

United Nations Development Program

Developing consensus-building mechanisms for resolving protracted conflicts



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Introduction

Protracted conflicts, often referred to as intractable or enduring conflicts, represent some of the most persistent and destabilizing challenges in global politics and human development. Generally covering generations, these conflicts are characterized by their endurance, complexity, and resistance to resolution as well as deeply ingrained issues, high levels of mistrust, and a history of unsuccessful peace procedures. Prolonged conflicts, whether based on religious, ethnic, political, or economic difficulties, severely undermine initiatives to achieve social cohesiveness, economic growth, and political stability by fostering environments of instability and suffering.

The roots of protracted conflicts are often embedded in historical injustices, systemic inequalities, and the marginalization of specific groups. Conflicts can be sparked by a variety of causes, such as competition for scarce resources or disagreements about territorial sovereignty. Cycles of violence, retaliation, and deeply embedded narratives of victimisation and blame ultimately intensify these original drivers. As a result, long-running disputes turn into self-reinforcing confrontations, with each violent outburst deepening tensions and making a settlement more unattainable.

The human cost of these conflicts is staggering. Beyond the immediate fatalities of violence, long-term wars result in mass relocation, infrastructure damage, and pervasive poverty. As communities fracture along lines of identity or loyalty and the long-term psychological impacts of trauma resonate through generations, social trust erodes. Furthermore, extensive conflicts can transcend national boundaries, destabilizing entire areas, facilitating the growth of illegal networks, and providing an environment that is conducive to extremism.

In this sense, addressing the underlying dynamics and causes of these conflicts is crucial for international security and sustainable development in addition to being ethically just.

Long-running wars have not always been successfully resolved by traditional methods of conflict resolution, such as military interventions, top-down peace accords, or politically enforced solutions.

Rather than tackling the structural and relational problems at the core of the dispute, these tactics frequently concentrate on bringing about an immediate end to hostilities or using coercion to enforce compliance. As a result, many of these efforts yield fragile agreements that collapse under the weight of unresolved grievances and persistent mistrust. This ongoing failure highlights the limitations of traditional methods and the need for innovative, inclusive approaches that can manage the complexities of protracted disputes.



Consensus-building techniques provide a possible solution to address the current problem. In contrast to adversarial strategies, which pit groups against one another in a battle for supremacy, consensus-building emphasises collaboration, inclusivity, and understanding.

The fundamental idea behind reaching a consensus is to move the emphasis from entrenched position to fundamental interests, creating a space where parties can explore common objectives and work together to develop answers to different solutions. This participatory process not only seeks to resolve immediate disputes but also addresses the deeper social, political, and cultural divisions that perpetuate conflict.

By prioritizing dialogue and cooperation, consensus-building mechanisms have the potential to transform hostile relationships into alliances, laying the foundation for a long-lasting peace and reconciliation.

Definition of Key Terms

Dialogue Facilitation	In order to assist disputing parties, express their concerns, comprehend one another's viewpoints, and pinpoint common objectives, facilitators lead organized talks between them. For instance, guided discussions aided in the transition to a multiracial democracy in South Africa during the post-apartheid era.
Multi-Stakeholder Engagement	In order to guarantee inclusivity and representation, this method of dispute resolution incorporates all pertinent stakeholders, including governments, non-governmental organisations, local communities, and companies. For instance, a variety of stakeholders are included in the Aarhus Convention for environmental disputes in order to promote openness and cooperation.
Deliberative Processes	promotes in-depth conversations where interested parties debate problems in order to reach well-informed and cooperative conclusions. As an illustration, consider Ireland's citizens' assemblies, which were utilised to discuss controversial topics like abortion regulations.
Joint Fact-Finding	In order to develop a common understanding of the facts behind the disagreement, the parties work together to collect and evaluate information. This approach is frequently used to provide a neutral baseline in environmental conflicts involving land use.



Interest-Based Bargaining	finds solutions that benefit both parties by concentrating on underlying interests rather than stances. For instance, Egypt and Israel's 1978 Camp David Accords highlighted their common interests in regional peace and stability.
Third-Party Mediation	A neutral party mediates between conflicting groups to identify points of agreement and help negotiate terms. For example, Norway's mediation in the Sri Lankan Civil War provided temporary ceasefires and negotiations.
Consensus Workshops	Structured workshops designed to foster open communication, brainstorm solutions, and build agreement on contentious issues. One example is the post-conflict planning workshops in Rwanda helped communities rebuild and reconcile after the genocide.
Participatory Decision-Making	It implies the collective decision-making where all voices are heard, and outcomes are agreed upon collaboratively. For example, did the community-led peace agreements in Colombia integrate indigenous and rural populations into the decision-making process.
Truth and Reconciliation Commissions	These commissions are used to uncover historical injustices, foster healing, and promote reconciliation. South Africa's TRC documented apartheid-era abuses and offered restorative justice.
Roundtable Discussions	Brings conflicting parties together to discuss issues in a neutral setting. One example here are the Poland's 1989 Roundtable Agreements between the Communist government and the Solidarity movement facilitated a peaceful transition to democracy.
Restorative Justice	The restorative justice aims to repair harm caused by conflict through dialogue and accountability. Victims and offenders engage directly to address grievances. The post-genocide Gacaca courts in Rwanda for example allowed community-based justice and healing.
Problem-Solving Workshops	Small, informal meetings where parties analyse their conflict and experiment with potential solutions. As examples there are the Track II diplomacy initiatives in the Israeli Palestinian conflict have employed this method.
Trust-Building Exercises	Activities designed to foster mutual trust, often through cultural exchange, shared projects, or confidence-building measures. Joint economic projects between India and Pakistan in disputed Kashmir aim to create shared benefits and reduce tension.
Scenario Planning	Stakeholders collaboratively imagine different future scenarios and plan for them, reducing the fear of uncertainty. Climate-related



	conflict planning in the Sahel region uses this to mitigate resource-based conflicts.
Alternative Dispute Resolution	Non-litigious techniques to settle conflicts outside of official courts, include mediation, arbitration, and negotiation. ADR procedures are often employed, particularly in economic disputes, but they are also used in ethnic or land conflicts.
Conflict Mapping	A methodical procedure for determining the parties, problems, connections, and dynamics involved in a dispute in order to determine its underlying causes. For instance, UN troops use it to plan their involvement in civil wars in Africa.
Cultural Sensitivity Training	Helps participants understand and respect cultural differences, which often underpin conflicts. Example: In Bosnia, cultural sensitivity programs helped ethnic groups rebuild relations after the civil war.
Consensus Decision-Making Tools	Software or structured methods that guide groups to make decisions collectively. Tools like Delphi surveys or consensus-building frameworks are used in multi-party negotiations.
Win-Win Outcomes	Strategies that, as opposed to forcing a compromise, seek to satisfy the fundamental interests of all parties. The Nile Basin Initiative and other agreements on shared natural resources guarantee fair usage and avoid conflicts.
Community-Led Peace Processes	Empowering local communities to lead negotiations and resolve conflicts. For example, Kenya where local peace committees have mediated tribal land disputes.

General Overview

Protracted conflicts are complex, involving multiple stakeholders with divergent interests, power imbalances, and often external influences such as geopolitical agendas. They are sustained by polarized perspectives, where each party sees itself as the victim and the other as the aggressor. This dynamic makes it difficult to establish trust or achieve meaningful dialogue. Traditional conflict resolution approaches, which often rely on top-down solutions or imposed settlements, fail to address the deep-seated issues that drive these disputes. Consensus-building, on the other hand, seeks to transform adversarial relationships into cooperative ones by emphasizing shared ownership of outcomes and inclusivity in the negotiation process.



At the core of consensus-building are principles such as inclusivity, transparency, and trust.

Inclusivity ensures that all stakeholders, including marginalized groups, are represented in the process, preventing the alienation of any party.

Transparency fosters trust through open and honest communication, while shared ownership of decisions encourages long-term commitment to agreements.

Neutral facilitation, often provided by skilled mediators, is crucial in creating an environment where parties can engage constructively and on equal footing.

The process of consensus-building involves several essential elements. First, it requires the creation of safe and neutral spaces where parties can engage in open and honest dialogue without fear of retaliation or judgment.

In order to steer conversations towards a long-lasting solution, it is of great importance to ensure that power disparities are addressed, and promotion of an environment of mutual respect and trust. Therefore, skilled facilitators and mediators are essential to achieve a common deal.

Another essential component of effective consensus-building is the engagement of a wide range of stakeholders, such as local people, civil society organisations, and marginalised populations, whose voices are frequently left out of conventional discussions. This inclusivity not only enhances the legitimacy of the process but also ensures that the resulting agreements reflect the diverse needs and aspirations of all affected parties.

In order to foster the engagement of all the use of technology and digital platforms has emerged as a valuable tool in consensus-building. Digital tools can connect stakeholders across divides, facilitate communication, and provide data-driven insights into conflict dynamics. Scenario planning, powered by technology, can help parties anticipate the consequences of various decisions, enhancing their ability to make informed choices.

Furthermore, in order to assist parties in moving past a one-sided thinking and investigating innovative alternatives, consensus-building processes frequently make use of cutting-edge tools and strategies including interest-based negotiating, scenario planning, and collaborative problem-solving workshops.

Several case studies highlight the potential of consensus-building mechanisms. For instance, South Africa's transition from apartheid involved inclusive dialogue, reconciliation initiatives, and shared ownership of the process, resulting in a relatively peaceful transition.

These approaches are inherently adaptive, designed to accommodate the unique cultural, social, and political dynamics of each conflict. For instance, to improve local



ownership and cultural resonance in communities with strong community traditions, consensus-building procedures may use indigenous dispute resolution techniques.

Similarly, in communities that are strongly divided, phased procedures and confidence-building initiatives can assist to gradually restore trust and set the stage for more in-depth discussions. The Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland demonstrated how sustained dialogue, facilitated by neutral mediators, could bridge deeply entrenched divisions.

While the potential benefits of consensus-building are significant, the approach is not without challenges. Other cases, such as the Israeli Palestinian conflict, illustrate the challenges of consensus-building, particularly when power asymmetries and external pressures undermine the process.

Building consensus in protracted conflicts often requires significant time, resources, and patience, as parties work through years or decades of mistrust and hostility. Consensus-building procedures must be well planned and backed by strong institutional structures since power imbalances, conflicting interests, and outside forces can potentially impede development. Furthermore, the capacity of facilitators to manage intricate dynamics and sustain momentum, as well as the desire by all parties to participate in sincerity, are crucial to success.

In conclusion, developing effective consensus-building mechanisms is essential for resolving protracted conflicts. Building trust, initiating inclusive conversations, and using adaptable frameworks that tackle the fundamental causes of conflicts are all essential to achieving a lasting peace. By fostering mutual understanding, leveraging mediation techniques, and ensuring stakeholder engagement, societies can break conflict cycles and establish long-lasting solutions.

While challenges remain, a commitment to collaboration and innovative approaches can pave the way for enduring peace and stability.

Major Parties Involved

Any dispute resolution procedure revolves around the parties directly involved. The effectiveness of peace initiatives depends on their readiness to engage in dialogue and discover points of agreement.

National governments are frequently among the main parties involved in a war. They have a crucial role in directing talks and carrying out peace accords, whether as defenders of national sovereignty or as parties charged with tyranny. Governments must be receptive to discussion, flexible, and dedicated to guaranteeing that every group is fairly represented.

Political opposition groupings and armed organisations frequently stand in for marginalised or oppressed populations or beliefs. In order to incorporate them into



post-conflict government systems and stop further unrest, their involvement in peace procedures is essential. Despite being the most impacted, civilians, particularly those who have been displaced or afflicted by violence are frequently ignored in discussions. The legitimacy and sustainability of accords are increased when their participation is ensured through consultations, grassroots dialogues, and representation in peace negotiations.

International organizations such as the United Nations (UN), African Union (AU), European Union (EU), and other regional bodies provide localized mediation efforts and conflict resolution frameworks tailored to regional contexts. Especially the UN plays a major role when it comes to resolving the issue at hand due to frequently mediations in protracted conflicts through peacekeeping missions, diplomatic interventions, and structured negotiation platforms.

Third-Party Countries, sometimes known as neutral states, are another crucial category. For example, Norway in the Colombian peace process or Qatar in the Afghan discussions, frequently provide safe places and diplomatic assistance to promote talks.

In order to guarantee that peace initiatives go beyond political elites and consider the concerns of common people, civil society actors are essential.

In crisis areas, organisations like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the International Crisis Group do research, advocate for causes, and offer direct aid. In peace negotiations, they also advocate for inclusion and human rights.

Through moral authority and common ideals, religious organisations and traditional leaders frequently encourage reconciliation and improve communication. Around the world, organisations like the Sant 'Egidio Community have played a crucial role in settling disputes.

Powerful states and regional actors can influence conflict dynamics, either by fuelling tensions or supporting peace efforts. To promote peace, major world powers like the US, China, Russia, and the EU may act as mediators, exert diplomatic pressure, or give financial incentives. However, biased interventions might occasionally result from their strategic objectives.

Countries that border a war zone frequently have economic and security interests in the outcome of the conflict, making them another party that may be involved in such long-running disputes. For instance, Pakistan's position in Afghanistan and Ethiopia's involvement in the Sudanese issue have had a big impact on the area.

Lastly the media and public opinion influencers play a vital role in shaping public narratives, influencing political decisions, and either promoting peace or fuelling conflict and deepen the trenches between the parties

Credible and independent reporting aids in public education, the exposure of human rights abuses, and the accountability of disputing parties. Propaganda or biased media, on the other hand, can make things worse. In the modern digital age, social



networking has developed into a potent instrument for resolving disputes. It permits advocacy campaigns, real-time documenting of peace initiatives, and greater public participation in peace processes, despite the fact that it can disseminate false information.

Timeline of Events

1884-1885 – Berlin Conference	European colonial powers divided Africa without considering the ethnic, tribal, or cultural divisions of indigenous populations, leading to artificial state boundaries. The legacy of this event has fuelled numerous post-independence civil wars and ethnic conflicts in Africa.
1919 – Treaty of Versailles & Foundation of the League of Nations	The Treaty of Versailles imposed severe penalties on Germany after World War I, creating deep resentment that contributed to World War II. The League of Nations was created to prevent future wars through diplomacy, but its failure to enforce agreements highlighted the limitations of early consensus-building efforts
1945 – Founding of the United Nations	Established to promote international peace and security, the UN introduced mechanisms such as mediation, peacekeeping, and diplomatic negotiation. However, Cold War rivalries between the U.S. and the Soviet Union often paralyzed decision-making and prolonged global conflicts.
1948 – Beginning of the Arab Israeli Conflict	The establishment of Israel and the resulting war with neighbouring Arab states created one of the most enduring and complex conflicts in modern history. Repeated attempts at peace, including multiple UN resolutions, have struggled due to deep-seated historical grievances and opposing national aspirations.
1978 – Camp David Accords	A landmark peace agreement mediated by the U.S. between Egypt and Israel, marking the first time an Arab state officially recognized Israel. This



diplomatic success demonstrated that sustained negotiation and third-party mediation could lead to consensus even in deep-rooted conflicts.

1989-1994 – South African Transition from Apartheid

After decades of racial segregation and violence, a broad, inclusive negotiation process led to a peaceful transition to democracy under Nelson Mandela. The process emphasized reconciliation, dialogue, and power-sharing, becoming a model for post-conflict consensus-building.

1993 – Oslo Accords

Secret negotiations between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) led to mutual recognition and an initial framework for peace. However, the agreement eventually unravelled due to political opposition, violence, and a lack of sustained trust-building measures.

1998 – Good Friday Agreement

A historic peace deal that ended decades of sectarian violence between Catholics and Protestants by establishing a power-sharing government. The success of the agreement relied heavily on inclusive dialogue, trust-building, and the involvement of external mediators such as the U.S. and the EU.

2005 – Sudan Comprehensive Peace Agreement

This agreement ended the 21-year civil war between North and South Sudan by outlining a framework for autonomy and eventual independence. It led to the 2011 referendum that granted South Sudan independence, highlighting the role of phased consensus-building in long-term conflict resolution.



Previous attempts to solve the issue

The topic of developing consensus building mechanisms for resolving protracted conflicts has shown that even over long periods of time it is not always possible to reach some kind of agreement. Its high complexity and the combination of geopolitical, social and economic issues has called upon various attempts to solve the issue. Developing consensus-building mechanisms for resolving protracted conflicts requires a combination of diplomatic strategies, inclusive dialogue, and institutional frameworks that promote trust and cooperation among conflicting parties.

One previous solution to resolve protracted conflicts and develop consensus that was entertained in the past was the so-called Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs). These measures can be categorized into political, economic, social, humanitarian and security measures.

Political CBMs include formal agreements to de-escalate hostilities, ceasefires, and transparency in governance. Economic CBMs aim to foster interdependencies, cooperative infrastructure development, trade alliances, and joint economic ventures. People-to-people activities like religious discussions, cultural exchanges, and cooperative community events are known as social CBMs. In order to foster goodwill, humanitarian CBMs collaborate on disaster assistance, health services, and educational initiatives. Demilitarisation accords, weapons control programs, and verification systems to stop escalation are examples of security CBMs.

The foundation of conflict resolution is trust, hence CBMs are essential instruments for promoting trust between disputing parties and create solutions for a long-lasting peace in protracted conflicts.

Another very important measure was fostering more and more inclusive dialogue as well as Multi-Track Diplomacy. These dialogues and diplomacy include a wide array of actors from governments and international organizations to marginalized groups, including indigenous populations, women, youth, and ethnic minorities. Most of the time these marginalized groups bear the consequences and yet remain underrepresented in decision-making processes even though their daily life is heavily affected. Guaranteeing that local communities have a voice in shaping peace agreements and peacebuilding frameworks plays a vital role for the development of both consensus building measures in regions of protracted conflicts and the achievement of more sustainable and locally driven solutions.

The comprehensive strategy of Multi-Track Diplomacy goes beyond formal government discussions. Louise Diamond and John McDonald Nine identified nine separate tracks are under a certain framework.

- Track 1 Diplomatic peace making or government. Here is where formal facets of the political process are used to represent official diplomacy, policymaking, and peacebuilding.
- Track 2 Professional or nongovernmental, or resolving conflicts to promote peace. This is the area where professional nongovernmental players try to manage, avoid, analyse, and settle international disputes.
- Track 3 Business or Peace-making via Trade. This is the area of business and how it may really and potentially contribute to peacebuilding by offering financial possibilities, fostering global friendship and understanding, creating unofficial lines of communication, and supporting other peace making initiatives.
- Track 4 Private Citizen or Using Personal Involvement to Promote Peace. Individual individuals can participate in peace and development initiatives in a variety of ways, including through exchange programs, citizen diplomacy, private volunteer organisations, nonprofit organisations, and special interest groups
- Track 5 This program emphasises research, training, and teaching to advance peace. Think tanks, academic programs, and special interest research centres are examples of research. Facilitation, negotiation, mediation, and conflict resolution are among the practitioner skills taught in training programs. Education covers peace and world order studies, conflict management, and global studies from kindergarten to doctorate.
- Track 6 Activism, also known as Advocacy for Peace. This course addresses environmental and peace action on topics including human rights, social and economic justice, disarmament, and special interest groups' support of particular government policies.
- Track 7 Religion, or the application of faith to promote peace. This looks at the morality-based movements like pacifism, sanctuary, and nonviolence as well as the beliefs and acts of spiritual and religious groups that are focused on peace
- Track 8 Funding or Providing Resources to Promote Peace. This is a reference to the financing community, which consists of the foundations and private donors who supply the funds for a large number of the other tracks' endeavours.
- Track 9 Media and Communications or Using Information to Promote Peace. This is the domain of the people's voice: how the media—print, cinema, video, radio, electronic systems, and the arts—shape and convey popular opinion.



Possible Solutions

Building consensus among diverse stakeholders is a complex yet essential process for resolving conflicts and fostering cooperation. To ensure effective and sustainable outcomes, several key strategies must be prioritized, including capacity building, a long-term approach, support from international organizations, and cultural sensitivity.

First and foremost, capacity building is essential in equipping stakeholders with the necessary skills to engage in constructive dialogue. Negotiation, mediation, and conflict-resolution training can empower individuals and groups to navigate disputes effectively. Workshops, simulations, and mentorship programs can help participants develop active listening skills, identify common ground, and create solutions that benefit all parties. Strengthening these abilities ensures that discussions remain productive and lead to meaningful agreements.

Promoting continuing collaboration between stakeholders is crucial to prevent disagreements from reoccurring and ensuring that agreed commitments are strictly adhered to. This process includes not only the disputing parties, but also mediators, nonprofit organisations, and the international politics that may aid in communication and give the required assistance. Maintaining communication accessible helps parties to discuss concerns before they develop into new conflict. Long-term peace measures ought to incorporate proactive approaches such as democratic government, social unification policies, and educational programs that foster cross-community discussion and understanding.

Beyond professional assistance, international organisations can give financial and logistical resources to help peacebuilding projects last over time. Many consensus-building strategies need long-term investments in infrastructure, education, and economic growth to address the underlying causes of conflict. By procuring financing and organising relief operations, these organisations help to guarantee that peace treaties are more than simply symbolic gestures and result in concrete changes in people's lives. Their presence also adds credibility to peace initiatives by ensuring parties that pledges will be kept and that violations of agreements will be handled. When international organisations act as peacekeepers, opposing parties are more likely to trust the process and continue to participate constructively.

Cultural understanding is critical for developing and conducting consensus-building strategies. Every dispute is moulded by its own historical, political, and social context, and disregarding these elements can result in ineffective or even detrimental remedies. Recognising and respecting local customs, religions, and social structures can help to increase acceptance of mediation methods. Working with municipal authorities to understand the complexities of cultural narratives can assist develop policies that benefit all parties involved.



To summarise, improving consensus-building efforts necessitates a multifaceted approach that incorporates skill development, long-term commitment, foreign help, and cultural awareness. By investing in such sectors, stakeholders may foster contact, mutual trust, and mutually beneficial agreements.

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