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# Overcoming barriers to grassroots inclusion in peace processes



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While grassroots participation in peace processes is increasingly recognized as a way of achieving more inclusive and sustainable peace, moving beyond the realm of traditional diplomacy among high-level actors remains a challenge. Community and grassroots organizations often remain at the periphery of peace processes. This can be due to contending priorities among civil society groups, geographical distance from the negotiation table, the language used during negotiations and implicit issues of hierarchy and privilege. Barriers to achieving more participation from local and community-level actors must be overcome.

## Inclusiveness matters

Global security has deteriorated over the past decade, as [evidenced by a growing number of armed con-flicts and an intensification of political violence](#). The number of major violent conflicts that have reached the threshold of war [has tripled since 2007](#). Peace agreements are one means of seeking long-term solutions for armed conflict, but [they are often not effective](#). Signatory parties with a lack of will to adhere to the terms and unrealistic provisions can hinder the process. Furthermore, sometimes actors or issues that are viewed as marginal are excluded and this has an impact on the kind of peace achieved and whether it will be sustained in the long run. It is increasingly apparent that inclusiveness matters: [the participation of civil society groups in peace processes is found to increase the durability of peace](#). Moreover, peace agreements signed by women delegates tend to be more durable, contain more provisions for political reform and, through their links to women's civil society groups, have higher rates of implementation.

## Multitrack approach gaining traction

These findings have important implications for peace processes and the [various types or tracks](#) of diplomacy they draw on. A multitrack approach—one that works at and across different levels of society to link high-level actors with non-governmental representatives from civil society and grassroots and local communities—is gaining traction among [mediation experts](#) and [peacebuilders](#) as necessary for attaining sustainable peace.

Track 1 dialogue is the realm of traditional diplomacy, involving high-level state representatives in formal government-to-government discussions; or, as is more frequently the case with intra-state armed conflicts today, involving the leadership of non-state armed groups that are party to the conflict, as well as intergovernmental organizations. In contrast, track 2 refers to informal and unofficial exchanges and dialogues among non-state actors, such as civil society representatives, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), ethnic or religious leaders, academics, experts, business elites and other private actors. It is aimed at exchanging information and building trust among non-official participants through more informal means. (When the top leadership of one or more of the parties meets in an informal setting, or with civil society actors, the process constitutes track 1.5.)

Track 3 involves dialogue and input from people at the community and grassroots level. Track 3 is the least explored and understood track to date, although this is beginning to change. Finding new ways to include community-based organizations and grassroots associations in peace processes is a key challenge, and of particular importance is the linking role of national NGOs and movements typical of track 2 in engaging grassroots-level actors. As a recent [SIPRI Background Paper](#) highlights, women's groups and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual and intersex (LGBTI) groups belonging to track 2 processes had to use a diverse set of strategies during the most recent Colombian peace process (2012–16) in order for conflict parties to recognize their legitimate concerns. In one notable example, victims of the conflict and representatives from women's and LGBTI groups raised awareness of gender-based violence at the negotiation table by framing it as an issue of violence that inflicted pain on both sides of the conflict. Nationally recognized women's organizations hosted a series of summits and forums outside the main negotiation process to better ensure (albeit with mixed success) that discussion points brought to the table would include the grievances of grassroots organizations, as well to enhance alliances and to open up participation at the political level.

In other contexts, different means are used to increase grassroots participation. For example, in Libya in 2018, as part of a broad-based national dialogue within the peace process, [a series of 77 public consultations](#) involving over 7000 Libyans identified areas of consensus, priority and cleavage. In Cyprus, [partici-patory polls](#) identified common ground between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities on sensitive issues in the peace process, including security and governance. As shown by these examples and more, exploring all entry points for influencing the agenda and road map for peace can better ensure its sustainability. Likewise, it can be detrimental when the focus on the negotiating table comes at the expense of alternative routes to peace, such as local peacebuilding initiatives.

## Strength of civil society is crucial

While support for the inclusion of community and grassroots actors in peace processes has strengthened, a key contextual factor is the strength and diversity of civil society in the conflict-affected state. Civil society plays an important bridging role to local communities and the grassroots. In countries with strong local NGOs, community activism and women's movements, [such as Colombia and the Philippines](#), diverse and active civil society networks made it easier to support and engage grassroots inclusion. In weak civil societies, however, it is more challenging to link up with and engage grassroots actors.

Another limitation may be the extent to which track 3 actors, such as local peace committees, ethnic and indigenous groups, and community women's and youth groups, have the required resources, voice, reputation and networks in order to mobilize and organize. Track 3 actors often have fewer resources to participate in peace processes, are more isolated geographically and have less media exposure than national civil society actors and NGOs. In Colombia, the collective experiences of indigenous women in peripheral regions (who often experienced violence very differently from women in the urban regions) were usually not included in higher-level dialogues taking place during the peace process. Furthermore, the complex intersectional experience of gender inequality within some track 3 groups—for example, indigenous women in traditionally male-dominated indigenous groups—poses challenges to ensuring a voice for marginalized actors in peace processes.

## Language key to grassroots participation

Notably, a key resource for participation is the language of the state. Quite literally, the language used by government may differ from the language(s) used by local populations. The language used by the state is likely to be legalistic (informed by the formal legal system) and institutional. Similarly, international legal and normative frameworks, such as [United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325](#) and its related resolutions that comprise the [Women, Peace and Security agenda](#), can be considered fundamental languages of activism, empowerment and diplomacy. Without familiarity with or knowledge of these languages—and compounded by the limited mobilization of, for example, women's or peace movements—grassroots participation is likely to remain limited. Conversely, those actors with the required reputation and access to networks will likely have more opportunities to participate in negotiations.

Even in highly inclusive contexts, such as Colombia's peace process, nuances have revealed the difficulties of linking up grassroots organizations with other tracks during a peace process. During the negotiation phase in Colombia, many of those in track 3 gave testimonies, offering their narratives and experiences of suffering, to be translated to track 1 actors. This was important for representation but it emphasized, and perhaps even reinforced, the hierarchy between local grassroots groups and civil society organizations that have greater representation throughout the country.

## Inclusion goes beyond physical presence

Moving forward, it is important that the understanding of inclusion and linking of different tracks move beyond the narrow interpretation of presence at the negotiation table. Inclusion should encompass a more substantial participation that involves multiple entry points and forms of influence. An important example of such participation is grassroots participation through community dialogues and local peace activism—bringing communities together across tribal, ethnic or religious divides. However, this participation must also be recognized and supported by national-level actors through capacity building and identifying new and diverse leadership. Furthermore, the international community can provide funding and gender training to larger social movements that can more effectively reach local grassroots organizations, with the caveat that they include diverse groups in key decision-making processes.

Measures such as a [new rapid financing tool](#) from the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, aimed at helping members of local and community-level women's groups participate in peace processes, can provide resources to address obstacles to participation, including funds for travel, childcare, translation and capacity building. Moreover, as negotiations may last for years or even decades, long-term, sustained support for local peacebuilding and grassroots actors is needed. An active peace negotiation usually attracts international attention, but this often ebbs when it is over and support to local actors with it, even when important challenges remain. As seen in [Colombia](#), attacks on local community leaders and women's and human rights activists are also attacks on inclusive political participation. Colombia illustrates the potential of moving beyond traditional, elite-focused dialogue towards a more inclusive peace process, but it also serves as a warning to protect the participation of track 3 actors in implementation in the longer term or risk unravelling the peace process.

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