



Local agreements - an introduction to the special issue

Mary Kaldor, Marika Theros & Rim Turkmani

To cite this article: Mary Kaldor, Marika Theros & Rim Turkmani (2022) Local agreements - an introduction to the special issue, *Peacebuilding*, 10:2, 107-121, DOI: [10.1080/21647259.2022.2042111](https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2022.2042111)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2022.2042111>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 23 Feb 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 430



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Local agreements - an introduction to the special issue

Mary Kaldor, Marika Theros and Rim Turkmani

Conflict Research Programme, LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This article introduces a *Peacebuilding* special issue on local agreements in intractable conflicts. By 'local', we refer to any type of agreement that covers a geographical area less than the entire national territory although the issues and actors may be national, regional, international as well as local. Our main finding is that local agreements are a pervasive feature of contemporary conflict, owing to the fragmented decentred character of conflicts. Local agreements are not necessarily about peace; they may be a form of surrender, or about tactical alliances and deployment of armed groups. The overall conclusion is that local talks can contribute to what the paper defines as a peace logic, if they involve local civilians and multilateral actors, and are based on a detailed knowledge of context. Expanding this type of process on a large-scale may be the best opportunity for addressing the social condition that characterises contemporary intractable conflicts.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 August 2021
Accepted 11 February 2022

KEYWORDS

Peacebuilding; local peace committees; local ceasefire; local agreements; armed groups; multilateral actors

Introduction

This special issue summarises research undertaken by the Conflict Research programme aimed at understanding the processes and outcomes of agreements forged at the local or sub-national level in intractable conflicts. By 'local', we refer to any type of agreement that refers to a geographical area that is less than the entire national territory even though both actors and issues may be national, international, and regional as well as local. Until recently, the main preoccupation of the international community has been national agreements. Local agreements are not a new phenomenon and can be observed as far back as the English Civil War in the 1600s, but a growing number of these agreements are being documented, and they are gaining increasing visibility and generating considerable interest among policymakers and practitioners alike. On one hand, this reflects the difficulty of reaching national level political settlements in places like Libya, Syria, and Yemen, or sustaining them once concluded.¹ On the other hand, the proliferation of local agreements across contexts and within a single context can be read as a response to the decentralised and fragmented nature of contemporary conflicts.

CONTACT Marika Theros  M.Theros@lse.ac.uk

¹Arthur Boutellis, Delphine Mechoulan, and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, 'Parallel Tracks or Connected Pieces? UN Peace Operations, Local Mediation, and Peace Processes,' International Peace Institute, December 2020; World Bank, World Development Report 2011 (Washington, DC: 2011), 2–3.

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Today, most major UN peacekeeping missions are mandated to engage and respond to local conflicts.² New operational concepts like ‘sustaining peace’³ as well as new mediation approaches and guidelines are being developed to respond to local-level conflicts while also accounting for the multi-level dynamics that shape and sustain the broader conflict.⁴ Yet, as a class of agreements, ‘local agreements’ remain poorly understood, and there has been little systematic investigation of their nature, their diverse manifestations, and their implications.

This special issue seeks to fill this gap. We start with the proposition that the lack of conceptualisation of this class of agreements and how they relate to underlying conflict dynamics leaves a vacuum in our understanding of war- and peace-making in contemporary conflicts. Today’s conflicts are characterised by fragmentation, the involvement of multiple actors, diverse forms of political and criminal violence, intensified external and geopolitical involvement, and a breakdown in legitimate political authority. They can be understood ‘as a ‘pervasive and persistent social condition in which multiple groups associated with fragmented forms of authority depend on violence itself both for finance and for political mobilization’.⁵ The social condition that constitutes war represents a kind of order where different logics are enmeshed across a fragmented and decentralised conflict landscape.

We argue that local agreements are an inherent and endemic feature of the changing nature of conflict, as varied actors mutually and continuously negotiate for their survival and shape local arrangements, whether for the purposes of power, immediate community benefit, or to influence a broader national settlement. They cover a variety of topics and can serve multiple functions across different contexts but also within the same one. On the one hand, local agreements can constitute an integral part of the dynamics of conflict and, on the other hand, they may slowdown and even reverse those dynamics. Some agreements entrench the power of armed actors and are associated with power-grabbing and predatory activities; some agreements impose ethnic divisions and may involve demographic engineering; and some agreements are about distributing the spoils of the local, national, regional or global political marketplaces. Some are a mix of all three. Local agreements may also produce meaningful reductions in violence in one local area while shifting or creating new conflict dynamics in other areas. But there are also agreements that can lead to improvements in everyday life and provide benefits for the community as a whole by reducing violence, and providing public services or access to humanitarian assistance. Although the distinction is not clear cut, it can be argued that the latter type of

²Allard Duursma, ‘Non-State Conflicts, Peacekeeping, and the Conclusion of Local Agreements,’ *Peacebuilding*, forthcoming (2021)

³United Nations; World Bank. ‘Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict,’ Washington, DC: World Bank (2018); United Nations General Assembly and Security Council, *Peacebuilding and sustaining peace*, Report of the Secretary-General, A/72/707–S/2018/43, 18 January 2018

⁴Thomas Carothers and Oren Samet-Marram, ‘The New Global Marketplace of Political Change,’ *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, (2015); United Nations, *Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnerships and People*. Report of the High-level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations. New York: United Nations (2015); European Union (2016). ‘Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy’ (http://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/eugs_review_web.pdf)

⁵Kaldor, Mary, Radice, Henry, De Waal, Alex, Benson, Matthew, Detzner, Sarah, Elder, Claire, Hoffmann, Kasper, Ibreck, Rachel, Majid, Nisar, Morgan, Azaria, Mehchy, Zaki, Rangelov, Iavor, Sarkar, Aditya, Spatz, Benjamin J., Theros, Marika, Turkmani, Rim, Vlassenroot, Koen and Watkins, Jessica (2020) *Evidence from the Conflict Research Programme: submission to the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*. Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK. (<https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/106522/>)

agreement could be said to be based on a peace logic, where sustainable, and help to change reality in ways that are more conducive to reaching further agreements at different levels and in different areas. By contrast, those agreements that merely manage the consequences of conflict and buttress the underlying structures of conflict could be said to be part of a war logic. Both logics can also be present in an agreement and it is often possible to detect a tension between the different logics during mediation processes.

This special issue draws on research undertaken by the Conflict Research Programme (CRP) in five sites (DRC, Iraq, Somalia, South Sudan and Syria) with inputs from PA-X Local, the database of the Political Settlements Research Programme, and quantitative data undertaken at the Center for Security Studies in Zurich.⁶ The goal was to elaborate a framework to better understand and analyse local agreements, the functions they serve, the process by which they are mediated, and their implications for the conflict and peacemaking landscape. A better understanding of these agreements and their processes can provide insight into conflict dynamics while also offering lessons for external actors on how to intervene in these processes in ways that mitigate the conditions on the ground that drive conflict.

Emerging literature on local agreements

Research so far on local agreements includes new global data sets that offer the opportunity for more quantitative inquiries that can help capture the scale of the phenomenon, identify patterns and typologies, or study them comparatively.

Local Pa-X⁷ is currently the only available open-access dataset of local peace agreements globally. It is a sub database of the PA-X peace agreements database developed by the Political Settlements Research Programme. Currently, it provides data on 286 local peace agreements between 1990 and mid-2020 world-wide, with 27% of them taking place in Syria between 2012 and 2019. The database maps publicly available written agreements and makes them possible to be viewed on a timeline. The database acknowledges the limitations of mapping local peace agreements, stating it only includes agreements for which it was possible to obtain a text and that ‘it is therefore neither exhaustive of all local negotiation practices, nor clearly representative of them, nor of the range of armed actors and groups involved in local agreement-making’.⁸

Another example of datasets of local agreements is the ETH/PRIO Civil Conflict Ceasefire Dataset which maps intra-state and non-state conflicts globally between 1989 and 2018.⁹ The dataset covers the 338 local ceasefires declarations that have been announced in English-speaking media derived from Factiva media archive. Other available datasets either concern a particular country or concern a particular aspect of local agreements, such as the rich data provided by the UN peacekeeping missions in Africa.

⁶This includes six articles are to be published in the *Journal of Peace-building*; they are cited in full where relevant; Martin Ochaya Lino, *Local peace agreement in Abyei: achievements, challenges and opportunities*, Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK (2020); Jessica Watkins and Mustafa Hasan, ‘Post-ISIL Reconciliation in Iraq and the Local Anatomy of National Grievances: the Case of Yathrib,’ *Journal of Peacebuilding*, Submitted (2021); Claude Iguma Wakege, *Local agreements forging peace? The case of eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo*, Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, unpublished 2020.

⁷<https://www.peaceagreements.org/>

⁸<https://www.peaceagreements.org/lsearch>

⁹See more on this database under Clayton et al, ‘Introducing the Eth/Prio Civil Conflict Ceasefire Dataset’, Preprint (2020).

Certain contexts, in particular Sudan, Somalia and Syria, have a rich history of local agreement-making processes and can provide a laboratory for studying them. Several studies and papers have been published based on local agreements datasets that are gathered from Syria such as the work of Karakus and Svensson which examines 106 local-level ceasefires that were reached in Syria between the years 2011 to 2017.¹⁰ Also Turkmani *et. al.*, examines more than 35 local negotiations in different parts of Syria, between October 2011 and June 2014.¹¹

Some of the large datasets from peacekeeping missions provide an important resource to investigate a specific aspect of local agreements, such as the role and effectiveness of local mediation. In addition to his contribution to this issue, an earlier paper by Duursma analysing the effectiveness of mediation at a sub-national level draws on event data compiled by the Joint Mission Analysis Centre of the UN–African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur between 2008 and 2009.¹² Based on a dataset of 199 armed clashes, he finds that local mediation efforts following armed clashes significantly prolong lulls in fighting in these areas and are more effective at preventing further attacks.

In addition to the quantitative research, there is an emerging literature, mostly in the form of grey literature, case studies, and participant observations that seeks to document and understand these agreements.¹³ The emerging study and practice of local ‘peace’ agreements is characterised by confusion and conflation of terms, as well as normative perspectives that emphasise ‘bottom-up’ interventions when addressing conflict. Some of the early advocates for ‘local’ approaches emphasised supporting efforts by indigenous communities and civil societies as well as the use of more traditional and culturally relevant conflict resolution mechanisms and strategies.¹⁴ More recently, the ‘local turn’ in peace-building tends to reflect broader critiques of the ‘liberal peace’ projects in contexts like Iraq and Afghanistan and contrasts them with local conceptions of political order.¹⁵ Both conceptions demonstrate a broad consensus on the need for more local ‘bottom-up’ interventions when addressing conflict. Autessere notes how the over-privileging of national and regional peace processes overlooks local conflict dynamics and conflict resolution mechanisms and strategies.¹⁶

¹⁰Dogukan Cansin Karakus and Isak Svensson, ‘Between the Bombs: Exploring Partial Ceasefires in the Syrian Civil War, 2011–2017’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 4 (2020): 681–700.

¹¹R Turkmani *et al.*, ‘Hungry for Peace: Positives and Pitfalls of Local Truces and Ceasefires in Syria’, (2014).

¹²Allard Duursma, ‘Making Disorder More Manageable: The Short-Term Effectiveness of Local Mediation in Darfur’, *Journal of peace research* (2020): 2,234,331,989,824.

¹³Tatiana Carayannis Vesna, Bojicic-Dzelilovic, Nathaniel Olin, Anouk Rigterink, and Mareike Schomerus, (2014) Practice without evidence: interrogating conflict resolution approaches and assumptions. Justice and Security Research Programme, International Development Department, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.; J. Turkmani *et. al* 2014; P. Johnson and P. Raghe, ‘How Somali-Led Peace Processes Work’, in *Book How Somali-Led Peace Processes Work*, ed.^eds. Editor (City: Conciliation Resources, 2010).; M. Bradbury *et al.*, ‘Local Peace Processes in Sudan’, in *Book Local Peace Processes in Sudan*, ed.^eds. Editor (City: Rift Valley Institute, 2006). Heathershaw, ‘Unpacking the Liberal Peace: the Merging of Peacebuilding Discourses’, *Millennium- Journal of International Studies*, Vol 38, (2008)

¹⁴See J.P. Lederach, *Building peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Washington D. C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, (1997); Severine Autessere (2009), ‘Hobbes and the Congo: Frames, Local Violence, and International Intervention’, *International Organization* 63 (2), 249–280

¹⁵See Roger Mac Ginty and Olivier P. Richmond, ‘The Local Turn in Peace Building: a Critical Agenda for Peace’, *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 5 (2013): 763–83; Thania Paffenholz, ‘Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding: a critical assessment towards an agenda for future research’, *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015): 857–74.

¹⁶Autessere 2009.

While the shift in focus to the local is important, there remains a tendency both to assume greater legitimacy in bottom-up approaches and to treat the local as a bounded category, with many scholars and practitioners continuing to separate domestic and external forces, actors and processes when addressing conflict resolution despite political economy analyses that helps reveal linkages between levels, networks and resource flows.¹⁷ More recent concepts like hybridity seek to problematise the strict distinction between the local and international spheres but still risk ignoring the multiplicity and multidimensionality of both local and international dimensions.¹⁸

A comparable growth in conflict resolution studies and mediation activity has accompanied the expansion of intractable conflicts in the post-Cold War period, and increasingly emphasises the potential of agreements forged at sub-national levels to support a national-level political settlement, or at least not undermine it. Moreover, new mediation approaches acknowledge that the mediation environment itself has significantly changed, and tends towards longer more complex processes involving multiple topics and third parties and requiring long-term commitment throughout multiple phases.¹⁹ Even so, as Martin Griffiths notes, ‘mediation is still largely operating on the old model of two parties coming together in a small room in a third country under the auspices of a disinterested third party to reach a written agreement’.

Methodology: researching local agreements

The main debate on data and methodology regarding local peace agreements is centred around whether it is best to use big data that can provide specific information about a large number of peace agreements or to use micro data that can provide more detailed granular information but on a limited number of agreements. We argue that it is important to achieve a balance between the two. Big data give an insight into the number and proliferation of local agreements and it signposts the way for drawing a typology of the different types of agreements, as demonstrated by Jan Pospisil, or on measuring the effectiveness of UN peacekeeping operations in responding to local conflicts, as Allard Duursma has done.²⁰ Micro data, on the other hand, are what is needed to understand the most important aspect of these agreements: locality. Moreover, micro-level analysis on mediating an agreement, as in the case of Galkaio,²¹ can provide insight into both the relationship between mediator characteristics, strategies and outcomes as well as into the features, constraints and opportunities afforded by a more complex mediation context.

Another important element is the question of what data one should collect to understand and analyse local agreements and processes. In the article on the agreement-making processes in Homs, for example, Turkmani shows the imperative of collecting both peaceful events, such as negotiations meetings, as well as violent events in order to

¹⁷Cfr. Richmond, ‘Becoming Liberal, Unbecoming Liberalism.’ See for instance Chandler, ‘The Road to Military Humanitarianism’.

¹⁸A Björkdahl, K Höglund, G Millar, J van der Lijn, 2016 *Peacebuilding and friction: global and local encounters in post conflict societies*. London: Routledge; Paffenholz 2015.

¹⁹Boutellis et al. 2021; International Peace Institute, ‘Mediation and Peace Processes,’ *IPI Blue Paper* No. 8, Task Forces on Strengthening Multilateral Security Capacity, New York, (2009); Oslo Forum, ‘The End of the Big Peace? Opportunities for Mediation’, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, (2018).

²⁰Pospisil, op.cit; Allard Duursma, Non-State Conflicts, ‘Peacekeeping, and the Conclusion of Local Agreements’, *Journal of Peacebuilding*, Forthcoming 2021.

²¹Nisar Majid and Marika Theros, ‘Bridging the Border in Galkaio, Somalia’, *Journal of Peacebuilding*, Forthcoming (2021).

understand how the success or failure of local talks affects the level of violence and also how violence itself is used to influence the talks.²² Mapping both peaceful and violent events is also critical for understanding how conflict and peace-making dynamics relate to each other, as opposed to mapping only violent events, which is followed by most conflict databases.²³

But whether collecting macro or micro data, local agreements remain difficult to map and identify even if, as Jan Pospisil notes, ‘the number of publicly available, written local peace agreements has sharply risen’ because they are becoming more formalised and accessible.²⁴ While the presence of international actors and organisations has facilitated their visibility, most local agreement-making processes are low-profile and discreet in comparison to top-level agreements, making it difficult to capture the majority of these types of processes and agreements. Some of the agreements are not written down, and often when they are, they are in local languages or handwritten on a piece of paper, unlike top-level agreements that are almost always available in English. They also hardly make it to the media, and if they do, they are mainly reported in the local media in the local language.

Mediators and negotiating actors also deliberately try to keep the talks leading to agreements secretive. Actors involved in the talks may even deliberately promote a twisted public narrative of the talks that suits their interests and to mobilise public support for their position. Therefore, knowing what exactly was agreed, how it was agreed, who agreed it, and understanding the context and the process that led up to the agreement requires vigorous investigative research based on micro data.

Defining local agreements: scope and content

Our starting point is an empirical understanding of the local relating primarily to space, rather than the actors, agendas, or structures involved. This understanding draws on the definition of Richmond and Mitchell that refers to the local as a ‘territorialized space . . . in this sense, the local is not to be essentialized or parochialized; it refers to a space, that is, in a sense, transversal, transnational and even global, or at least a feature of most human societies’.²⁵ In practice, these agreements are never purely local and depending on context, can involve actors, agendas, and processes at multiple levels, including the national, regional and global. They can also include other local geographies within the same conflict zone such as the Four towns agreements that features in Turkmani’s paper in this special issue on how local are local agreements.²⁶ They are defined as local only because they concern mainly a specific ‘sub-national’ geography and are not a national agreements. Some local agreements may address a specific local issue, but often the issues addressed by such agreements are not specific to this particular geography and are experienced by other local geographies in the same conflict zone, or they are local

²²R Turkmani, ‘Local Agreements as a Process: The Example of Local Talks in Homs in Syria’, *Journal of Peacebuilding* forthcoming 2021.

²³Turkmani, *ibid.*

²⁴Pospisil, *op.cit.*

²⁵O. Richmond and A. Mitchell, *Hybrid forms of peace: from everyday agency to post-liberalism*. Rethinking peace and conflict studies, Palgrave Macmillan Ltd, 2012, –11.

²⁶R Turkmani, ‘How Local Are Local Agreements? Shaping Local Agreements as a New Form of Third-Party Intervention in Civil Wars’, *Journal of Peacebuilding*, Forthcoming (2021).

manifestations of a failure or an issue at a higher level. The release of political detainees from a specific area for example has been a feature of many of the local agreements in Syria. Others may involve a disputed border area, such as in the case of Abyei in South Sudan/Sudan. The agreements over Abyei, for example, included (i) community-level agreements over such matters as nomadic rights; (ii) agreements between Sudan and South Sudan (prior to 2011, the SPLM); (iii) regionally mediated agreements to suspend the fighting and bring in peacekeepers; and (iv) rulings at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. All these levels are inter-twined and have served to reinforce one another.²⁷

Secondly, local agreements are not necessarily local peace agreements. They cover a wide variety of issues. Some agreements are about reducing violence or ending hostilities, while some are about coping with the consequences of conflict and improving the living conditions for civilians until an end can be seen on the horizon. Other agreements are about managing the interdependencies between conflict areas as geographic conflict lines often run within areas that are not designed to function independently. This could be a conflict line within a city or between a city and its neighbouring countryside. The agreement reached between opposition and government-controlled areas in Deraa in Syria in 2014 was about exchanging water in return for the provision of electricity. ISIS and HTS in Syria also cut similar agreements related to services and trade with all actors. These agreements often include a truce in order to guarantee the continuous provision of services and trade. Some agreements could also be classified as military tactic. This includes agreements that lead to a period of calm that gives parties an opportunity to arm and redeploy and agreements that aim to secure access through a local area in order to attack another area. One example is the agreements that the Syrian authorities reached in 2013 with opposition forces in Madaya in order to secure the road that lead to the neighbouring area of Zabadani.²⁸ Most agreements contain a mixture of some or all of these issues.

Thirdly, local agreements vary in the functions they serve and the impact they have on local areas and on the broader conflict and peace landscape. While some agreements, like the case of Galkaio in this context, are directly linked to national-level dynamics. Even if infused with local drivers, most agreements tend to be about the *concrete situation* on the ground rather than the overall political faultlines. These agreements are often about ceasefires, lifting sieges, provision of services, managing checkpoints, redeployment or demobilisation of armed groups, and so on, rather than political or constitutional issues. Similarly, agreements that aim to ‘disconnect’ conflict in a specific area include community-led peace zones, and appear in contexts as diverse as Bosnia, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Philippines.

Some agreements may reflect broader conflict dynamics or are used by armed and/or state actors to influence war-fighting dynamics, rearrange political loyalties, and reassert their authorities, for better or worse. In some cases, they serve to entrench the power of armed actors, acting as a mechanism to distribute the spoils of local, national, regional or global political marketplaces. In other cases, a local agreement might potentially be

²⁷M. Ochaya Lino, *Local peace agreement in Abyei: achievements, challenges and opportunities*. Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK, (2020).

²⁸Turkmani et al. 2014.

a means of constituting local authority or a mechanism through which the state reasserts its authority, for better or worse. Similarly, in South Sudan, politicians and the government have used demands for local reconciliation as a way to rearrange political loyalties and rebuild authority.²⁹ This was the case during Riek Machar's 2012 efforts as Vice President to start a reconciliation process. The recent National Dialogues in South Sudan also appears to be an attempt by the government to assert authority through a series of local meetings.

Even if local agreements are concerned primarily with a specific locality, they are often still as complex as the wider conflict system of which they are part and at times, can be more difficult to conclude than a national-level settlement. The contextual environment in which they are forged involves a diverse range of conflict actors and third parties, multiple interests and issues at stake, and complex interactions between local, national and global levels. Similar to the national-level dynamics, complicating factors include the proliferation and fragmentation of actors, external patronage and financing, geopolitical interests overlaid by local-level dynamics and grievances, war economy and the presence of ideological and identity-based violence. In some cases, they are even more complex, as they involve an additional layer of local issues and actors that are not part of the wider conflict, such as land, family, or clan disputes, and so forth. The variation between agreements, and complexity typifying conflict and peace-making contexts poses distinct challenges for those seeks to understand and engage with them. Today's mediators must undertake both broader and granular political economy analysis, tackle greater substantive agendas, and coordinate engagement across levels and the wide range of actors involved.

While the literature often approaches local agreements in relation to national-level processes, both Pospisil and Turkmani in this special issue challenge the hierarchical ordering in conflict analysis and local-level agreement making, arguing that these agreements are relevant beyond their potential to link to higher-level talks.³⁰ Jan Pospisil uses the notion of 'conflictsapes' to describe the hybrid, diverse and interrelated violent conflicts in which local agreements are forged. He argues that 'violent conflict can also be read in a non-hierarchical and interrelated way that understands the diverse conflictsapes as part of an overall landscape of conflict that is not ordered and linear in its intra-relations, but a complex mesh'. In this context, understanding the features and processes of local agreements can provide insight into a particular conflict. By engaging with them, he suggests local agreements can offer an important avenue to 'disintegrate' rather than resolve a conflict by shifting the logic and undermining the conditions on the ground that drive violence.

Turkmani, in her piece on local agreements in Homs, notes how local processes and agreements are often approached and measured similarly to high-level peace-making and mediation processes, reinforcing the belief that their value lays mainly in how they can link up and support a national-level political settlement: 'Local agreements have also been envisioned as positioned at the bottom level of a pyramid that is crowned by a top-level process; and their relevance have been judged by whether and how they can be linked to

²⁹Discussions with Naomi Pendle, London School of Economics

³⁰Jan Pospisil, 'Disintegrating Conflict. Local Peace Agreements and Armed Conflict Transitions', *Journal of Peacebuilding*, Forthcoming 2022; Rim Turkmani, Local agreements as a process: the example of local talks in al-Waer in Syria, *Journal of Peacebuilding*, Forthcoming 2022.

supporting high-level political talks'.³¹ Instead, she shows us how local agreements had a value in their own right, whether in reducing violence, improving livelihoods or strengthening local authorities.

Actors

One of distinctive features of local agreements is the diverse set of actors involved especially if compared to top-level agreements. Being negotiated at the local level these agreements are more accessible to locals including local dignitaries and traditional and civic leaderships. In that sense local agreements could be seen as more inclusive than top-level agreements.

The actors in local agreements can be classified in terms of their roles in different the levels of their authority – local, national and external/international actors. On the local level, the main actors are local armed groups, traditional leaderships (tribal, religious, family), civil society actors both as organisations or as civic voices such as doctors and lawyers, the de facto governing authority (such as the Local Administrative Councils in opposition-controlled areas in Syria) and traders and businessmen whose business would benefit from a ceasefire and/or a more organised and managed conflict line. Civilians can be seen as actors in local agreements even when they are not represented in the talks. Civilians for example put pressure on armed actors to engage in talks and agree a ceasefire or arrangements to provide them with services. This role of the civilians most salient when the local talks fall apart or stumble because one of the armed actors is refusing to concede to certain conditions. In these circumstances, the civilians who live under the control of this armed actor are often deliberately targeted by violence, and services get disrupted so that the civilians themselves put pressure on this actor to go back to the talks (e.g. Homs, Easter Ghouta).

On the national level, we see the local representatives of the central power. For example, army and security officials, mayors, heads of municipalities and local councils. In some of the major local agreements in Syria, even ministers take part. In the early local talks in Homs for example in 2012, ministers, senior Baath party officials, army and security officials and the mayor of Homs were all present in the local negotiation meetings of 2012. At times, the government itself could be represented in local agreements by local informal actors such as the heads of loyalist militias or a loyal local dignitary rather than by formal institutions and representatives.

External actors in most cases are either unilateral or multilateral actors. The unilateral actors are more often than not the external states that are already part of the conflict, and this is exactly what makes their presence problematic. Both Russia and Iran played key roles in many of the major local agreements in Syria. America and Turkey played a major role in Manbij agreement. In some cases, neutral countries attempt to play a role that is more conducive to a peace logic; an example is the role Norway tried to play in the al-Waer agreement of Homs.

³¹ see for example the emphasis on the linkage in the UN literature UN Mediation and Support Unit, 'Un Support to Local Mediation: Challenges and Opportunities', in *Book Un Support to Local Mediation: Challenges and Opportunities*, ed. ^eds. Editor (City, 2020).

Multilateral actors that do not provide direct support to any of the warring parties are better positioned to play a role within the negotiation and follow-up processes that reinforces tendencies towards a peace logic. This includes the UN–African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur,³² or the role of UN in Galkaio, as well as international NGOs. Allard Duursma draws on the Uppsala Conflict Dataset and the African Peace Processes (APP) dataset to conduct a systematic review of the effectiveness of UN peacekeeping missions in supporting a subset of local agreement-making processes, namely local conflicts fought between non-state actors although many are linked to state or external actors and issues. He finds that, ‘in locations of peacekeeping operations, the involvement of peacekeeping staff in negotiations makes these negotiations more likely to end in the conclusion of an agreement’. He suggests that this is because peacekeeping missions have a comparative advantage over other third-party actors because of their ability to leverage their military and logistics capabilities, political capital and resources on the ground. This enables them to support and facilitate negotiation processes by arranging logistics, providing security, and where needed, mitigating government bias.³³

In Syria, the UN role in local agreements was hindered by two main obstacles. First, the UN did not have the mandate and the tools to play a role in peacemaking and keeping at local level. Second, the Syrian regime opposed such a role for the UN. In the examples where they were able to play a role their presence was constructive as illustrated in Rim Turkmani’s paper on external interventions.³⁴

On the other hand, the paper on the Galkaio local agreement in Somalia, demonstrates the important role that the UN Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) played at multiple levels in order to secure an agreement at the local level. The UN understood it needed to reach a public agreement at the inter-state level between the presidents of Puntland and Galmudug in order to create the space for local efforts to be supported. Moreover, managing the different external actors helped increase coherence and support to a locally owned process. A key concern in international engagement in peace-making is the involvement of multiple actors that can work at cross-purposes and confuse the mediation space. From the start, the SRSG’s office helped to manage a fragmented aid landscape and stressed its facilitatory role, enabling local actors to feel empowered, rather than part of an external project.

Ghassan Salameh, the head of the UN mission to Libya was able to bring the parties together to reach a ceasefire for Tripoli in September 2018. His efforts which succeeded in agreeing a ceasefire which he reported on in the UN SC briefing ‘On 4 September, the Mission brokered a ceasefire between the major parties to the conflict. This has effectively halted the fighting and started the restoration of some order to the city. The Mission is now working to protect this fragile peace and enable it to take root. As a first step, we are offering technical assistance and good offices in support of the ceasefire’.³⁵

³²Allard Duursma, ‘Making disorder more manageable: The short-term effectiveness of local mediation in Darfur,’ *Journal of peace research* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343319898241>.

³³Allard Duursma, ‘Non-State Conflicts, Peacekeeping, and the Conclusion of Local Agreements,’ *Peacebuilding*, forthcoming (2022).

³⁴R. Turkmani, ‘How local are local agreements? Shaping local agreements as a new form of third-party intervention in protracted conflicts,’ *Peacebuilding*, Forthcoming 2022.

³⁵See SRSG Ghassan Salame briefing to the Security Council 5 September 2018 available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/libya/srsg-ghassan-salame-briefing-security-council-5-september-2018>.

In general, women rarely play a direct role in local agreements especially if the talks are dominated by armed actors. Where they do play a role as mediator, as in Galkaio, they create space for the inclusion of women in the talks.³⁶ Jessica Watkins, in her research on local agreements in Iraq, found that local mediators in Iraq cite the inclusion of women as one of the key ingredients for the success of a local agreement by providing insights and details about issues that tribal leaders and security actors did not, such as the social effects of implementing tribal exile customs on families, employment and welfare, and the social stigma attached to displacement.

A tentative conclusion based on the evidence presented in the papers of this special issue is that whether local agreements are driven by a civic logic, based on the belief that dialogue and talks are the best way to end the conflict, or by a war logic, in which the talks are seen merely as either a military tactic or platform to organise the surrender of the opposite side, depends on the actors involved. By and large, the greater the involvement of multilateral actors and civilians, the more likely are talks to be guided by a peace logic which serves primarily the interests of ordinary civilians. Armed actors in general try to exclude civic actors from the process of the talks and merely use them as implementers of some of the aspects of the agreements such as organising the delivery of aid. When included in the talks, it is civic actors who bring in the elements of the agreements that are more relevant to people's lives such as aid, restoration of services, freedom of movement, releasing detainees. Likewise multilateral actors can act as independent mediators and press for the inclusion of civilians thereby making a peace logic more likely. Nevertheless, both these logics can be observed within each side of the talks including among armed actors.

Process

The dominant literature on peace-making and mediation tends to evaluate the success of a process or outcome largely by whether or not an agreement is reached.³⁷ In contrast, local agreements must be understood as an ongoing complex process, often punctuated by differing levels of violence at various stages, agreements on specific issues, and relationship-building activities, rather than a decisive event.

The agreements and processes examined in our research demonstrate that local agreements are often time-bound (although their impact may last even if they don't) and may lead to improvements for civilians in a specific locale (e.g. reduction in violence, improvements in humanitarian access, etc.) while also shifting conflict dynamics in unforeseen ways in other areas or at the national level. This makes it important to consider both the question of who benefits and the time-frame: the short- and long-term impacts that these agreements may have not only on the local area but also on larger conflict dynamics and the nature of political authority. In cases where civic local actors are involved more actively, local buy-in can spur a reduction in violence during the talks, support the conclusion of an agreement, and ensure that the benefits are more widely

³⁶Majid and Theros, 'Bridging the Border in Galkaio, Somalia,' *Peacebuilding*, Forthcoming (2022).

³⁷Allard Duursma, 'A Current Literature Review of International Mediation', *International Journal of Conflict Management* 25, (2014):81–98.

enjoyed by the community. Moreover, reaching an agreement may mark just the beginning of a longer process of continuous implementation and guarantees by local, national and/or international structures.

In many of the cases we studied, we can observe the different ways in which process matters both in practice and as an analytical approach. A process perspective in the case of Homs, Syria, for example, provides preliminary insights into the relationship between violence and local negotiations. Turkmani traces, over a 13 months period, how violence would significantly decline during moments of talking, intensify again when negotiations stalled and/or the strategic calculations of armed actors shift, and decline again once talks resumed. In the periods of reduced violence, public services would often resume and improve living conditions for civilians. Measuring the success of a single agreement reached in this case would limit our understanding of how these talks unfold, how they impact civilians, and how they relate to the broader dynamics and political fault lines that exist across the larger conflict complex. 'Instead', she states, 'an agreement is part of a long process of talks that is interlinked to other levels and to other localities, during which the terms of an intermittently negotiated agreements are continuously shaped not only by talks but also importantly, by the exercise of violence against civilians.'³⁸

The rich history of local agreement-making in Somalia illustrates the importance of a process-oriented incremental mediation approach to transform relationships and enable collective local ownership of the process and eventual agreement. In the case of Galkaio, what emerged as critical was the reconstitution of relations across the divided border as well as the strengthening of joint mechanisms in security provision and ceasefire monitoring in order to mitigate conflict escalation and establish a basis for progressive stability. This stands in contrast to previous agreements in Galkaio that functioned more like truces or ceasefires. The recent Galkaio agreement, which was more inclusive in process and content, spurred 'a process where social relations across the border could be repaired, evidenced by further inter-clan agreements forged in 2020'.

Brief outline of the collection

The special issue starts with two articles that provide broader conceptual and analytical insights into local agreements, the process by which they are reached, the functions they may serve, and their implications on both local and larger conflict and peace-making dynamics.

Jan Pospisil's **article** develops a typology of local agreement. He argues that the functions of local agreements are pragmatic and focused on managing the present without attempting to resolve the fault lines of the national conflict. Yet even so, they offer the potential to reshape the conflict context and shift the logic of conflict towards a logic of peace by undermining conditions that drive violence on the ground.

Rim Turkmani's article on the series of local agreements forged in Homs, Syria over six years challenges some of the conceptualisations and methodologies developed in mapping local agreements. Through mixed methods, including a specially designed innovative crowd-based events database, a dataset of local agreements in Syria and interviews with leading local

³⁸R Turkmani, 'Local Agreements as a Process: The Example of Local Talks in Homs in Syria', *Journal of Peacebuilding*, Forthcoming (2022).

players in the negotiations process, her article demonstrates that these processes are often more important for improving the security and livelihoods of civilians than the agreement itself. She finds that violence against civilians decreased dramatically during the process of local talks, even when an agreement was not concluded or when it does not alter the broader conflict dynamics at the national level. The results of her research lead her to conclude that understanding and evaluating local agreements requires mixed methods and the creation of databases through local research networks in order to capture many local agreements that are not covered by media. In evaluating the impact of these agreements, she argues that we must trace the entire process rather than on the conclusion of an agreement and its impact post-agreement. Surprisingly, she finds that ‘the experience of Syrian-driven mediation in Homs, for example, shows the local mediation initiatives that held the features of what it takes to achieve a durable peace, including addressing local grievances, were the ones that actually failed’.

The next three articles focus attention on the role that third-party actors can play in supporting local processes. While most analyses on external interventions in local peace-making efforts are drawn from case studies or focused on a single country, Allard Duursma draws on the Uppsala Conflict Dataset and the African Peace Processes (APP) dataset to conduct a systematic review of the effectiveness of UN peacekeeping missions in supporting a subset of local agreement-making processes, namely local conflicts fought between non-state actors although many are linked to state or external actors and issues. He finds that, ‘in locations of peacekeeping operations, the involvement of peacekeeping staff in negotiations makes these negotiations more likely to end in the conclusion of an agreement’. He suggests that this is because peacekeeping missions have a comparative advantage over other third-party actors because of their ability to leverage their military and logistics capabilities, political capital and resources on the ground. This enables them to support and facilitate negotiations processes by arranging logistics, providing security, and where needed, mitigating government bias.

The second article on Syria examines the growing role and impact of third-party interventions in the negotiations of local agreements by drawing on a unique archive she developed documenting local agreement-making processes in Syria. Through five cases with differing levels and types of external intervention, Rim Turkmani contrasts unilateral with multilateral engagements in these processes and finds that unilateral action shapes local agreements in ways that crowd out local actors and often extend the duration of the conflict. In a context like Syria where multilateral institutions have limited presence, she finds that external actors most able to shape agreements are those with physical presence on the ground, such as Russia and Iran. Where the UN played a role, even if minimal, in shaping local agreements, she finds that the process was more inclusive of civilians and helped to offset the geopolitical rivalries that colour other agreements in Syria.

The article by Nisar Majid and Marika Theros provides an in-depth examination of a local agreement-making process in Galkaio, a divided city in Somalia where renewed violence had national implications around the formation of a new Federal system. It explores the role external mediators played, especially at the UN, and strategies employed to ensure viability and sustainability of the process and agreement at the local level by linking it to multiple layers. They paint a picture of dedicated external mediators, whose personal characteristics and commitment to conflict transformation, enabled them to

support a more comprehensive agreement that not only ended violence but also, in part, addressed underlying grievances and strengthened joint mechanisms for implementation and conflict de-escalation. Their article raises important questions about who mediates and the organisational obstacles that they face in supporting local agreement processes.

Conclusion

Local agreements are a pervasive feature of contemporary conflicts. In the research undertaken within the CRP, we have sought to understand the complexity of these agreements and to ask whether such agreements are a merely of way of coping with intractable conflicts or whether they offer a mechanism for reversing or transforming the social condition that constitutes conflict. Below we summarise our main findings based on the evidence presented in this special issue.

First of all, we find that whether or not a local agreement contributes to peace depends to a considerable degree on the actors involved in the negotiation process. Where civilians and multilateral actors such as the United Nations are involved in the negotiation process, agreements tend to be closer to a peace logic. By contrast, where the dominant actors are armed groups or representatives of external states that are supporting one or other warring party, the agreements are more likely to follow a war logic.

The implications of this finding are that it is **very important to expand the mandate of the United Nations mandate or other multilateral actors in a particular conflict so that it could also play a role at local level even in the absence of national peace agreement or ceasefire**. Among the tasks that multilateral actors can perform when they assist that their interventions could protect civilians and aid peace are:

- Assisting with **logistics and security**
- Acting as **mediators** and also **protecting local mediators** who often threatened or killed.
- Pressing for the **inclusion of civilians, especially women, youth and civic actors**
- Acting as **monitors and observers** even if they are not directly involved as mediators, thereby contributing to transparency.

Secondly, we find that local agreements tend to be about the **concrete situation** on the ground- ceasefires, lifting sieges, provision of services, managing checkpoints, redeployment or demobilisation of armed groups, and so on rather than political or constitutional issues. Far too often, the external interest in local agreements is driven by the hierarchical perspective on conflict and the desire to ensure that these agreements can either support or at least not undermine a national-level process. Indeed, the case of Galkaio in this special issue offers a successful example of how a local agreement can support multi-layered peacemaking.³⁹ Yet, our other case studies also demonstrate how local agreements, even if they are not linked to a national-level process, not only could provide immediate benefit to communities but can also undermine the logics of violence more broadly.

Thirdly, local agreements cannot be treated in isolation. What happens in one area affects other areas. What happens at one level affects other levels (local, national, regional). Local agreements are part of a broader ecology of negotiation. While a local agreement improved the

³⁹Majid and Theros, 'Bridging the Border in Galkaio, Somalia,' *Journal of Peacebuilding*, forthcoming (2022).

security and living conditions of the al Ghouta area, it displaced the conflict to other areas and led to further deterioration in areas such as Afreen and Idlib. These talks included local and national actors with the direct involvement of Russia in reaching an agreement and with its outcome also influenced by Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

The implication of these two findings is the need **to foreground the concrete situation on the ground at both national and local levels**. Local agreements need if possible to be guaranteed at the national level and related to other areas, even if they have utility as an isolated agreement. A focus on the concrete situation at the national level can improve the situation for ordinary people and by so doing may also contribute to a shift in the dynamics of the political/constitutional discussions.

Fourthly, we find that **process** is important and not just agreements. The agreement to talk on its own could be seen as an agreement even if no final written agreement is reached. Periods during which talks take place tend to be associated with lower levels of violence. The implication is that multilateral actors should not just focus on reaching agreements but should aim to **contribute to a long-term reconciliation process**

Lastly, a granular understanding at local levels over time is a necessary condition for effective involvement in the negotiation or mediation process. Conflict research has to be both bottom-up and top-down. There is a need **to establish databases of local processes and not just agreements**, based on local knowledge and not just media reporting. There is also a need for conflict databases to expand mapping of conflicts beyond violent events. Our pilot conflict events data base of the process in Homs covered both peace and violent events over an thirteen month period and demonstrated how much can be achieved through the combination of digital technology, crowd seeding and the expansion of the definition of conflict related events.

Our overall conclusion is that local talks and community-level mediation can contribute to a peace logic, if they involve local civilians and regional or international multilateral impartial actors, are related to the national, regional and international level, and are based on a detailed knowledge of context. An effort to expand this type of process on a large scale may be the best opportunity for addressing the social condition that characterises contemporary intractable conflicts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Notes on contributors

Mary Kaldor is Professor Emeritus of Global Governance and Director of the Conflict Research Programme at LSE IDEAS.

Marika Theros, Policy Fellow at LSE IDEAS.

Dr Rim Turkmani, Senior Policy Fellow at LSE IDEAS and principal investigator of Legitimacy and Citizenship in the Arab World research project.