EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What we talk about when we talk about political settlements

**Towards Inclusive and Open Political Settlements
in an Era of Disillusionment**

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PSRP

About Us

The Political Settlements Research Programme (PSRP) is centrally concerned with how political settlements can be made more inclusive of those affected by them, to include more than political elites without undermining their stability. In particular, the programme examines the relationship between stability and inclusion, sometimes understood as a relationship between peace-making and justice.

The programme is addressing three broad research questions relating to political settlements:

1. How do different types of political settlement emerge, and what are the actors, institutions, resources, and practices that shape them?

2. How can political settlements be improved by internally-driven initiatives, including the impact of gender-inclusive processes and rule of law institutions?

3. How, and with what interventions, can external actors change political settlements?

The PSRP involves a consortium of five organisations, the Global Justice Academy University of Edinburgh (lead partner) Conciliation Resources (CR), The Institute for Security Studies (ISS), The Rift Valley Institute (RVI), and the Transitional Justice Institute (TJI, University of Ulster).

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Abstract

A discourse on the importance of understanding political settlements has achieved some salience in development academic and policy discussions. As a concept, however, the term political settlements can be (and has been) criticised: as lacking in clarity; as failing to do any real intellectual analytical work; and for being difficult to translate into practical strategies for change. This article reviews political settlement literature, and argues that 'political settlement' as an analytical concept has many of the flaws suggested, but that the central project of trying to understand the extent to which stopping violent conflict depends on powerful elites reaching deals on cooperation, and the ways in which such deals enable or limit projects of attempted transformation remains an important one. The article suggests that political settlement discourse has similarity with discourses emerging in other fields, all of which are attempting to respond to an 'era of disillusionment' in which moves towards democratisation or peace as an 'end point' of history, are now understand to have remained elusive despite sustained international intervention. The article suggests six critical research gaps which provide a focus for bringing work across the fields of development and conflict resolution together.

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Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

As a concept, The term political settlements can be (and has been) criticised: as lacking in clarity; as failing to do any real intellectual analytical work; and for being difficult to translate into practical strategies for change. This article argues that 'political settlement' as an analytical concept has many of the flaws suggested, but that the central project of political settlements discourse in relation to fragile and conflict-affected states is one that has close connection with current conflict resolution dilemmas in the peacebuilding field. This central project is to understand the extent to which stopping violent conflict depends on powerful elites reaching deals on cooperation, and the ways in which such deals enable or limit projects of attempted transformation which aim for more inclusive political arrangements, a fair sharing of sources and just accommodation of ethnic and religious diversity and equality for women (cf. UN 2015a: para 14).

This working paper identifies six critical gaps in how political settlement analysis deals with deeply divided societies characterised by violent conflict:

1. The Conceptual Gap

On-going reviews of political settlement literature whether policy or academic, struggle with the integrity of political settlements as a concept, and its relationship to closely related concepts such as state-building, peace-building, peace settlements, and constitutionalism. Core definitional issues relating to this concept include to what extent political settlements are elite-focused or society-focused? Are political settlements 'things' or processes? Is there any normative minimal content to the concept of political settlements? Are political settlements subjects of intervention or globalised domestic orders?

2. The Violence and Conflict Gap

Political settlement discourse now appears to assume that political settlements continue through all but the most extreme periods of conflict. Conflict is often viewed as inherent to the particular form that a political settlement takes, or a 'symptom' of political settlement failures.

Despite an asserted relationship between violence and political settlement, there has been little systematic analysis of how actors use violence to shape contemporary political settlements at a more day-to-day level, including during moments of attempted transition. Neither has there been overt analysis of the multiplicity of functions violence might have, beyond being a symptom of a struggle over who will own the state's resources. Political settlements analysis focused on a statist paradigm now stands to be outpaced by the complex contemporary forms of violence, which move between ideological and organised, to criminal and diffuse, from within state borders to transnational mutations that seem characteristic of our contemporary global condition (cf. Carothers & Samet-Marram 2015).

Further under-analysed spheres in this category include: the complicated relationship between 'private/interpersonal violence' and 'public/political violence', which sees conflict mutating pre, during and post wars, through private and public manifestations; regionalised violence and the complex relationship between violence within the state's border and violence beyond it; and where to locate inter-state violence that focuses less, as in pre-cold-war days of inter-state conflicts relating to interstate relations, and more inter-state conflicts focused on intra-state relations, such as the conflicts in Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan, and now to some extent Syria.

3. Political Settlements and Transition

Political settlements literature to date has included little analysis of the relationship between structured attempts to transition from violent political settlements to less violent political settlements that arise through negotiated transitions from conflict. Current political settlement analysis distinctions, which view peace agreements as formal settlement 'events', misunderstand the contingent process-nature of the documents and the ways in which they attempt to capture the prior bargaining processes, so as to try to contain their violent dynamics and translate them into revised political and legal institutions.

We suggest there is a need to better understand the politics of peace processes and the relationship between their formal peace agreements and processes of political settlement. Peace processes are perhaps best understood as processes of containing fundamental disagreement as to how inclusive a political settlement will prevail, that aim to establish new modes of political bargaining that rely less on violence than before. We view better understanding of transitions as vital to understanding the different and sometimes contradictory processes of inclusion that they attempt, and the implicit trade-offs that are established between conflict-resolution goals, and different types of inclusion.

4. Political Settlements and Gender

Political settlements with their focus on elites, appear from the literature to be gender blind; there is little by way of comprehensive scholarly or policy literature available to elucidate the nature and form of the gender dimensions of political settlement, although very recently some is beginning to emerge. We suggest that the omission of gender from political settlement analysis is one that follows from its frame of analysis and focus on elite groups, rather than a simple research failure.

The presumption that 'political settlement' operates as a category capable of including and embracing women's needs must be critically interrogated from the outset. Indeed all the other deficits we identify in the political settlements project implicate gender. This is not just critical to achieving inclusion of women; gender analysis is an important lens through which to understand the larger questions regarding projects of inclusion, elite focus, and construction of public authority that we have identified as conceptual gaps more generally.

5. Political Settlements and Strategies for Transformation

Political settlement literature has attempted to describe and understand dynamics of political settlement and views these as closely related to the economic and participation incentives created – intentionally or unintentionally – by institutions. Somewhere between descriptive analysis of political bargaining processes, and normative institutional analysis, there is a need for systematic case-study analysis of 'strategies of change', of external and internal actors, and the roles that appeals to normative outcomes play. We furthermore suggest that engaging with strategies of change that internal and external actors attempt requires understanding of the positioning of researchers and research methodologies with relation to the political settlement.

6. Political Settlements and Defining and Measuring Transformation

With political settlements defined as on-going processes of bargaining whose end goals are often contested among elites, between elites and other internal actors, and between elites, internal interveners and external interveners, a final gap is that of how to define and measure 'transformation'.

A number of interesting attempts to measure exist in a number of different spheres, from attempts to set 'end state goals' in peace operation mandates, to attempts to benchmark peace-building, to attempts to define 'every-day peace' at a local level (Mac Ginty 2014), to attempts to measure the impact of particular peace process provisions, and attempts to evaluate projects of change as a monitoring exercise (Duggan 2012). In different ways these projects all struggle with the questions set out in this working paper.

We suggest, however, that it might now be useful to adopt a more portfolio approach to measurement that uses not just different quantitative measurements or mixed methods approaches to measuring outcomes, but fundamentally different approaches to what it is we should be measuring that then enables an interrogation of how we understand 'progress' when looking across the portfolio of possible meanings and measurements. How do international development indicators relate to conflict indicators, relate to whether a structured transformation such as is found in a peace agreement was implemented or not, relate to lived experiences of improved human capacities?

Conclusion

In conclusion, we suggest, that some of the conceptual and semantic confusion over political settlements, can be dealt with by understanding political settlements analysis as a project of engagement with the possibilities of transformation in situations where powerful and violent actors appear to hold all the cards, rather than a project of designing a 'thing' called a political settlement.

Political settlement analysis as a project should aim to better inform interveners as to how to engage with the reality of political power-balance in the societies in which they intervene, in ways that are smart both to needs to sustain elite consent if change is to be made possible, but are also smart as to how to move beyond permanent elite capture.

Processes aimed at changing political settlements are difficult and problems of conflict and state lack of capacity profound; and the global market place in which we attempt to address these difficulties is almost so fast-changing that it outpaces capacity to research. Yet conflict remains inextricably linked with the exercise of brute power and exclusion, and better forms of co-existence require the excluded to become included.

When people talk about political settlements, centrally they talk about how to navigate between elite deals and projects which aspire to transform societies away from elite capture.