’ support for peaceful processes; and communicate their positions during negotiations. This may involve creating or supporting channels and mechanisms such as citizen’s assemblies or public meetings to foster discussion regarding SD arrangements.

- **Engaging directly with a broad spectrum of different perspectives, aims and agendas with regard to SD** beyond those of the negotiating parties. Talking to people about what they really want now, what they can live with and aspirations for the future – in terms of political status but also their economic, social and cultural development – can open up discussion of different options and potentially change conflict narratives. Even where civil society space is restricted, this may contribute to change further down the line.
- **Considering whether and how different groups and cohorts within them want to participate** in dialogue and mediation processes and working with them to find ways to support that. This may not fit traditional models of inclusion at a central negotiating table, but could help, for example, where youth are disillusioned with their experiences of inclusion in official processes.

Clarifying roles and enabling connections across levels and spaces

- **Helping develop systemic responses to complex multi-layered SD conflicts.** Peace practitioners can fill the gap where a high-level formal process is absent or stuck, either by engaging directly or supporting others' work, depending on their own capacities and mandates and how they fit with those of others. This may involve disparate initiatives that capitalise on opportunities to work constructively with different actors – separately or across conflict divides. While on the surface these may not appear to be directly connected it is important to have a strategy behind them.
- **Facilitating coalitions, networks and linkages between different peace-oriented initiatives** where possible and useful. Peace practitioners can potentially provide the 'connective tissue' in a SD conflict by bringing different people together, helping them understand what is happening in other spaces and providing broader perspectives and understanding of different positions regarding SD.
- **Consulting with community level mediation actors – particularly women – to identify ways their work can be effectively supported.** For example, peace practitioners could provide funding or create spaces for insider mediators to network across contexts where SD is an issue to share knowledge and experiences of navigating SD-related sticking points and barriers to constructive engagement.

Building an evidence base to inform practice

- **Knowing the options for different models of self-governance and how they have been treated in negotiated settlements** is essential for peace practitioners, conflict parties and other stakeholders seeking to resolve SD conflicts. An updated study on options and trends in settling SD conflicts would provide a valuable resource for understanding the advantages, drawbacks and trade-offs of different models for realising SD, how they have played out in practice and factors influencing outcomes.
- **More studies on contexts where groups with SD claims have not pursued violent strategies**, including the factors that have influenced this choice, would also provide valuable insights for peace practitioners seeking to understand, prevent or resolve SD conflicts.
- **Developing a more substantial body of evidence relating to different methods of analysis** would contribute to an understanding of how to best capture the particular drivers and dynamics of SD conflicts. For example, using gendered, intersectional analysis can potentially draw out various experiences, perspectives and positions in a SD conflict and so inform more nuanced and contextual design of governance arrangements. Taking a conflict systems approach may also be useful not only in untangling underlying structural causes, but also the role of 'intangibles' like emotions and symbols in SD conflicts.

KEY RESOURCES

Websites and databases

Center for Systemic Peace, Major Episodes of Political Violence – covers inter-state, intra-state, or communal; includes all episodes of international, civil, ethnic, communal, and genocidal violence and warfare (and categorises as such). [Center for Systemic Peace](#)

Conflict Barometer, Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research – identifies situations of ethnic conflict and the main issues at stake across some broad categories (secession, autonomy, system/ideology, territory, resources, etc). Includes summaries of main conflict developments in specific contexts. [Conflict Barometer](#)

Minority and Indigenous Trends, Minority Rights Group International (MRG). [Minority and Indigenous Trends](#)

Minorities at Risk dataset, Center for International Development and Conflict Management, University of Maryland [Minorities at Risk dataset](#) (1990-2006) – and AMAR project (from 2014) which uses broader criteria to identify ethnic groups. [Amar project](#)

MRG World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, Minority Rights Group International. [MRG World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples](#)

Peace Agreements Database PaX, Edinburgh University – database containing 2003 peace agreements, found in more than 150 peace processes between 1990 and 2023, now with 44 new agreements. Search by various types of intra-state conflict and by substance of agreement including governance, power sharing, human rights and equality. [Peace Agreements Database PaX](#)

Peace Accord Matrix (Notre Dame), Kroc Institute – qualitative and quantitative longitudinal data on the implementation of 34 Comprehensive Peace Agreements (CPAs) negotiated between 1989 and 2012. Can search for 'right of self-determination', 'minority rights' and 'indigenous minority rights'. Also includes relevant categories such as Inter-ethnic/State Relations, Cultural Protection, Natural Resource Management, and Official Language and Symbols. Includes analysis/assessment of implementation. [Peace Accord Matrix \(Notre Dame\)](#)

Self-Determination Movements dataset, Penn Identity and Conflict Lab, University of Pennsylvania. [Self-Determination Movements dataset](#)

United Nations Peacemaker – links to text of agreements. Can do a free search, e.g. for self-determination or minorities. [United Nations Peacemaker](#)

Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCPD), Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University – database on armed conflicts and organised violence, provides information on aspects of armed conflict such as conflict dynamics, conflict resolution and post-agreement recurrence. [Uppsala Conflict Data Programme \(UCPD\)](#)

Further reading

Self-determination

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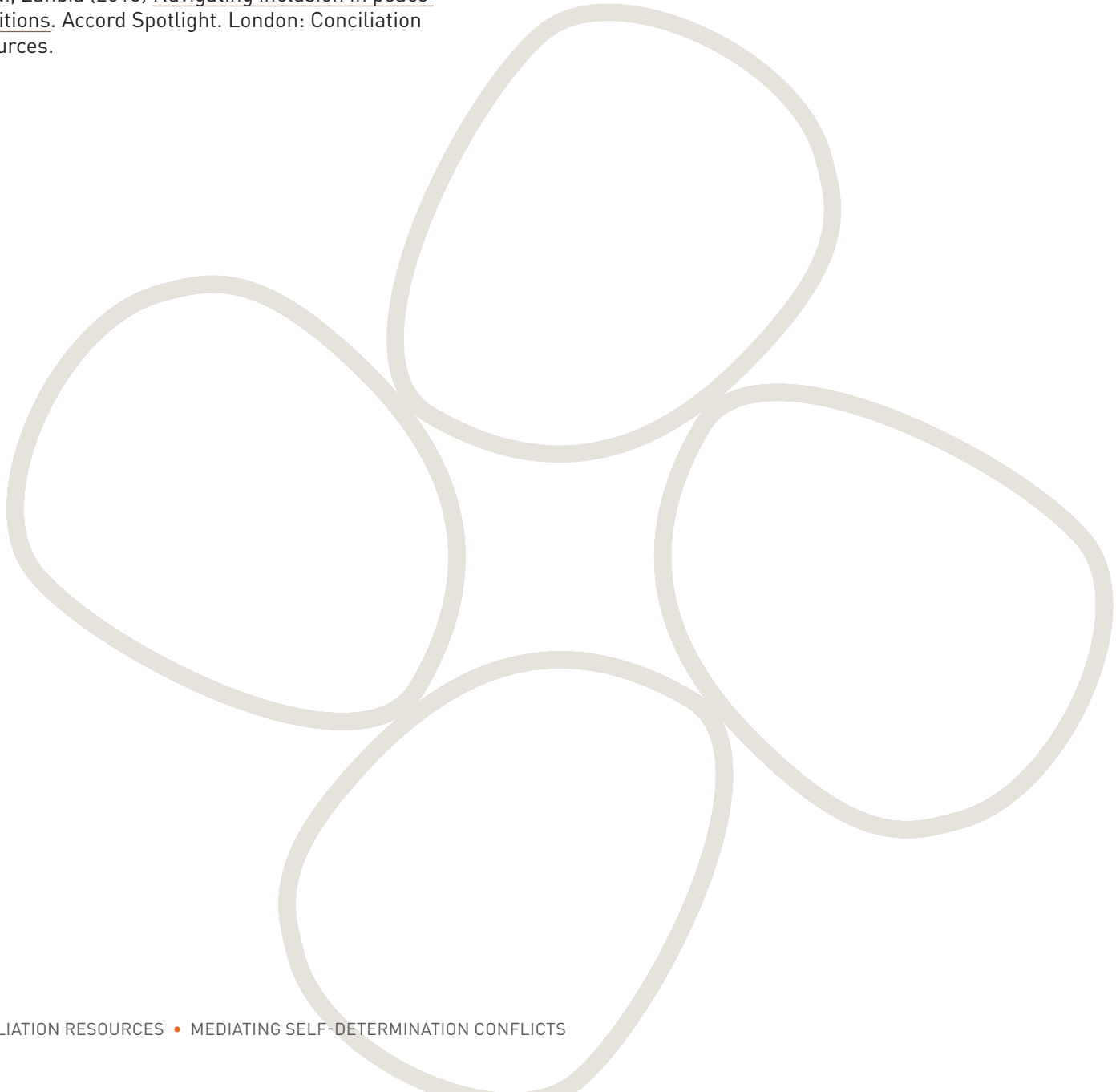
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ANNEX 1: MAPPING THE SITUATION

Subject area	Relevant data/information	Sources & methods of data collection
1. DEMOGRAPHY		
Demographic composition of the population	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Size of population• Number and size of groups (majority and minority) that share an identity (cultural, linguistic, religious, etc)• Geographic distribution of groups in relation to territory and jurisdiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Population census and hospital birth rates▪ State reports to international treaty monitoring bodies▪ Reports of international governmental organisations (IGOs), international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and NGOs▪ Observation/monitoring missions
Demographic dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Demographic trends, including intra-state population movements, whether voluntary or coerced (international migration, internal relocations, rural-urban migration) as well as birth/mortality rates amongst different groups	
2. POWER		
Divisions of jurisdictional authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Territorial and administrative divisions (e.g. federal, regional, autonomous and municipal units)• Competencies with respect to different territorial levels (central, regional, municipal, territorial autonomies)• Any group competencies such as personal/cultural autonomies <p>* Note any changes in administrative borders affecting proportions of population, as well as recent changes among competencies of the various levels.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Constitution; legislation, <i>inter alia</i>, laws on administrative divisions and laws on municipalities▪ Multilateral and bilateral treaties and other agreements▪ Statutes of governmental agencies and regional governments, statutes of municipalities, statutes of autonomies
3. KEY ACTORS AND RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS		
State authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify relevant state actors at national level (e.g. parliament, government, president), regional and local levels• How can the relationship between state authorities and SD groups be characterised (cooperative, distrustful, conflict creating)?• What channels (formal/informal) are available for dialogue (are these sufficient)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Constitution; Legislation, <i>inter alia</i>, laws on administrative divisions and laws on municipalities▪ Electoral results▪ Reports by public institutions, IGOs (especially human-rights-monitoring bodies)▪ Interviews with relevant actors, knowledgeable non-governmental organisations and researchers▪ Reports of independent monitoring bodies
Political parties and elites	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Political party system, parliamentary, registered/non-registered, regional parties• Parties/elites who promote (in whole or part) or are sympathetic to the needs, interests, aspirations and claims of SD groups• Parties with nationalist/assimilationist or secessionist/separatist agendas	
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Other (potentially) influential actors (e.g. trade unions, private business, professions, women's groups, public figures or personalities)• Determine their role and the dynamics of their relationships with other actors (including the authorities and different groups)	

External actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neighbouring states with links to local actors, great powers, IGO, INGO, NGO or other state networks, business corporations? • What are their interests and potential influence on intra-state dynamics?
The media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are media outlets segregated along linguistic/cultural lines? • What is the role of the media in characterising different groups? Do they perpetuate stereotypes, hate rhetoric or incitement to violence? Are there positive voices in the media promoting understanding and tolerance?

4. PROFILE OF SD GROUPS

Group profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are they identified (self-defined or objectively on the basis of ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural or other criteria, e.g. race or national origin)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Written sources: laws, reports by public institutions, IGOs, INGOs, NGOs, academic publications and media reports
History	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Origins and historical link to the state (e.g. indigenous population, colonial and migration histories) • History of persecution/oppression/disadvantage (e.g. forced migration due to slavery, migrant labour importation)? Other experiences? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Independent surveys ▪ Interviews with group members, knowledgeable NGOs and researchers, members of other groups who could serve as comparators, others who are in a position to provide helpful factual information (e.g. lawyers, social workers, community associations, teachers), officials at national, regional and local levels
Composition and internal dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breakdown of a group by gender, generation, social-economic or political status, degree of proximity to cultural /religious tradition, etc. • Social structures and intra-group dynamics (e.g. patriarchal dominated by religious leaders, etc) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Meetings: organising roundtables, seminars, public panels and hearings
Organisation/mobilisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the leaders and representatives • Is there one single strong leader or factional/competing leaders? • Who claims to represent/speak for whom? Is leadership contested? 	
Strategy and behaviour	<p>How are concerns/aspirations and demands of different groups pursued:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representations of interests/concerns to public officials through available channels, electoral politics? • Education and/or propaganda? Verbal opposition (petitions, letters, publications)? Symbolic resistance (sit-ins, demonstrations, etc)? • Any advocacy in public statements of violence (whether domestic or international, against infrastructure, security personnel, government or political figures, civilians, etc)? • Any violent incidents or attacks carried out? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Field visits to enable direct observation of the situation of a particular group. Such visits are especially useful for observing living conditions, infrastructure, distance to services and the spatial relationship between the group concerned and others (including segregation) <p>* Potential sensitivity of data collection is something peace practitioners should be aware of, particularly for those groups that have historically been or continue to be (or feel) marginalised, discriminated against and who fear that information collected may be used against them. In undertaking primary research, e.g. through interviews and other consultative processes, care should be taken to ensure that ethical frameworks are in place and that the fully informed consent of all participants is obtained with respect to the distribution and use of any information provided.</p>
Relationships between different identity groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Characterised by cooperation, dependence, hostility or violence? What are the sources of solidarity or antagonism? • Any (in)formal mechanisms or avenues for dialogue and cooperation? 	

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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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