



### 3 Breaking Deadlocks: Peace Process Support

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*“Crises and deadlocks when they occur have at least this advantage – that they force us to think.”*

Jawaharlal Nehru

One of the basic insights from protracted conflicts is that it takes time – not only years, but often decades – to overcome the risk of relapse into violence. In many cases, protracted conflicts move through long and painful phases of “no war, no peace”. Peace processes that do not also transform the conflict at hand by addressing root causes will hardly be sustainable. Based on this recognition, the Berghof Foundation, along with many activists,

**DEADLOCK** | a situation, typically one involving opposing parties, in which progress appears impossible due to the unwillingness or inability of the parties.

**PEACE PROCESS** | a series of talks, agreements and activities designed to end war or violence between two groups. Peace processes may include formal and informal mechanisms, and involve a multitude of actors often over a long period.

peacebuilding practitioners and international actors is focusing attention on advancing sustainable peace support efforts.

### **Mechanisms and actors**

National and local actors are key in initiating, driving and supporting peace processes. The discussion around national peace support structures or → Establishing Infrastructures for Peace emphasises the importance of establishing formal, semi-formal and informal mechanisms for cooperation among the conflict parties and more permanent networks and institutions to support peace processes over time.

Peace support structures in many contexts also receive external assistance, often in the form of financial support but also including capacity-building, advice, process support and assistance with organisational development. One strand of discussion has thus focused on comprehensive, coherent and effective peace support strategies by external actors through long-term development of national, local and organisational capacities, using leverage to encourage conflict parties to engage in peace processes and coordinating with influencers in a multilateral support strategy.

### **From peace support to peace process support: evolution of a term ...**

Initially, peace support operations were introduced to complement or replace traditional concepts of peacekeeping as third-party military interventions based on the consent of the conflict parties. Peace support operations came to encompass more robust mandates for peace enforcement, but they also shifted towards recognising the importance of civilian support for UN peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations. Since then, the focus of “peace support” efforts has increasingly evolved to include more medium- and long-term efforts by internal and external actors, ranging from process-oriented support such as dialogue and mediation to establishing more institutionalised infrastructures promoting human rights, rule of law or multiparty democracy.

### **Deadlocks: how they occur**

Peace processes to end protracted conflicts remain fragile and are continuously at risk of being blocked or stalled. These deadlocks can be caused by a number of factors.

*Contentious issues and positions:* Peace processes can accentuate existing ideological incompatibilities or bring forward new contentious issues. This can prompt the conflict parties to reject talks and stop the process, fearing that negotiating would mean abandoning their beliefs. In such cases, the parties often see either too few or too many favourable outcomes of the negotiations. With too few options, they hope the other party will be the one to shift position in their favour. With too many favourable options and in an attempt to get the best possible outcome for themselves, they fear that being satisfied with several options might be perceived as a sign of weakness. They therefore block the process altogether.

*Frictions around trust, interests and relationships:* Peace talks touch upon the vested, if not existential interests of the conflict parties in a situation where relations between parties and social groups more broadly are characterised by deep divisions, grievances, atrocities and violence – in many cases directly blamed on the other sides involved in the negotiations. Often, experiences of unfulfilled commitments in previous rounds of negotiations or doubts about the other parties' intentions and seriousness prevail. Certain actors may continue to benefit from the status quo and are therefore interested in sustaining deadlocks and seeking to undermine efforts to reach a settlement. These benefits may be financial and economic, such as access to resources, rents or the profits of war economies. However, they may also be political, with parties justifying a continued grip on power and strengthening their support bases by inciting against other groups or portraying themselves as a protective shield or guarantor of certain group rights or privileges.

*Shortcomings in process design:* Deadlocks can also result from procedural shortcomings in the design of a peace process. An example is insufficient preparation of the process or the parties themselves, leading to uncertainty among key actors or lack of trust in the process – sometimes caused by a desire or pressure to achieve quick results. Shortcomings may also arise from the lack of support structures for problem-solving (in informal and formal settings) or for the development of safety nets or alternative options to generate and sustain broader support for the process. The process architecture may also be negatively affected by the exclusion of key actors or lack of mechanisms to deal with elite or popular resistance. In third party-mediated processes, perceptions relating to the impartiality, competence or commitment of the mediating party may also lead to deadlocks until trust can be restored or, more often, the mediating party is replaced.

### **Deadlocks: how to break them**

Peace support actors can help in preventing deadlocks through elements of process design or safety nets or can support efforts to overcome deadlocks in order to prevent and avoid a complete breakdown of the process.

The Berghof Foundation investigated many other mechanisms for deadlock-breaking while preparing a National Dialogue Handbook in 2017. They include:

#### **≡ *Formal and semi-formal structures and mechanisms, informal and ad hoc mechanisms***

When deadlocks hinder the continuation of talks, it may be helpful to bring together a small deadlock-breaking team comprising problem-solving-oriented individuals from each side who may find it easier to reach agreement on the contentious issues in this more concentrated setting. Depending on the context and process, these mechanisms can either be integrated in the design of the process as a formal or semi-formal structure or the process itself can be organised in an informal or ad hoc manner.

#### **For example ...**

During the National Dialogue Conference in Yemen, the participants quickly realised that the working groups needed a way to overcome deadlocks in their discussions. A deadlock-breaking mechanism was therefore put into place in the shape of a Consensus Committee. Whenever the plenary was unable to reach consensus on an issue, it was taken to the Committee. The composition of the Committee mirrored that of the Conference, consisting of the heads of all decision-making bodies, and was tasked with proposing adjustments that made an agreement in the working groups possible. In this way, the contentious issues could be dealt with individually by a representative group able to reach a solution.

≡ *Public consultations/referenda and reference to wider audiences and third parties*

Experience has repeatedly shown that connecting all tracks in an inclusive process offers the greatest potential for a transformation towards sustainable peace. Peace support actors engaged in process design thus aim to establish processes that actively include not only the elite but also the broader public down to the grassroots (→Inclusivity and Participation). Inclusive processes not only bring parties closer to an agreement but also help prevent and address deadlocks, since public opinion is often a contributory factor to processes stalling. On the other hand, public opinions and perceptions of the negotiations can give the conflict parties the necessary impetus to move the peace process forward.

**For example ...**

In the context of the Abkhaz-Georgian-South Ossetian conflict, the Berghof Foundation's Caucasus Programme focuses on building bridges between estranged communities through local history dialogues. Implementing a "three-tiered gearwheel approach", the team found that constructive and self-critical reflections on the past, involving individuals and groups, and upscaling these discussions to the public debate level can achieve the greatest possible inclusivity in the process and spark collective reflection processes. In a first step, "gearwheel one", project groups collected their perspectives on the conflict, escalation of violence and war in an interview format. "Gearwheel two", consisting of intergenerational discussion rounds, gave space to people from different age groups to come together and reflect on their experiences and listen to others. "Gearwheel three" then took the dialogue up to a public level using TV talkshow or radio formats. This initiated a wider process of public reflection.

### ≡ *Collective strategic thinking processes*

In situations of intractable conflict, where parties refuse encounters with others or lack internal cohesion, a new model by the Oxford Research Group (2017) proposes intra-party “collective strategic thinking”. These structured thinking processes within the parties on their identity, the conflict context, their own strategic goals and alternative means of achieving them and an exploration of the opponent’s perspective lay the ground for (re-)kindling constructive inter-party engagement.

While some of the mechanisms mentioned above aim to respond to an existing situation and are utilised to address deadlocks in a specific process, others, like long-term process support, safety nets and common spaces, have a broader function. They can serve as sustainable mechanisms to protect a process from collapsing or to prevent deadlocks from occurring. In the long term, safety nets can be seen as an important part of the → Establishing Infrastructure for Peace. They include continuous dialogue initiatives, common spaces, local dialogues, and other civil society and expert engagement in formal peace processes. The Berghof Foundation continues to support the creation of such spaces in many conflict arenas around the world.

### References and Further Reading

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