

The Spaces of Local Peace Agreements: Towards a New Imaginary of the Peace Process



PeaceRep Executive Summary

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In recent years, the peace process based on an imaginary of intrastate conflict between two key protagonists no longer seems to fit the fragmented nature of conflict in the most complex and protracted settings, within a fragmented global order. These settings increasingly involve a high degree of fragmentation of armed actors, more active involvement of geopolitical conflict underwriters, and more fluid conflict landscapes in which local and international actors can quickly ‘change sides’ and ‘change partners’.

This new complicated conflict tapestry, emerging in the last ten years, and typified by conflicts and peace processes in South Sudan, Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Libya, is not merely what continues when peace processes fail: it is a product of that failure. Conflict fragmentation is in part a product of the nation-state-building projects that have been tried and have failed, with new transitions becoming overlaid on earlier ones.

The consequences of fragmentation are immense: if conflict can no longer be resolved by primarily focusing on national geographies and a singular conflict, how can it be brought to an end? What is the new imaginary that would underpin the search for new places and spaces of conflict resolution, and translate them into an institutionalisation that could be squared with existing state boundaries?

In our new article [‘The Spaces of Local Peace Processes: Towards a New Imaginary of the Peace Process’](#) we use insights from a new qualitative dataset on local agreements ([PA-X Local](#)), to explore the places and spaces of local agreements as an alternative frame to understand conflict resolution in the current moment. We suggest that local agreements present a new picture of conflict and point to a new imaginary for peace processes.

What are local agreements, and how do they fit within the traditional peace process?

The [PA-X Local Peace Agreement Database](#) project has involved collecting, classifying, and coding local agreements in order to explore their comparative dimensions. This process has resulted in a collection of 318 local agreements between 1 January 1992 and 30 June 2021, in over 21 different countries, with multiple actor dyads within some of those countries (Bell et al. 2020). The following working definition of ‘a local agreement’ lies at the heart of the collection:

Local agreements may be formally documented, but are often informally documented or even unwritten. They relate to a geographic area smaller than the entire conflict zone, and involve at least some local actors, whether in an immediate village, neighbourhood, municipality, city or specified military zone. Their aim is to mitigate or end conflict in that area by addressing local conflict drivers and actors. (Bell et al. 2021)

We argue, however, that in almost every case ‘the local’ as a space is inevitably connected to the space of the ‘national’, the ‘transnational’, and the ‘international’ in non-hierarchical ways:

- First, local agreements sometimes embed a national peace but also serve as sites that can resist and subvert national peacemaking goals – particularly when attempting to transmit international norms;
- Second, as national peace processes become ‘stuck’, normatively-driven donors and external interveners such as the United Nations increasingly look to local arenas both as a place to embed a national peace deal and as a site for strategic engagement to address or even bypass logjams in the national peace process;
- Third, local mediators and armed actors are seldom ‘purely’ local, but are often also ‘transnational actors’ operating as ‘circulating locals’ ([Engle Merry 2006, 40](#)), who move between local, national, and international spheres of action, brokering in each direction with international and transnational actors.

We find that the existing peace process imaginary (on imaginaries see [Browne and Diehl 2019, 393](#)) offers two competing visions of how local and national peace processes are linked:

- A first, internationally dominant vision understands local peacemaking as an often-necessary adjunct to national peacemaking. For international actors local agreements provide a possible ‘security resource’ to the deficit of national peace processes, whether at early stages of conflict onset, where local conflict can trigger national conflict, or at end stages, where it can trigger process breakdown.
- A second approach – operating more from the ‘local turn’ – understands local agreements as an important site of peacemaking-as-development in their own right. International actors are often prepared to support local processes without a wider agenda where they create important moments and examples of peace, where little else is possible.

We suggest an alternative third framing which understands different types of local agreements as providing distinct security functions to different stages of an evolving peace process. We draw this framing from what we argue is a need to connect with detailed appraisal of when and how local agreements operate, such as our new [PA-X dataset of local agreements](#) provides. This data points to how peace and conflict, and national and local peacemaking, are deeply intertwined.

The Spaces and Functions of Local Agreements

We use this data to illustrate the different security and peacemaking roles that local agreements perform at different stages of a conflict-to-peace life-cycle, not all of which are ‘peace focused’. We set these roles out in Table 1, to comprise:

- (1) local ‘pre-negotiation’ agreements to de-escalate, contain, or mitigate conflict as a short-term measure in the middle of emerging or ongoing local (and even national) conflict when there is no national peace process in play;
- (2) local ‘framework’ agreements which attempt to produce a new local political settlement during a peace process, that will return a measure of governance and stability to the locale (whether there is a national settlement or not); and
- (3) local ‘implementation’ agreements which attempt in some way to implement a national peace accord that has already been signed but lacks wider social and civic involvement.

Table 1. Types of local agreement, according to function and form.

Function	Types of agreement
Local ‘pre-negotiation’ agreements to de-escalate, contain, or mitigate conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Civic de-escalation agreements</i> • <i>Inter-armed group de-escalation agreements</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Truces, ceasefires, and de-militarisation agreements - Humanitarian agreements • <i>Tactical agreements</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Alliance agreements</i> - <i>Surrender agreements</i>
Local ‘framework’ agreements aimed at forms of local political settlement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Intercommunal peace processes</i> • <i>‘Peace Solidarity’ agreements</i> • <i>City deals</i>
Local ‘implementation’ agreements to develop and extend national peace agreement outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>State–local ‘mop-up’ and agreements</i> • <i>Reconstruction and reconnection agreements</i>

Cutting across our temporal analysis of local agreements, we point to the different types of physical and conceptual spaces that local agreements create (Table 2):

- (1) ‘territorially-limited transcalar space’, where local agreements address a defined sub-state geography, such as a city, to produce a local political settlement in ways that can impact on the wider conflict.
- (2) ‘borderland mediation space’, for example between two different tribes or clans, which addresses the interfaces between different communities as places of intercommunal transaction, movement, and exchange that contain the potential for conflict or peace.
- (3) ‘route-of-passage space’, a space such as a road or path which is a distinct from the surrounding area, created by the very act of journeying. The road as a space is often significant to those that ‘stand apart’ from the conflict, and seek to pass through it, such as pastoralists, the displaced, or indeed humanitarian workers.

Table 2. Types of space arising across local agreements.

Type of spaces created	Physical space	Conceptual space	Purpose of agreeing in the space
Territorially limited trans-scalar space	Territorially local space (city, town, village)	Space of trans-scalar peace creation	Mediating a distinct geographical space to be shared
Borderland mediation space	Borderland interfaces	Spaces for mediating inter-group confrontation	Mediation points of interface and exchange between separate places and peoples
Route-of-passage space	Roads, ways, water courses, or pastoral tracts	Spaces of movement which enable people with moral or spiritual purpose to move through contentious places across geographies	Protection of movement of the spiritual goods of nomadism and humanitarianism as its own space, crossing both territorial spaces and borderlands

These three different types of space persistently appear in local agreements in intertwined ways. We consider how the security functions of local agreements connect to – and sometimes create – these types of conceptual spaces at different stages of an attempted peace or transition process.

Understanding fragmented conflict and fragmented state

Local agreements increasingly are being viewed as bottom-up alternative to a big peace process in contexts where it seems to have been tried and failed multiple times. However, our collection of local agreements illustrates the complexity of differentiated practices of local agreement-making which need to be better understood. Our interrogation of the space of local agreements begins to offer a new political imaginary of both conflict and peace process.

Local peace agreements are not merely local and not just about peace. Hyper-fragmentation of conflict is created by a proliferation of armed groups challenging the unitary state. However, fragmentation is also reinforced from 'above' – perpetuated by the incentive structures of successive peacebuilding interventions, often rotating through very different types of international mediation. Diverse normative and 'pragmatic' international actors, often with incompatible goals, have increasingly become embedded in national and local governance structures.

Sub-state locales have become important spaces for international and national actors to occupy because they are strategic spaces in which to incubate alternative spatial framings for peace or conflict. Indeed local agreements reveal how 'the national' is often itself merely a 'local fragment' with limited geographical and structural reach. The central state institutions can even perhaps be understood as a fractal of the whole, rather than the whole within which the other fractals are contained. As national peace and transition processes stall, and conflict dynamics mutate, interim state institutions often become increasingly illegitimate and shrunken over time.

Towards a new imaginary of the peace process

To move to a new peace process imaginary requires dealing with this complex shapeshifting world of interrelated conflicts that reach beyond borders. It requires replacing any idea of '*the*' peace process with 'multi-level interconnected peace processes'. To some extent, international actors are already grappling with this new world, and recognise this fragmentation in reaching out to engage with local agreement practices. However, they lack a language and toolkit to enable them to ground and justify this practice in terms of a clear sense of how it will deliver the national peace they seek.

Internationals struggle to imagine what the project of 'scaling up' looks like because there is no viable central state project to 'scale up' to.

We argue that policy makers need to begin to understand and map the fragments which operate spatially and conceptually to variously create geographic, group-based, and project-based relationships with capacity for conflict and peace. If the old imaginary was one of architecture, an alternative new imaginary rooted in metaphors of 'variable geometry', or even particle physics, should drive analysis of how forces pull individuals and groups together and push them apart, so as to provide a more fruitful image of the type of spaces and places where peace can be created ([see McCrudden 2015](#)).

'Fragment mapping' would point beyond the national peace process imaginary by making visible fragmented conflict that operates in combination as a 'system' which must be unwound, rather than ended. Fragment mapping, however, could also usefully reveal the types of networks, relationships, and moments of dialogue and cooperation that make up persistent practices of conflict disruption which exist in the places and spaces the national peace process does not reach or care about.

A granulated understanding of locally intertwined peace and conflict process such as we have presented matters if peace and transition design is to 'work with the grain' of existing fragmented conflict dynamics.

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