Accord spotlight
an international review of peace initiatives

Bringing in the margins

Peacebuilding and transition in borderlands

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Bringing in the margins: peacebuilding and transition in borderlands

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Cover photo: A small fence separates densely populated Tijuana, Mexico, right, from the United States in the Border Patrol's San Diego Sector. Construction is underway to extend a secondary fence over the top of this hill and eventually to the Pacific Ocean. © SFC Gordon Hyde

Key workshop findings

- **Re-imagining state-centric approaches**: Borderlands are often linked to national and transnational instability, insecurity and violence – prompting securitised responses, regulation of the border, and exceptional forms of governance. But these may exacerbate marginalisation and exclusion of borderland communities. Such responses develop because mainstream policy is often state- and capital-centric, based on the assumption that peace and development built from the centre will automatically spread to peripheral areas.
- **Bringing in the margins:** Analytical frameworks focused on borderlands, political settlements and inclusion can help better understanding of the margins and support more effective and inclusive peacebuilding policy and practice. By taking the margins as a starting point, these lenses bring into focus the multiple actors, informal and formal structures, and changing political and economic relations, at different levels – sub-national, between centre and periphery, and across borders – that impact transitions out of conflict.
- **Understanding borderland violence:** Violence often looks different in border regions, with implications for peacebuilding approaches and priorities. Borderland violence is typically explained by generalised assumptions concerning weak institutions and underdevelopment. A detailed and precise typology of violence could strengthen evidence of why and how violence emerges and is sustained in borderlands, supporting the development of early warning systems and preventive options.
- **Governance, authority and borderland brokers:** Borderlands are often areas of highly contested authority and hybrid governance structures. A key challenge for peacebuilding interventions is to identify who exercises authority and through which structures, as well as the levels of legitimacy that these have among communities. Borderland brokers can navigate these fluid environments and negotiate between communities, political leadership and conflict parties in borderlands. Greater understanding of the role of brokers to mediate between the periphery and centre, within borderlands and transnationally, can strengthen interaction between national and subnational peace and development interventions.
- **Challenges to access and data:** There are acute challenges to accessing information in borderlands for researchers, policymakers and practitioners. Innovative methodologies such as comic strips, spatial technology and spatial mapping of data provide opportunities to explore hard to reach borderland areas, and to facilitate greater understanding of the complex dynamics and personal stories of borderland communities.
- **Inclusion versus stability**: Balancing inclusion of borderland interests and communities with the stabilisation priorities of states is a core challenge for interventions. While tensions may be inevitable, experience from peacebuilding initiatives suggest that there are a number of different entry points to support better inclusion of borderlands. Further consideration of the consequences of stabilisation is also required to ensure tailored responses work with existing political and social institutions.

Introduction

This report presents a synthesis of a Joint Analysis Workshop that brought together 35 practitioners, academics and policymakers for a two-day reflection on a new *Accord Insight* project on peace, transition and political settlement in borderlands. The report distils the main discussion points and will inform the development of the project, the main output of which is an *Accord Insight* publication due in mid-2018.

The project looks at sub-state political settlements in conflict-affected borderlands and the possibilities for more effective and inclusive peacebuilding interventions. Borderlands refer to areas on the margins of states – geographically but also politically and socially. They are often viewed as trouble spots, or lagging and disruptive zones beset by violence and interests that threaten state integrity and development processes.

Why look at borderlands?

High levels of violence in borderlands are linked to weak state presence or clumsy efforts to extend it. But simplistic correlations between violence in borderlands and their exclusion from processes of political and economic integration have led to poor policy choices. Consequently, borderlands are approached as areas to be pacified and regulated by the centre. This prompts securitised responses, exceptional forms of government, or other efforts to assimilate borderlands into national processes and top-down governance models.

A borderlands lens challenges such narratives by demonstrating how violence can be related to processes of statebuilding and economic development, rather than residual to them. This can offer a useful critique of conventional approaches to borderlands – securitisation, regulation of borderland economies and movement of borderland peoples – and also challenges the assumption that there is an automatic peace dividend from statebuilding and economic development.

Mainstream policy is commonly based on the assumption that peace and development are built at the centre before spreading out to the edges of the state. While border communities and regions are often proclaimed as important to inclusive peacebuilding efforts in conflict and post-conflict contexts, national and international policy and practice often struggle to incorporate them constructively. In fact, current approaches to conflict and violence in borderlands remain predominantly state-centric, shaped by analysis and understanding reflecting national or centre-focused concerns.

Yet borderlands are often progressive zones of economic and political innovation, where governance takes on experimental forms. By taking the margins as its starting point, a borderlands lens brings into focus the multiple actors, informal and formal structures, and changing political and economic relations that affect political settlements at different levels: sub-national, between centre and periphery, and across borders. A borderlands lens can help peacebuilding policy and practice to be sensitive to the dynamics of border spaces, *and* to how these dynamics shape and are shaped by national and transnational processes.

This *Accord Insight* project seeks to reflect and incorporate the everyday experiences of those living and working in borderlands, as well as to explore the types of peacebuilding activities that have been attempted. It also draws attention to the different 'brokers' that negotiate between communities, political leadership and conflict parties in borderlands, at national level and across borders, and their potential contribution to successful peacebuilding interventions. A central aim of the project is to improve understanding of and support for war to peace transitions, and provide guidance for more effective peacebuilding policy and practice.

Key project questions include:

- What has been the impact of peacebuilding initiatives in borderland regions, and how have different peacebuilding activities addressed the concerns of borderlands communities?
- To what extent have efforts to secure, promote and regulate governance, development and cross-border economies in the margins of states supported or undermined national and sub-national peace agreements and talks?

Trucks wait to cross the Afghanistan-Iran border in Zaranj, Afghanistan, May 10, 2011. The crossing is part of a busy trade route between Central Asia and the Middle East. © Sgt. Mallory VanderSchans

- What roles have different actors played in brokering processes of reconstruction and post-war transition in borderlands?
- How do wider social networks and gender relations within and beyond borderlands shape peacebuilding processes, and how can a better understanding of these enhance existing conflict resolution approaches?

To explore these questions discussions at the workshop looked at the following issues:

- Concepts and theories of borderlands and political settlements.
- The particular types of violence, (in)security, governance and authority that emerge in borderlands.
- The challenges of working in borderlands, and innovative methods and tools to better engage with and understand borderland dynamics.
- Peacebuilding responses and practice in borderland spaces.

A concluding session reflected on how workshop discussions related to participants' work and which issues could be taken forward in the project to develop a better understanding of options for peacebuilding practice as it relates to borderlands. While discussions explored many of the complexities of borderland contexts, some themes and issues were missing or covered in less depth. These included forced migration and displacement, mobility across borders, and borderlands in the Global North. A gendered analysis of borderland lives and relations was introduced – for example, how women and men might broker different types of relations and resources – but was not discussed in depth.

Definitions and contested concepts

The project connects concepts of **borderlands**, **political settlements** and **inclusion** to bring a spatial perspective currently missing from peacebuilding policy and practice. While these concepts can help advance understanding of how conflict-affected societies transition out of violence, they also bring complications as the terminology is contested.

The workshop began by differentiating **borders** and **boundaries**, **borderlands** and **frontiers**, and the implications of using one or other term. As mentioned above, borderlands refer to areas on the margins of states. They are 'in between' places where memory, identity and loyalty often transcend and even contest state boundaries. Broadly, the term 'border' refers to a formal line, with borderlands straddling the space across them

– with an implicit assumption that borders refer to political partitions between recognised entities. However, borders are often disputed and the formal lines used to delineate states and citizenship seldom map onto the boundaries that divide social, ethnic, linguistic and political groups. Borderlands appear in the ambiguities of these spaces.

While the terms, much like the spaces they represent, are fluid, there are some general assumptions associated with each. The origin of the concept of borderlands is often linked to European expansion across the American continent, where the distinction between 'borders', 'boundaries', 'borderlands' and 'frontiers' gained significance. A frontier describes a more fuzzy, pliable political space related to conquest and territorial acquisition, which a border is meant to close down. Yet, in practice, frontier dynamics continue long after nation states define their territorial limits. These dynamics are often key generators of contemporary borderland spaces, and are central to the way borderlands are treated in national and international policy; in particular, making it possible for states to define borderland spaces as exceptional zones that warrant exceptional kinds of intervention.

Political settlements refer to the balance or distribution of power in a society, including the conflicts and coalitions that emerge between various groups and social classes. Political settlements analysis has a practical value in that it challenges conventional development and state-building policy and the view that good governance is a matter of simply incorporating the 'right institutions' into the local context. It also acknowledges the influence of politics and power relations. Political settlements can be national or local, or extend across borders, with different levels of political settlement overlapping and interacting.

But the term political settlement as a frame of both analysis and intervention is disputed. A key point of contestation is between: 1) Douglas North's perspective, which sees a political settlement as plastic or mouldable, responding to different carrot or stick incentives and sanctions, and which has a goal of containing or stabilising conflict; and 2) Mushtaq Khan's definition of a political settlement as a 'fact' – descriptive of fixed power relations within a particular society and lacking flexibility. Practically, it is useful to think of a political settlement as somewhere in between – as a deeply embedded set of institutions that regulate the administration of power, but that are not immutable and are subject to change. External factors and actors can incentivise change but are also limited by the entrenched, internal rules of the game.

Inclusive political settlements are often associated with stable states and societies. But there is disagreement over what inclusion refers to. Recent discussions suggest that stability is more likely if key elites are included in formal and informal bargaining processes that shape the political settlement. This focus on elite inclusion leaves an important gap that cuts to the heart of the relationship between stability and inclusivity: what is the role of marginalised groups? If they are not at the centre of the analysis, how are the terms 'inclusive' and 'stable' understood? And how are challenges of marginalisation and exclusion, which are key drivers of conflict or instability, incorporated into peacebuilding and development interventions?

As areas positioned at the geographic and often developmental margins of political units, borderlands often face marginalisation and conflict. Borderland elites are likely to operate at the margins of the national political settlement, while playing a crucial role in the local secondary settlement, or even in the settlement that spans the border. Borderland populations are also commonly marginalised in national political settlements, and can similarly be highly influential locally or across borders. What does inclusivity mean in these contexts, including for conflict or peacebuilding?

Bringing together a political settlements approach with a borderlands lens unveils the need for a more complex understanding of power relations and inclusion, including how these are embedded in local histories and existing institutional arrangements. Applying a borderlands lens to political settlements reorients analysis towards the power (im)balances that maintain state margins as exceptional spaces separated from the centre, and that are integral to the way violence emerges. As one workshop participant emphasised: political settlements implies looking at power relations from both sides of the border, and understanding how they incorporate both internal and external actors.

Unravelling the borderlands: violence, governance and authority

Violence

While there was overall consensus among workshop participants that levels of violence are higher in borderlands than other regions, there was extended discussion about the different forms such violence takes in borderlands, and the extent to which it is different than elsewhere, and why. For example, it was suggested that the potential for violent conflict in borderlands could come from multiple sources: from the political centre, from a neighbour, or from within the borderland itself. A lack of state presence or efforts to expand the state were both linked to high levels of borderland violence, as was the presence of multiple actors asserting competing claims to authority and who may see a strategic value in coercion and violence. A common pattern is of states that label borderlands as unruly or a threat to sovereignty so justifying the use of exceptional security measures to maintain control, or even franchising out the use of violence to militias, bandits and other armed actors. It was also suggested that the fact that borderlands are often far from media scrutiny and exposure can encourage more extreme forms of violence – ethnic cleansing, or disproportionate or indiscriminate violence.

Yet the correlation between these observed factors and levels of violence is not straightforward and multiple elements may intersect to give rise to different types of violence. A common misunderstanding is that violence in borderlands is associated with the fragile nature of state institutions or economic underdevelopment – a consequence of incomplete processes of state consolidation and integration into national, regional and global economies. Policy typically adapts this simplified diagnosis, developing increasingly stringent state intervention as an appropriate and effective response, with an emphasis on securitising or closing the border to promote stability. However, these types of hard intervention can have detrimental effects for community security, including undermining existing networks and community resilience.

A borderlands lens challenges such narratives by demonstrating how violence can be related to processes of statebuilding and economic development, rather than residual to them. This can offer a useful critique of conventional approaches to borderlands – securitisation, regulation of borderland economies and movement of borderland peoples – and also challenges the assumption that there is an automatic peace dividend from statebuilding and economic development.

A borderlands lens also asks policymakers to think differently about different types of violence and what drives them. For example, state-centric perspectives of violence in Myanmar might highlight the problem of non-state armed actors and point to the need to control them through ceasefires and military actions. From the perspective of borderlands communities, however, the most harmful forms of violence stem from activities associated with the extractive industries. Workshop participants suggested that a typology of violence in borderland regions would help dissect its different forms and develop a more accurate and disaggregated understanding of its causes, including from the perspective of those living there.

Participants also pointed to the tendency among policymakers to see violence as occurring in a vacuum. This leads peacebuilding interventions to prioritise ending the violence, rather than understanding how violence functions as part of the underlying political order and addressing its root causes. To explore this more fully, comparative examples of how present-day violence maps onto underlying political orders were presented on borderlands in northern Kenya-Somalia-Ethiopia, and Tunisia-Libya.

In northern Kenya, the evolution of the modern political settlement was linked to the economic and political infrastructures of the colonial and post-colonial eras. Under British rule, pastoral communities in borderland areas were neglected in favour of commercialisation and extraction of agricultural resources. In the post-colonial era, the

Somalia, Kismayo Town: Somali civilians walk down a street during a patrol by Kenyan soldiers serving with the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) in the southern Somali port city of Kismayo. © AU/UN 1st photo / Ramadan Mohamed Hassan

Kenyan state continued a violent policy to pacify the borderlands, which resulted in the deaths of almost 50 per cent of the population. Consequently, these areas became increasingly cut off from the state's wider political economy, leaving them vulnerable to regional and transnational conflicts and pressures. Today, governance in the Kenyan borderlands continues to be mediated through violence, including more recently in the form of Somali military incursions in response to the presence of the militant group Al Shabaab.

Tunisia's recent transition from authoritarian to democratic rule is viewed as comparatively peaceful; yet its border region with Libya continues to be viewed as unstable. A deeper look at the sub-national political settlement reveals links between the historical absence of the state and present-day conflict around the border. Responding to a lack of economic and educational infrastructure, communities living along the 450 km border with Libya have developed their own survival mechanisms – many of which depend on the capacity to develop informal trade networks across the border.

Yet in mainstream national discourse these areas are seen as hotbeds of cross-border smuggling and terrorism. In the post-revolution period after the ousting of President Ben Ali in 2011, the state has attempted to penetrate and regain control of these areas. This has been done through increased regulation of cross-border trade and migration, and increases in security presence, arrests and detentions. A new national policy to securitise the border includes construction of a border wall – supported by international aid funding and rationalised through counter-terrorist logic.

Closing down contact and unregulated trade by building a border-wall is not uncommon – from the US-Mexico and Yemen-Saudi borders, to the Israel-Palestine context, the security concerns of one group disciplines the movements, living-spaces and economic opportunities of another. In assessing the value of closing down borders in this way, it is important to consider who does and does not benefit from such projects.

Governance and authority

Navigating diverse governance structures and sources of authority in borderlands is vital to more effective peace and development interventions. Conflict-affected borderlands often suffer from weak state institutions or from a state presence that is heavily securitised. State authorities may be viewed with suspicion or can have negligible influence on the lives of borderland communities. Borderlands can also be vulnerable to cross-border, local and international influences. Workshop discussions identified informal and hybrid authorities that exercise political, economic, social and coercive power as key features of borderlands, with multiple actors making contesting claims to exercise authority.

"Bargaining processes [in borderlands] *are shaped as much by local understandings of legitimacy and authority, as by the provision or denial of material resources, mediated through particular institutional arrangements."*

Gaining **legitimacy** among local and cross-border actors in borderlands is intrinsic to the cultivation of authority. It cannot be artificially manufactured. As noted by one participant, "bargaining processes [in borderlands] are shaped as much by local understandings of legitimacy and authority, as by the provision or denial of material resources, mediated through particular institutional arrangements". A key challenge flagged by workshop participants was that it is not always clear when viewed from outside borderland areas who exercises authority within them. Identifying local understandings of authority and legitimacy are essential to discerning which actors or institutions organise political and economic life. For example, in Sudan's border regions, Khartoum's attempts in the 1990s to dissolve traditional authority structures met with strong local resistance. As a result, this system of traditional authority was allowed to continue in parallel with newly established formal state authorities and systems of territorial administration.

Authorities and institutions in borderlands are often hybrid: state/non-state, formal/informal, licit/illicit, and military. They may take on the function of public authority while simultaneously claiming to be independent or in direct opposition to the state. At the same time, by assuming the language and iconography of the state, as well as its function and form, informal authorities may in fact reinforce the image of state presence – in some cases without inherently undermining the state itself. In Goma, in the Democratic Republic of Congo's eastern borderlands, informal petrol traders have proliferated where state regulations are distant and unenforceable. They have set up their own structures for negotiating prices, cross-border trade and employment. These structures are empowered and gain authority through mimicking state rules and authority: interacting and bargaining with state actors on issues of taxation, policing, violence and security. The petrol traders are enabled by the state's recognition of their know-how, networked relations and authority, which in turn informs and entrenches their legitimacy among local and cross-border communities.

In recent years, the peacebuilding field has been increasingly interested to understand multiple forms of public authority – how legitimacy and authority are generated, by whom, and through which networks, institutions, relations of power, and forms of violence. Public authority is increasingly seen as a pool of resources, of which the state is just one. For example, workshop discussions highlighted that in Myanmar's borderlands, relationships between militia movements, tribal leaders and Chinese officials, as well as cross-border economic and political networks, all affect people's access to political, social and economic resources. Local, national or international peacebuilding or humanitarian interventions have to navigate multiple authorities, from the Myanmar state, to local groups, to Chinese businesspeople and officials.

Discussions at the workshop highlighted the role of **brokers** that mediate between borderlands and other spaces: individuals and institutions that can straddle multiple boundaries and geographic spaces, and provide vital connections – between

communities, periphery and centre, or across borders. They can play a particularly important role in places where institutional hybridity and contested authority are prevalent, but they are often overlooked. Better understanding of the histories and function of such brokers, of how they emerge and embed themselves, provides insights into how to navigate the layers of social and political relationships in borderlands that determine the trajectory of change.

Brokers and their networks can prove remarkably resilient in unfavourable circumstances, through their capacity to work locally, nationally and transnationally. The Borneo case *(see box)* illustrates that a local vacuum in state hegemony offers entrepreneurial opportunities in traditionally marginalised and disconnected places, and that actors that provide services in such spaces can earn legitimacy and authority by operating through local political and socio-economic structures. It can be challenging for peace initiatives to consider how and by whom legitimacy and authority are generated in borderlands – where sources of legitimacy and authority are much less immediately visible from the outside and where systems of governance are hybrid. But the ability of such initiatives to engage with the reality of borderland governance affects their potential to be inclusive and effective.

Borneo's timber brokers

Following the fall of Indonesian President Suharto in 1998, a power vacuum arose in the Indonesian/Malaysian borders of the island of Borneo while the Indonesian state focused on consolidating the centre. As a result, timber brokers that formed part of a network of Malaysian entrepreneurs were able to infiltrate the Indonesian Borneo borderland. They began transporting billions of dollars' worth of timber back to Malaysia, circumventing taxes and other customs and legal regulations.

These timber barons' shadow economy operated through their ability to penetrate local lives and communities, through developing close-knit patrimonial networks, even marrying into local families, and providing services and infrastructure that the state was unable to deliver. From this 'mini-kingdom' base, timber barons also orchestrated a trade network extending into international timber trade routes that stretched as far as Canada.

When the Indonesian state eventually intervened and regained control over Borneo's timber trade, these entrepreneurs were chased out. But they were able to reinvent themselves, finding ways to exploit new opportunities based on their understanding of local and transnational power and political relations.

Building peace in borderlands: challenges and innovations

Innovation in methods

The workshop highlighted the challenge of collecting data and information on borderlands, the implications of this for understanding and intervening in border regions, and some methods and approaches available to overcome these issues.

First, border zones are often remote: state neglect, weak governance or heightened security and political sensitivities often translate into lack of roads and infrastructure or other restrictions to access. Information and data may therefore be unavailable, unreliable or difficult to collect. Second, sub-national, centre-periphery and

Challenges to working in borderlands: policy and practice perspectives

These are abridged versions of reflections presented at the workshop by a peacebuilding practitioner and a UK policymaker on the challenges they face working on borderland issues in conflict contexts.

Peacebuilding practitioner

Working in contested borderland regions presents a number of practical challenges. Some are logistical – trying to gain access to securitised, politically closed borderland areas can have security risks and other obstacles, including difficulties in trying to bring people together and ensure representation when they may have travel restrictions or passport issues. We also have to navigate conflicting, contrasting and often officially sanctioned narratives about why or even if a border exists. It can be difficult to unravel the embedded, subjective accounts and histories in order to understand what the conflict dynamics are.

We can also come under suspicion for being seen to challenge these accepted narratives. This information economy also mediates the ability to engage people in the process – what people feel safe or willing to say and in which environments. In the contexts where we operate, elites from the centre can feel threatened by our work, which questions their positions. They often interfere with progress on the ground, viewing peacebuilders with suspicion and hostility.

UK policymaker

Many conflicts have sub-national or cross-border dynamics, which make them complicated for policymakers to get to grips with – we are used to working with and through the state. Borderlands often suffer historical patterns of political and socio-economic marginalisation, but policy institutions and response mechanisms only 'see' the edges of state when they become a serious security threat – and are therefore reactive rather than preventive. There are lots of things we could and should be doing to prevent problems from arising in the first place.

There is also a prevailing view that border security and management including barriers are the only remedy to borderland challenges, despite examples that these do not necessarily work and can even be counter-productive in many situations. Current policies developed as part of the dominant counter-terrorism agenda solidify this view. Another reason policy struggles to incorporate sub-national areas in political processes is that there is often nervousness about providing special measures for certain territories. This then results in generic decentralisation approaches, which can ignore the specific histories of exclusion in these areas.

transnational relations in borderlands are inherently complex, making it difficult to distil analysis, lessons or tools for developing policy and practice. Third, the multiplicity of voices and interests in borderlands can exacerbate levels of disagreement over how history and conflict dynamics are presented or perceived. This manifests both within the borderland, as well as between centre and periphery, and can bias or even silence particular types of information. Workshop presentations demonstrated how the use of innovative methods – qualitative and quantitative – could be an effective way to uncover hard to access information, knowledge and data, and incorporate multiple voices, including those that are often silenced.

Comic books, combining graphics, storytelling and personal testimony, have been an innovative and effective means to present the experiences of those living in conflicted borderlands in new ways and to new audiences. The storytelling approach can help capture lived experiences of conflict and peace, humanising narratives for policymakers in a non-confrontational manner, and facilitating understanding of how conflict affects people in different ways. Comics can also be presented in many media, including newspapers, magazines and online platforms, which opens up discussions to non-specialist audiences such as the wider public.

In Colombia, animation has been used to document the stories of those who have gone missing during the conflict, in particular in remote regions of the country. A film and comic strip were used to raise public recognition of the issues faced by the families of the missing, which put pressure on the government to address the issue in the peace process. While comics have an important role to play, workshop discussions suggested that they need to be balanced by deeper analysis. Pioneers of comic strip inquiry at the workshop agreed that such platforms can provide effective entry points for accessing a wider body of research and information, and have already been creating relevant interfaces such as via interactive websites and other media.

The process of creating each comic book can also provide unique opportunities to engage research participants. The comics that were presented at the workshop are developed through a series of conversations with their subjects, and are drawn by local artists. They are a rich medium to capture and reveal layers of memory, trauma and personal angst, as they are able to jump between time and space, or the external and internal world of the story teller. For peacebuilding work, the development of a comic book story can be a useful way to support cross-community initiatives by bringing together multiple and contested narratives that typically exist in conflict contexts. It can also be used to archive places, people and events that may be under threat from violence and at risk of being disappeared.

Spatial technology has also been innovatively employed to explore hard to reach areas such as borderlands. Examples at the workshop included using geographic information system (GIS) mapping to track refugee boats sunk during rescue operations off European maritime borders; the use of 'memory modelling' to recreate (often inaccessible) spaces through human testimony and memory, for example a Syrian detention centre; and aerial mapping of Bedouin communities living in the southern desert region of Israel. In this latter instance, the use of aerial images alongside often contested historical records and personal testimonies made it possible to build a picture of how the state has encroached on Bedouins' everyday lives and spaces, including through displacement and destruction of property.

In Nigeria's north-eastern borderlands, **quantitative and qualitative data have been integrated** to map spatial patterns of violence perpetrated by Boko Haram, and to track how these shift over time. Research from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) has been applied alongside participatory data from incidents of violence reported by community members, and has been used to trace the movements of Boko Haram elements across different locations, inside and outside Nigeria. This has enhanced understanding of how the group's transnational movements link to its localised interactions with communities. The results challenged the prevalent view of Boko Haram operating across borders as part of a transnational network. The data showed that Boko Haram's reach has in fact been contracting and it has been operating in a more localised space. The data disputed the widely held assumption that armed groups are more violent in peripheral regions, rather showing that Boko Haram operatives are less likely to target civilians or use remote violence in areas where they are entrenched and invested in the local infrastructure.

A donkey-drawn cart in Abyei, Sudan. CC BY 2.0 Sudan Envoy

All three examples of innovative research and analysis illustrate the possibilities to build and strengthen evidence of the different ways conflict and violence impact on people and livelihoods in borderlands, especially where there may be established or assumed knowledge derived from state-centric understandings of conflict dynamics. As well as enabling access to difficult to reach areas and offering new lenses for exploring complex research sites, these methods can test and challenge fixed political narratives, and inform alternative policy and practice approaches.

Peacebuilding practice

The complexity of borderlands, including the difficulties in understanding and navigating competing authorities, brokers and modes of violence, create significant challenges but also opportunities for peacebuilding practice. Workshop participants discussed how peacebuilding interventions in borderlands could balance priorities of inclusion and stability, and how to bring the borderland 'in' to analysis, policy and practice, without risking further insecurity. A number of illustrative examples of peacebuilding activity in borderlands were provided at the workshop, a selection of which are summarised below.

Abyei

Following the Sudanese civil war that led to the independence of South Sudan, Abyei, a highly contested border zone, remains volatile. A UN peacekeeping force deployed to Abyei in 2011 was unable to stem continued fighting. In response, peace committees were developed along the length of the border as an early warning system against escalations of violence. They was organised among the Ngok Dinka community and the Misseriya herders (who move into Abyei to graze and water their cattle), local practitioners and non-government organisation (NGO) support.

The committees are highly informal. Behavioural norms are agreed between the two communities, and then the peace committees monitor any breaches of these, arranging and enforcing compensation for transgressions. Communities take responsibility for the actions of any individuals violating the norms. Alongside the committees a market has been created to further promote connections between communities and support economic livelihoods and the movement of goods in and out of South Sudan. The market uses traditional, existing routes, networks and relationships that were disrupted by the civil war and has revitalised pastoral migrations and economic exchange. The market provides a tangible benefit to peaceful coexistence, further encouraging people to commit to peaceful resolution of disputes.

Tunisia

The Tunisian border region with Libya faces increased Tunisian state security interventions due to its image as a smuggling and terrorist hub. Attempts to control illegal cross border activity have further stigmatised and marginalised borderland communities, rather than incorporate them into formal economies or provide alternative sources of income.

Peacebuilding initiatives have adopted an alternative approach that focuses on the particular needs and concerns of borderland communities themselves. Participatory research among those involved in illegal cross-border 'suitcase' trading as well as the wider community has documented their perceptions of both security and smuggling. This revealed the complex socio-economic and political relationships that characterise the border economies, and the prevailing view among borderland inhabitants that smuggling is a legitimate livelihood support strategy in the face of historical socio-economic exclusion. Advocacy campaigns have then been aimed at central and local government, encouraging them to support inclusive and participatory governance. These have been accompanied by the development of dialogue forums between civil society organisations and local authorities, to jointly discuss recommendations and practical ways forwards to address concerns.

Myanmar

In Myanmar, as ceasefires continue to be negotiated between Myanmar's many armed groups and the government, power struggles between state and non-state actors have escalated in the resource-rich borderlands of Shan state. These have been exacerbated by efforts by the military to assert itself in Myanmar's margins, and the emergence of new opportunities for resource extraction in the region.

NGOs trying to implement community development and civilian protection programmes in Shan state have had to negotiate with multiple actors: different state ministries at central and local level; parliamentarians; local businesspeople and entrepreneurs; as well as militia groups with varying agendas and interests – from ethnic-based to business elite-led. Some former militia leaders now hold government positions and exert power over displaced persons' freedom of movement in militia-held areas, as well as their overall safety.

China is also a significant actor – it is the largest economic investor with particular interest in extraction in Shan state, and it is widely thought that China supports many ethnic armed groups in the region.

NGOs have developed several methods for over-coming these challenges – including building alliances of several civil society organisations, and liaising with the civilian wings of armed actors. Much humanitarian assistance comes from China; but because NGOs are unable to deal directly with the Chinese government, they develop links with Chinese cultural organisations to mediate relationships with Beijing.

West Africa

Borderlands in West Africa have over many years allowed for the development of distinct economic opportunities. These have grown into longstanding informal trade networks that are simultaneously illicit and stable. But the easy movement of arms and young men across the porous borders of Sierra Leone and Liberia were also identified as key causes of the civil wars that engulfed the region in the 1990s. Post-war reconstruction efforts focused on managing or stabilising these borders through internationally-funded border security and management projects. Yet the concomitant disruption of trade and community networks produced new forms of destabilisation along the border, for example, exacerbating tensions between border officials and illicit traders, or disrupting local community conflict mitigation strategies established through long-term cross-border relationships.

Northern Kenya

Local peace dialogue platforms developed by community groups and local NGOs in northern Kenya became victims of their own success. The committees' effectiveness in mediating inter- and intra-community tensions fostered increased international financial and other interest and support, leading to their expansion and institutionalisation into District and National 'Peace and Development Committees'. Increases in resources have encouraged elite competition and capture, leading to mismanagement and corruption. The committees have subsequently struggled to maintain legitimacy, which has reduced their ability to intervene effectively to resolve tensions and conflicts.

Conclusion: bringing in the margins

The workshop concluded with reflections on how peacebuilding policy and practice can benefit from a more complex approach to space, violence and power relations. There was general consensus on the need and value of bringing in a borderlands lens to peacebuilding research, policy and practice. But an outstanding challenge was how to apply more granular borderlands analysis to the practice of peace. How can the reality of borderland relations – their complexities, ambiguities, contradictions and tensions – contribute to finding more effective ways of addressing issues of conflict and violence, in borderlands but also more broadly? Some potential entry points for better practice that were discussed at the workshop are summarised below. These will inform the development of the main *Accord Insight* publication that will be published in mid-2018.

Inclusion and stability: policy trade-offs

A borderlands lens provides a more nuanced understanding of how elite bargains are negotiated or brokered between the margins and centres of states. It can inform the tactical trade-offs that policymakers need to make to achieve different strategic objectives, of stabilising volatile borderlands, and of supporting inclusive modes of peacebuilding that incorporate marginalised interests.

A borderlands lens also provides an opportunity to examine the tensions between strengthening state institutions as a response to borderland insecurities, and the reality that attempts to replace informal institutions with formal ones are often major drivers of violence. While some level of tension may be inevitable, an awareness of the potential implications of different types of intervention may allow for more balanced and tailored responses that work with existing political and social institutions to pinpoint viable entry points for change.

Violence in the margins: critique and categorisation

A comparison of national and sub-national initiatives to address violent conflict could help identify the failures of dealing with borderland violence to date. One policy implication to be explored is to ensure borderland actors have a greater voice in national and global dialogues, research programmes and interventions. This could be linked to developments in practice, to identify more effective ways to engage borderland actors in dialogue and other peacebuilding initiatives.

Adaptive responses could be informed by a typology of violence at the borders that incorporates underlying historical and existing power relations alongside contemporary triggers, for example, categorised according to motivations; scale of violence; tactics; and actors. This could also serve as a matrix of early warning signals for larger national and transnational processes.

Brokers and brokerage

The individuals and organisations that act as brokers between groups, interests and spaces play key roles in determining how political settlements function inside and outside borderlands, mediating relationships and tensions. Increased understanding of borderland brokers – who they are and how they operate – can strengthen interaction between national and subnational spaces, and identify ways to support the emergence of 'good brokers' that help support peace and reduce poverty.

Moving forwards

The project looks at borderlands, not as exceptional spaces or simply as windows into national, local, or transnational tensions, but as spaces with their own agency and meaning. Yet they must be analysed as part of broader social, political and spatial relations. Workshop discussions highlighted the unique vantage point of a borderlands lens, but also stressed the importance that such a perspective engages with national and trans-national dimensions of development and peacebuilding. Ultimately, the project must overcome both the tendency towards borderland blindness and borderland myopia.

Bringing in the margins: peacebuilding and transition in borderlands

This paper summarises discussions from a workshop to explore sub-state political settlements in conflict-affected borderlands and the possibilities for more effective and inclusive peacebuilding interventions.

It looks at four key themes: concepts of borderlands, inclusion and political settlement; the particular types of violence, (in)security, governance and authority that emerge in borderlands; the challenges of working in borderlands, and innovative methods and tools to better engage with their dynamics; and peacebuilding responses and practice in borderland spaces.

Conciliation Resources is an independent international organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence, resolve conflicts and promote peaceful societies.

Accord spotlight presents focused analysis of key themes for peace and transition practice.

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