



Practice paper

April 2018

Partnership in peacebuilding

Lessons from Conciliation Resources' practice

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How and under what conditions can partnership between international non-governmental organisations and civil society organisations and networks in conflict-affected contexts support inclusive and transformative peace processes and peacebuilding?

To begin to answer this question, Conciliation Resources took as a case study its own practice of over 20 years of partnering with civil society organisations, networks, and individuals in conflict settings. Established in 1994, Conciliation Resources is a London-based, international non-governmental peacebuilding organisation working with people in conflict contexts to help them find creative and sustainable solutions for peace. Our research sought to explore the rationale and assumptions in Conciliation Resources' partnering approach and find out how these play out in practice in the contexts in which it works. We arrived at four key findings and some practical lessons for Conciliation Resources' practice and for the wider peacebuilding policy and practitioner community.

Findings

1. An 'accompaniment approach' to partnering is particularly suited to flexible, adaptive and long-term peacebuilding
2. A diverse set of partner organisations with different mandates and profiles is a strength in peacebuilding
3. Remote partnering with an international non-governmental organisation has distinct advantages for civil society working on conflict in terms of ownership, agency and practicality
4. Balancing the contractual aspects of partnership with activism for change is not straightforward, but it is important

This study is part of a wider research programme looking at how to support peaceful and inclusive change, conducted with International Alert and Saferworld and supported by the Department for International Development (DFID). Under this programme, Conciliation Resources' focus is on supporting peace and transition processes, based on the evidence that peace processes which can accommodate a broad set of interests are more likely to support peaceful and inclusive change. Partnerships between international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and civil society actors and organisations in conflict settings can be a way to support that.

Why is this relevant?

- The solutions and the agency to transform conflict lie primarily within the societies experiencing conflict. The people and organisations with whom Conciliation Resources partners are key stakeholders in processes of peaceful change. Therefore it is vital to understand how partnering with an INGO works best to support that.
- The importance of partnership is widely acknowledged in international frameworks, but detail on what it means and how it works is scant. UN Security Council Resolution 2282 recognises that the scale and nature of sustaining peace calls for close and strategic partnerships between the UN, national governments and other key stakeholders. Sustainable Development Goal 17, target 17, encourages and promotes effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships. The 2018 World Bank/UN *Pathways for Peace* report observes the importance of the formation of coalitions, local to global, for effective conflict prevention.

- Partnering between international and local and national civil society actors is an important means of supporting the UK's ambitions to tackle conflict and insecurity, and in particular to develop effective conflict resolution mechanisms (building block 3 of DFID's Building Stability Framework).
- Looking into partnerships in a peacebuilding context can help to better understand the relative value and role of INGOs amid a more generalised push for localisation of aid. DFID's *Civil Society Partnership Review* in 2016 called for new approaches to funding for innovative and collaborative projects, especially in challenging environments, including conflict and post-conflict scenarios.

Conciliation Resources' partnership approach

Conciliation Resources' practice can be described as 'accompaniment partnership', in which the INGO plays an accompanying role to partners in conflict-affected contexts by offering solidarity, facilitating dialogue and bearing witness, as well as providing technical support and access to resources. Partnering offers:

1. Advice and accompaniment, including in policy processes
2. Capacity building in peacebuilding and conflict transformation, as well as organisational support
3. Opportunities for comparative learning, joint planning and networking
4. Space for dialogue and reflection between groups

Conciliation Resources' staff are primarily based in London, though a few individual staff members are based in closer proximity to a conflict context. For the purpose of the study, Conciliation Resources' partners are loosely defined as individuals, civil society organisations (CSOs) or networks with whom we are collaborating on short or long-term programme objectives, with or without a permanent financial relationship. Conciliation Resources jointly manages projects and programmes with its partners, or supports partners to implement their own projects.

A note on *peacebuilding* partnerships

A body of useful literature exists on the practice of partnerships in conflict settings, much of which comes from the practitioner sector (see Further reading for some of these). The [Partnership Brokers Association](#) also provides excellent guidance on successful partnering.

Our research sought to understand the distinctiveness of 'partnering for peace'. In so doing, we discovered much common ground with other sectors in terms of principles for good practice. Yet we also discovered that the distinctiveness of peacebuilding partnerships lies in the *peacebuilding* intent and commitment that runs through them and shapes their objectives, the nature of work and types of organisations, networks and individuals involved. Peacebuilding also carries high stakes for partners, in terms of the political and legal risks involved, as well as the potential impact on sustainable peace. Partnerships need to be agile and flexible given the volatility of conflict contexts. Finally, cause and effect are much harder to measure and attribute than in other types of work; trust between partners that together they will achieve results is crucial.

Findings in detail

1. An ‘accompaniment approach’ to partnering is particularly suited to flexible, adaptive and long-term peacebuilding

Our research showed that a long-term partnership with Conciliation Resources gives partners in conflict-affected contexts the space and authority to think beyond the outputs and deliverables outlined in a given project plan, and focus instead on bringing about the necessary conditions for the transformational change they are pursuing.

Partners were not seen as implementers – indeed, implementation was understood as a joint endeavour. Instead, partners are given the space to respond autonomously to emerging issues as and when they arise. Projects were seen as a way – but not the only way – to pursue change. We found that this broader understanding of partnership, which allows for flexibility, was vital in enabling adaptability and responsiveness to changes in complex, unpredictable and often volatile environments.

“ *The other partnerships that we have are more of a client relationship where we are implementers. Here we are partners. The word makes a big difference.* ”

Afaq Hussain Bureau of Research on Industry and Economic Fundamentals (BRIEF), India

The longevity of Conciliation Resources’ accompaniment and engagement has also been a key factor in building the trust that enables the partners and Conciliation Resources to take forward innovative and sometimes challenging initiatives when working on deep-rooted and often protracted conflicts. During the consultations, many commented that creative thinking and risk-taking were essential in order to make breakthroughs in peace processes. This trust has developed in many cases through deep personal relationships between programme leads and individual members of the partner organisation – relationships often characterised by mutual honesty, respect and critical challenge. For example, many of the personal relationships between Conciliation Resources’ staff and partners in the Caucasus region pre-date the establishment of the programme of work itself, nearly two decades ago.

“ *They put [you] in the front while they themselves are supporting you from the back, with the technical know-how.* ”

Father Mark Kumbonyaki
Inter Church Peace Committee, South Sudan

These long-term and personal relationships present three main drawbacks that have to be managed. Firstly, several partners acknowledged that these personal relationships placed significant demands on individuals’ capacity. While essential, personal relationships need to be complemented by a wider variety of professional relationships with other members of staff at multiple levels of the respective organisations as a way to make partnership more sustainable.

Secondly, there is a risk that relationships of great longevity can lead to Conciliation Resources and its partners thinking in the same way. One partner in the South Asia region suggested that the respective organisations should challenge one another to stay dynamic and innovative, rather than “stay within the same boundaries of the past”.

Thirdly, the risk of dependency on Conciliation Resources’ access to funding or other support needs to be offset by longer-term planning and investment in organisational development and financial sustainability. In some cases, this has meant the nature of the partnership has had to shift.

Several partner organisations noted that their relationship with Conciliation Resources had withstood the inevitable ebbs and flows of funding, even if the nature of the partnership had changed. Partnerships do not necessarily stop when the financial relationship ends. Having developed not only capacities and adaptive strategies but also relationships and trust, Conciliation Resources and its partners were able to change the nature and scale of their joint programme of work, adjusting to new financial realities or continuing to work together without funding. Even where Conciliation Resources has modified its operational approach in a particular context, for example by hiring in-country staff, partner relationships had in general been maintained.



Conciliation Resources and partners from across their global programmes discussing the way they and other peacebuilding organisations understand and practice partnership, February 2018. © Mike Bradford

2. A diverse set of partner organisations with different mandates and profiles is a strength in peacebuilding

While Conciliation Resources and its partners share a common purpose in the peaceful resolution of conflict and the building of lasting peace, there is huge diversity in the range of skills, expertise and relationships. Some of Conciliation Resources' partners operate at the grassroots community level, while others may be civil society organisations at the local and/or national level, research organisations or even local enterprises. Some have different political aspirations. Partners consulted in the research emphasised the importance of maintaining shared peacebuilding values, which can provide an anchor for diverse organisations to work together towards peace.

The focal areas of Conciliation Resources' partner organisations' work include, among other things, human rights, social and economic development, political analysis, democratisation, mediation, inter-faith dialogue, media and film production, support to internally displaced people and diaspora members, and dealing with the legacy of the violent past. Some have a specific focus, such as women's empowerment; our Colombian partner, *Corporación de Investigación y Acción Social y Económica* (CIASE), describes itself as a feminist organisation that promotes implementation of human rights, with

an emphasis on women's economic, social and cultural rights. Other organisations are multi-mandated: Conciliation Resources' Liberian partner, the Institute for Research and Democratic Development, runs programmes on sustainable natural resource governance, human rights and service delivery, in addition to their peacebuilding work. Several of the partners have partnerships with a range of other INGOs.

Those consulted understood this diversity as a strength. Conciliation Resources and partner organisations were seen to bring complementary mandates, profiles and skillsets to their joint peacebuilding initiatives, as well as access to different constituencies, allowing each partner to achieve results that would not be possible alone. For example, one of Conciliation Resources' partners in the Caucasus saw its expertise in film production, which it used to develop analytical documentaries on conflict, as a natural complement to Conciliation Resources' convening power, which helped to bring the documentaries to a wider audience in the region. Partnerships worked well when partners amplified each other's strengths, while also identifying and addressing skills gaps and sharing their expertise where appropriate.

“ I think that Conciliation Resources knows that there is a lot of knowledge in their partners and they really try to learn from the knowledge so they can perform their work in a better way. It is not mining of knowledge, it is a way of learning.

Rosa Emilia Salamanca
Corporación de Investigación y Acción Social y Económica (CIASE), Colombia

Partners felt that Conciliation Resources had a key role to play in strengthening the links and relationships between its network of different partners in any given context. Conciliation Resources was encouraged to look beyond its circle of immediate partners to expand its network. At the same time, some partners were concerned that an expanded network could diminish the level of support for, and the quality of relationships with, existing partners. One of Conciliation Resources' partners in Latin America acknowledged that this was in part due to the emotional attachment to the partnership, inevitable when it is built on close personal ties. Despite this, there was broad commitment among partner organisations to make

network-building a success – one Kashmiri partner spoke of their determination to remain “open to Conciliation Resources' other partners... to not let competitiveness get in the way of partnership.”

Finally, it was noted during the consultations that there may be limitations to partnering solely with professional or semi-professional civil society organisations, given the fact that local informal networks or movements also play a role in transformational change and could benefit from INGO support. However, the level of organisational capacity and staffing required by international donors can mitigate against partnerships with such networks, potentially limiting the range of local partners for peacebuilding.

Yet, some of Conciliation Resources' partnerships suggest that it can be possible. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Conciliation Resources supported ROFU (*Réseau des Organisations de Femmes des Uélés*), an umbrella network of 18 separate women's organisations, first to come together and later to secure legal recognition and formalise. ROFU is now able to run significant joint peacebuilding projects, using international funds, that are preventing and resolving conflict at the local level and beyond.



Conciliation Resources' East and Central African Programme working with staff of their partner organisation Femmes Hommes Action Plus (FHAP) in Bangui, Central African Republic, October 2017. © Conciliation Resources

3. Remote partnering with an INGO has distinct advantages for civil society working on conflict in terms of ownership, agency and practicality

Remote partnering has distinct advantages for local civil society: it can create more equal and mutually satisfactory partnerships, build local ownership, and enable peacebuilding across conflict divides. Conciliation Resources' preference not to establish in-country offices is a deliberate choice – a way to nurture and preserve local capacities for transformational change and to avoid displacing or disempowering local organisations.

Giving space to local CSOs to take a lead on many programme activities, including activities such as policy advocacy, helps to build local peacebuilding agency and longer-term ownership of initiatives. However, explaining and justifying this remote partnering arrangement to international donors, which sometimes prefer INGOs to have a permanent in-country presence, can be difficult. Moreover, the approach is also not without its challenges for Conciliation Resources staff, who travel regularly to the regions they cover and invest a significant amount of time in the partnership relationship. That said, the physical distance means Conciliation Resources staff are more reliant on partners' insights and analysis than if the organisation had a permanent presence, requiring staff to triangulate perspectives from a number of partners and other actors in order to maintain a balanced analysis.

“ Conciliation Resources provides the partners opportunities to shine by not being the front speakers during lobbying, but ordinary women who were engaged in the action. With this, [partners] were able to even become speakers / advocates at the senate for IP [Indigenous Peoples] rights in the Bangsamoro Basic Law.

Leonara Mokudef Teduray Lambangian Women's Organization (TLWOI), Philippines

Staff and partners considered Conciliation Resources' approach of allowing those affected by or most closely involved with the conflict to inform and shape analysis and responses to be highly successful, as it helps ensure that peacebuilding responses are grounded in local understanding.

Partners agreed that it was appropriate that they, as local experts with deep links in their communities, play an equal or more prominent role in conflict analysis. Conciliation Resources is seen to bring comparative and thematic knowledge and expertise, as well as a deep understanding of the history and politics of the conflict. Several partners highlighted Conciliation Resources' role in “seeing the bigger picture”, helping to link together partners' work within the wider conflict system so that it can become more than the sum of its parts.

“ We do not see that Conciliation Resources has a hidden agenda behind it. A local partner's problem is always that, if it is in the society [its agenda is questioned]... Conciliation Resources has achieved trust on both sides of the Line of Control.

Altaf Hussain Wani Kashmir Institute of International Relations (KIIR)

Where peacebuilding takes place across physical conflict divides, such as in Kashmir or the Georgian-Abkhaz context, Conciliation Resources' base outside the region is seen as an advantage, giving the organisation the ability to engage impartially with partners (and authorities) across conflict divides, or act as a convenor for partners and other societal actors who may be constrained by political or logistical barriers. In politicised contexts, however, the association with an INGO can create reputational difficulties for partners. Some noted that they occasionally face questions about some of the sources of their funding that, if not managed carefully, could undermine their local legitimacy. This risk is somewhat mitigated by being transparent about the nature and goals of the programme, maintaining strong relationships on all sides of a conflict, and remaining in close contact with key people within both civil society and official circles.

Inevitably, the issue of power arose in different ways during the consultations. In certain spheres, Conciliation Resources has privileged access to influential decision-makers, access which is



Partners from South Sudan, Uganda, Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of Congo during a consultation meeting in Entebbe, Uganda, 2017. © Conciliation Resources

not available to partners. While unfair, it was agreed that Conciliation Resources can and does offset this by using this access to open doors for partners. In so doing, Conciliation Resources can help otherwise unheard voices come to the fore in policy advocacy; some partners encouraged Conciliation Resources to create more such opportunities for joint advocacy.

Furthermore, the consultations drew attention to the need to observe power imbalances *within* a particular context and how the choice of local partner by Conciliation Resources can reinforce or otherwise rebalance this. One partner observed that there was a perception locally that Conciliation Resources worked with a narrow elite, rather than consistently engaging with the wider public. Local partners, with their intimate local knowledge of patterns of exclusion, can thus play an important role in calling an INGO to account on the degree to which it is furthering inclusion. In this case, it was felt that INGO and partners needed to be more transparent, where possible, in explaining the content and format of particular peacebuilding initiatives, some of which are necessarily more 'closed' due to the sensitive nature of the issues discussed, in order to counter criticisms of elitism.

Finally, the partnership was seen to provide both Conciliation Resources and its partners with the legitimacy and agency to operate in particular spaces or access constituencies that would otherwise be inaccessible. For example, partnering with the Bureau for Research on Industry and Economic Fundamentals (BRIEF), an Indian research organisation, provided the project with a base in New Delhi for more effective engagement with Indian policymakers and strengthened the linkages between them and Conciliation Resources' partners in Jammu and Kashmir. In turn, the partnership with Conciliation Resources helped BRIEF expand into peacebuilding and enhance their access to Jammu and Kashmir, strengthening their existing work on India-Pakistan trade.

4. Balancing the contractual aspects of partnership with activism for change is not straightforward, but it is important

A common observation throughout the consultations was that Conciliation Resources can play a useful role in partnerships as the interface with international donors, acting as a 'buffer' to insulate local partners from complex or competing donor demands relating to the administration and management of resources. This spared some of Conciliation Resources' partner organisations, particularly those with less organisational capacity, from the most time- and resource-intensive donor processes and procedures, allowing them to focus on having an impact on conflict. Reporting arrangements agreed between Conciliation Resources and partners still ensured accountability for funds.

However, balancing a contractual relationship with a collegiate passion for peacebuilding is not without its challenges. Some partners reported receiving demands for documentation and reports, sometimes with the same questions being asked more than once, without having a clear understanding of why they were needed. Multiple partners noted that delays in the disbursement of funds can make their work difficult. Some donors' overly prescriptive approach to 'results-based' monitoring and evaluation was considered especially burdensome, given the long-term and often very non-linear nature of change in the volatile, complex environments where Conciliation Resources and its partners work.

Some of these challenges, and others identified during the consultation, are external and limit the flexibility necessary for effective partnering between civil society organisations. The transfer of funds to conflict contexts can be subject to delays due to bank de-risking. Donors are shifting away from programmatic approaches towards project funding, increasing transaction costs, reducing flexibility in activities, and multiplying reporting obligations. The consultations highlighted useful improvements which Conciliation Resources can make in its partnerships, but reinforced the need to be wary of bureaucratisation and to ensure that systems and processes serve peacebuilding, rather than vice versa.

Practical tips for partnering

Some very practical lessons emerged from the consultations, which Conciliation Resources found valuable and which are shared here:

- 1. Develop a longer-term strategy for the partnership** as a way to foresee and cope with ebbs and flows in donor funding. Give time for reflection on the partnership itself, not just on the conflict. Consider the stage or phase of the partnership.
- 2. Ensure clarity in communication and roles** to manage risks and avoid tensions which can arise during joint project implementation. Clarify roles and responsibilities, mutual expectations and share of liability from the outset.
- 3. Approach capacity building as an opportunity for joint challenge, shared learning and reflection.** Capacity assessment tools have worked best when used to structure reflection between Conciliation Resources and its partners, identifying where and how Conciliation Resources could help, and the aspirations of partner organisations.
- 4. Be aware of and manage power dynamics in partnerships.** Power imbalance is sometimes unavoidable between the INGO and local partner, but the discrepancy can be reinforced by the way resources or access to power-holders are managed.
- 5. Find ways to measure and put a value on partnership.** The investment in and outcomes of partnership seem intangible and hard to measure, let alone demonstrate to a donor. One way to 'capture the magic' is to assign qualitative and quantitative values to measure aspects of the relationship that are valued and monitor how these change over time.

Areas for further enquiry

The arguments for the localisation of aid have strong justification where the aim is to strengthen civil society capacity to address conflict and its drivers, or to deliver services. Yet if, as our research shows, partnerships between INGOs and local civil society organisations and networks can offer real value for peacebuilding, how can donors best support this? What kinds of inclusive outcomes can be achieved through partnering between INGOs and civil society organisations, networks and groups, and how? How do partnerships help to challenge and shift power imbalances, gender norms, and patterns of exclusion which drive or perpetuate conflict? How can donor funding instruments and monitoring frameworks better enable responses to the non-linear nature of conflict and peace processes, and the 'activism' and flexibility which partnerships between civil society actors require?

Methodology

Research was conducted between September 2017 and February 2018 in five stages:

1. Desk research and literature review on partnerships in conflict environments, methodology development;
2. Half-day workshop for all Conciliation Resources staff and trustees on partnership practice: rationale, assumptions, case studies;
3. Facilitated, structured and documented conversations among or with partner organisations in five contexts: Colombia, East and Central Africa (Uganda, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo), Philippines, South Asia and South Caucasus;
4. Two in-house consultations with staff in 2017 and 2018;
5. Facilitated two-day workshop in London with six partner representatives from four regional contexts and Conciliation Resources staff; half-day workshop with external practitioners, February 2018.

Further reading

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Peace Direct, CDA and Search for Common Ground (case studies ongoing, 2017-2020), [Stopping as Success: Planning for success from start to exit](#)

Van Brabant, K. (2010) [Peacebuilding How? "Insiders" – "Outsiders" and peacebuilding partnerships](#). Interpeace – International Peacebuilding Alliance.

Acknowledgements and disclaimer

This report was written by Teresa Dumasy and David Elliott with contributions from staff at Conciliation Resources. We would like to thank all the partners and staff who contributed to the research. We are grateful also to Ros Tennyson for her work on the background literature review, methodology development and workshop facilitation. The paper and background research were funded with UK aid from the UK Government. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect official policies of the UK Government.

Saferworld, Conciliation Resources and International Alert are collaborating on a three-year research programme which generates evidence and lessons for policy-makers and practitioners on how to support peaceful, inclusive change in conflict-affected areas.



Funded by UK aid from the UK Government, the research focuses on economic development, peace processes, institutions and gender drivers of conflict.

Conciliation Resources is an independent international organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence and build peace. We provide advice, support and practical resources to help divided communities resolve their differences peacefully. We take what we learn to government decision-makers and others working to end conflict, to improve policies and peacebuilding practice worldwide.

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Cover image: Froilyn Mendoza, Executive Director of Teduray Lambangian Women's Organization, one of Conciliation Resources' partners in the Philippines, discusses partnership practice with Conciliation Resources staff and partners and other peacebuilding practitioners in February 2018. © Mike Bradford

Design and layout: www.revangeldesigns.co.uk



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