SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND

PRINCIPLES for PEACE

PRINCIPLES FOR PEACE: LOCAL INSIGHTS ON BUILDING LASTING PEACE

FROM AFGHANISTAN, THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC, MYANMAR, SIERRA LEONE, SYRIA, AND YEMEN

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MALLORY MATHESON, ABDUL QAHAR JAWAD, SAMANTHA LAKIN, MERANDA MA, AZZAM TOMEH, SEINT SEINT TUN, HAMA SIDI YACOUBA, AND KAUNG HLA ZAN

Participants discuss during consultations in Yemen.

About the Authors

Mallory Matheson is the Herbert Scoville Jr. Peace Fellow with Search for Common Ground, based in Washington, D.C., United States. Associate Professor **Abdul Qahar Jawad** is the Afghanistan Program Manager with Search for Common Ground, based in Kabul, Afghanistan. **Samantha Lakin** is an Independent Consultant with Search for Common Ground, based in Boston, Massachusetts, United States. **Meranda Ma** is the Global Policy Fellow with Search for Common Ground, based in Washington, D.C., United States. **Azzam Tomeh** is the Syria Analyst with Search for Common Ground, based in Beirut, Lebanon. **Seint Seint Tun** is an Independent Consultant with Search for Common Ground, based in Yangon, Myanmar. **Hama Sidi Yacouba** is a Design Monitoring and Evaluation (DME) Coordinator with Search for Common Ground, based in Bangui, Central African Republic. **Kaung Hla Zan** is an Independent Consultant with Search for Common Ground, based in Yangon, Myanmar.

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Cover Photo Credit: Consultation facilitator discusses with participants in a focus group discussion in Yemen.

About Search For Common Ground

Search for Common Ground (Search) is an international organization committed to conflict transformation. Since 1982, Search has led programs around the world to help societies transform the way they deal with confli ts, away from adversarial approaches and towards collaborative solutions. With 875 staff and 839 partners in 32 countries around the world, our in–person and media programs reach more than 39 million people each year. Using our Common Ground Approach, we work in many of the world's most difficult conflict environments, including situations of widespread violent conflict, to prevent and mitigate violence, empower local and national actors to build peace, and support reconciliation. We do this by supporting inclusive dialogue and dispute resolution processes, developing media programs that promote fact-based public information and tolerance, and strengthening collective and community actions that solve local challenges.

About Principles For Peace

This research was conducted as part of the Principles for Peace (P4P) initiative, which seeks to address flaws in current approaches to building lasting peace by coordinating a global collective effort to fundamentally reshape approaches to peace and establish new international principles for the successful development and implementation of peace processes. Principles were created using input from local people in conflict-affected countries and reviewed by board members states and actors in the UN in a Stakeholder Platform and the International Commission on Inclusive Peace (ICIP).

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List of Acronyms

CAR	Central African Republic
CPC	Coalition of Patriots for Change
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration
EAOs	Ethnic Armed Organizations
ETC	Emergency Telecommunications Cluster
EU	European Union
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FPRC	Popular Front for the Rebirth of Central African Republic
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
IRC	Inter-Religious Council
JMC	Joint Monitoring Committee
KII	Key Informant Interview
MINUSCA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
MONUSCO	United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCA	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
NDC	National Dialogue Conference
NPRC	National Provisional Ruling Council
P4P	Principles for Peace
R2P	The Responsibility to Protect
RUF	Revolutionary United Front
Search	Search for Common Ground
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UFDR	Union of Democratic Forces for Unity
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNAMSIL	United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone
UNSCRs	United Nations Security Council Resolutions
US	United States

Executive Summary

As the number of successful peace processes has decreased in recent decades, many peacebuilders are rethinking fundamental assumptions about what makes a peace process succeed or fail. Current models for international involvement in peace processes have suffered from three major flaws: they typically focus on negotiations to end violence at the expense of finding solutions to root causes of conflict; they rely on traditional, mandate-driven strategies to guide decisions; and they lack real inclusivity and local ownership. While there is broad consensus that inclusivity during peace processes is a prerequisite for sustainable positive peace,[1] peace processes in practice rarely include the stakeholders they need to reach.

In similar fashion to the development of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P),[2] the Principles for Peace (P4P) Initiative seeks to address these flaws by coordinating a global collective effort to fundamentally re-shape approaches to peace and establish new international ***principles*** for the successful development and implementation of peace processes. Driven by input from local people in conflict-affected countries, and reviewed by board members states and actors in the UN in a Stakeholder Platform and the International Commission on Inclusive Peace (ICIP), these principles will better enable local, national, and international actors to craft more inclusive approaches that result in lasting peace as *all* local stakeholders lead *all* steps toward peace. As part of this initiative, Search for Common Ground (Search) conducted a series of consultations with groups that have been generally excluded from recent, ongoing, and/or attempted peace processes in six countries-Afghanistan, the Central African Republic (CAR), Myanmar, Sierra Leone, Syria, and Yemen. This report details our findings and offers recommendations for international actors to support future peace processes.

Search country teams held 57 total consultation sessions, spanning online and in-person focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs), with 364 total participants between December 2020 and January 2021. In each country, team leads chose different groups who are critical stakeholders in that context, but have not been deeply engaged in peace processes. Participants reflected on:

- What peace looks like in the local context
- Challenges and obstacles to peace
- What peace should deliver
- Recommendations to realize peace

Based on these consultations, we have identified four principles that should guide international actors as they support the creation and implementation of inclusive, effective, and sustainable peace processes:

1 United States Institute of Peace. "Inclusive Peace Processes Are Key to Ending Violent Conflict." 5 May 2017. Web. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/05/inclusive-peace-processes-are-key-ending-violent-conflict>

2 The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) is an international norm that seeks to ensure that the international community never again fails to halt the mass atrocity crimes of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. The International Committee on Intervention and State Sovereignty developed the concept of R2P during 2001, which was unanimously adopted in 2005 at the UN World Summit. (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. "What is R2P?" Web. <https://www.globalr2p.org/what-is-r2p/>)

- **Principle I: The international community should ensure inclusivity and fair representation of conflict-affected groups, civil society, and ordinary people in formal peace negotiations.** Inclusive representation at the national level allows all groups affected by conflict conditions to jointly determine the future of their country, thus increasing the likelihood of achieving enduring peace as all grievances and hopes for peace are taken into account.
- **Principle II: The international community should cultivate positive peace by committing to invest in sustainable peacebuilding work in the long-term as desired by local populations.** Because achieving positive peace is a long-term process that aims to end structural violence by creating conditions necessary for peaceful societies, building positive peace requires a sustained commitment to social cohesion and development in order to fully address root causes of conflict.
- **Principle III: The international community should support efforts to build social peace at all levels of society, rather than focusing predominantly on achieving political peace.** As political peace can often seem removed from peoples' daily lives, building social peace in tandem with political peace offers a way to address community-level drivers of conflict that people experience in their everyday lives and that often scale up to the national level.
- **Principle IV: The international community should center their involvement around the leadership and needs of local peacebuilders and peace architecture at all levels of the peace process.** Locally led and owned peacebuilding is both ethical and effective. International actors should place an emphasis on human security rather than solely focusing on national security, and partner with local people, who know their conflict context best, in order to create and carry out effective peacebuilding initiatives.

Key Similarities and Differences:

- **Participants' conceptualizations of inclusion vary by conflict context.** Concepts of inclusion depend on the types of root causes of a conflict, national history, country demographics, societal power structures, parties to conflict, and individuals' intersecting identities among other factors.
- **Participants from certain countries reflected on what their populations need to learn from past peace processes, while others focused on what peace means going forward.** Depending on their countries' stage in peace processes, some participants analyzed key points of weakness that undermined past peace agreements and described what their nations should do going forward to make a current or forthcoming peace process successful, while others focused on imagining a new foundation for what peace can deliver both in the short-term and long-term.
- **Participants agree that peace comprises more than a political result, but hold nuanced views on what both political peace and social peace entail.** Common themes among countries included non-corrupt government and good governance, youth political participation, women's political participation, transitional justice and rule of law, social cohesion, employment, civil rights, education, development, and peaceful lives.
- **Participants expressed widely varying degrees of openness to international involvement of any form in their countries' peace processes.** Based on many factors, such as their countries' past experience with international actors, participants' views ranged from supportive of to indifferent about to against international involvement in formal peace negotiations and implementation of peace processes in their countries.

Methodology

Consultations occurred between December 2020 and January 2021. Tailoring methodology to local contexts, our Afghanistan and Myanmar teams held online FGDs while our CAR, Syria, and Yemen teams conducted in-person FGDs and KIIs, and our Sierra Leone team held FGDs and KIIs with a blended in-person and virtual format as a consultation facilitator virtually attended the in-person consultations. Total participants surveyed ranged from 32 to 95 people in each country. Team leads in each country chose participants by asking the question: "Who are the groups in this context that can influence the success or failure of a peace process, but are typically not invited to participate?" We organized consultations in various areas of each country to capture differences in views across regions, including gathering the perspectives of people living within and outside areas of government control. Teams also took care to ensure diversity in gender, religion, ethnicity, age, professional background, and political affiliation All teams took robust measures to ensure the privacy and confidentiali y of participants when requested, obtained consent while explaining the P4P initiative prior to beginning consultations, and relied on note-takers and facilitators to capture the data while conducting the workshops.

Facilitators grouped inquiry questions into four categories:

What peace looks like in the local context

- How do you define and onceptualize peace?
- What has contributed to peace – what has worked?
- What are the practices and elements that create foundations for lasting peace?

Challenges and obstacles to peace

- What are the current challenges facing your community?
- What are the flaws in current approaches y international actors and what could be done better?

What peace should deliver

- What are your hopes and aspirations for the future?
- Who is involved, and how, in realizing peace?
- What should a peaceful society deliver for you, personally?

Recommendations to realize peace

- What expectations and demands are there for any particular actors?
- What would you or your organization/community need to make your vision of peace successful?

Country teams faced extensive challenges throughout consultations:

- Several country teams relied on virtual discussions due to insecurity in various parts of their countries that hindered travel, health risks associated with COVID-19, and geographic distance between participant

groups. In some cases, they experienced connectivity issues in places with limited access to internet or telecommunications infrastructure.

- In Afghanistan, bomb blasts across the country – including in Kabul, Kandahar, Nangarhar, Balkh, Baghlan, and Khost – occurred throughout December and January.

- In the Central African Republic, one set of consultations originally planned to be held in Bangassou relocated to Bimbo when Bangassou fell to the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) rebels.

- In Yemen, some participants in Ansar Allah-held Northern areas gave somewhat vague responses to inquiry questions given their fear that certain answers would expose their political and social affiliations which could spark violence against them and their families if personal data was released to their employers or security forces. Three registered participants withdrew from the study due to related fears.

- Several teams noted that all inquiry questions could not be asked directly due to time constraints on consultations, but the vast majority were addressed regardless given the overlap between information relevant to many questions.

These obstacles testify both to the tenacity of our country teams in completing the consultations in highly insecure environments and to the timeliness of this study as conflict rages and peace remains elusive in these countries, further indicating the urgent need to reexamine approaches to pursuing peace inclusively, effectively, and sustainably.

Search staff in all countries but Sierra Leone identified and spoke with key constituencies who are underrepresented in peace processes, while our Sierra Leone team spoke with people involved in creating the 1999 Lomé Peace Agreement. We held 57 total consultation sessions (29 FGDs and 28 KIIs) with 364 total participants. The case studies in the following sections explain in detail why these groups were chosen.

- Our Afghanistan team spoke with university students and professors.

- Our Central African Republic team interviewed women; youth; mayors and municipal authorities; members of Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees, which are ad-hoc structures set up in various parts of the country to manage in the context of the state collapse; representatives of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA); media managers and talk-show hosts; religious leaders; and traditional leaders, including neighborhood and village chiefs.

- Our Myanmar team met with key youth leaders and members of “minorities within minorities” groups, or “double minority” groups, which consist of people living in a province where they are a minority group and the province is itself a minority within national demographics (for example, the Rohingya in Rakhine state or the Naga).

- Our Sierra Leone team interviewed key political leaders involved in negotiating and implementing the Lomé Peace Agreement, civil society actors involved in its implementation, and youth.

- Our Syria team spoke with women, civil society leaders, teachers, youth, labor syndicates, local council representatives, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and Arab Kurds, Muslims, and Christians.

- Our Yemen team interviewed members of tribes and interest groups underrepresented in the peace process (including the al-Muhamasheen), women, youth, representatives of private sector industries, civil society representatives, media producers, university professors, and representatives of political parties.

Table 1: *Search Consultation Details by Country*

Country	City	FGD/KII	Participants (M/F)	Language	Key Groups
Afghanistan	Mazar-i-Sharif (Balkh University)	FGD	10 (6/4)	Persian	University youth and professors
	Faizabad (Badakhshan University)	FGD	10 (6/4)	Persian	University youth and professors
	Puli Khumri (Baghlan University)	FGD	10 (5/5)	Persian	University youth and professors
	Herat (Herat University)	FGD	10 (4/6)	Persian	University youth and professors
	Kabul (Kabul University)	FGD	10 (3/7)	Persian	University youth and professors
	Kabul (Kateb University)	FGD	9 (7/2)	Persian	University youth and professors
	Kandahar (Kandahar University)	FGD	10 (4/6)	Pashto	University youth and professors
	Khost (Khost/ Shaikh Zayed University)	FGD	8 (7/1)	Pashto	University youth and professors
	Laghman (Laghman University)	FGD	9 (9/0)	Pashto	University youth and professors
	Jalalabad (Nangarhar University)	FGD	9 (9/0)	Pashto	University youth and professors
CAR	Bangui	FGD	20 (10/10)	Sango	Journalists, community members, and members of Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees

	Ndélé	FGD	20 (7/10)	Sango	Community members and members of Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees
	Bimbo	FGD	20 (10/10)	Sango	Community members and members of Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees
Myanmar	Yangon Region, Chin State, Mon State, Dawei City, Kayin State, Shan State (virtual)	FGD (3)	36 (21/15)	Burmese	Youth activists, peace workers, NGO workers, faith groups, teachers/educators, community mobilizers
	Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Shan, and Rakhine	FGD	15 (7/8)	English	Members of "minorities within minorities" groups
Sierra Leone	Freetown	FGD	6 (5/1)	English	Pastor, Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) member, civil society representative, youth
	Freetown	FGD	6 (4/2)	English	Pastor, parliament clerk, member of the Inter-Religious Council (IRC), youth, imam
	Freetown	FGD	10 (7/3)	English	Media producers, civil society actor, youth, former government minister/TRC member
	Freetown, Goderich, Hastings, Leicester, and Gloucester	KIIs (10)	10 (9/1)	English	University professor, member of parliament, colonel in Sierra Leonean army, Lomé civil society delegation chair, civil society actor, government minister, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sierra Leone representing the rebel group Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Lomé, Non-State Actor representative in Lomé, member of IRC, media producer
Syria	Azaz	FGD	10 (5/5)	Arabic	Civil society actors, media producers, local council members, IDPs
	Azaz	FGD	13 (7/6)	Arabic	Civil society actors, media producers, local council members, teachers

	Hasakah	FGD	10 (5/5)	Arabic	Civil society actors, media producers, local council members
	Hasakah	FGD	10 (4/6)	Arabic	Arab Kurds, Muslims, and Christians; civil society actors; media producers; local activists
Yemen	Taiz	FGD	12 (7/5)	Arabic	Civil society representatives, human rights activists, journalists and Media producers, and youth
	Taiz	FGD	9 (9/0)	Arabic	Civil society representatives, human rights activists, representatives of the Yemeni Socialist Party, and representative of Renaissance Movement Party
	Taiz	KIIs (2)	2 (2/0)	Arabic	University professor and social worker
	Aden	FGD	18 (6/12)	Arabic	Civil society representatives, human rights activists, media producers, youth, Al-Muhamasheen representatives, and representatives of Southern Movement and Southern Transitional Council (STC)
	Aden	FGD	22 (13/9)	Arabic	Civil society representatives, human rights activists, pedagogues, private sector representatives, youth, Al-Muhamasheen representatives, and representatives of Southern Movement and Southern Transitional Council (STC)
	Sana'a	FGD	4 (4/0)	Arabic	Media professionals, university professor, academic researcher, writer and political analyst
	Sana'a	KIIs (16)	16 (13/3)	Arabic	Media producers and journalists, peace activists, university professors, human rights activists, pedagogues, private sector representatives

Findings

Principles

From our consultations, four principles emerged concerning what international actors can do to better support the creation and implementation of inclusive, effective, and sustainable peace processes. While these principles apply across all national contexts and confli ts, all participants underscored the importance of designing tools and approaches specifically for each national and local context and conflict rather than approaching all confli ts with the same set of ideas. Without taking advantage of conflict-specific approaches and tools, attempts to achieve lasting peace will not be effective. Accordingly, participants provided specific recommendations regarding the application of these principles within their local contexts. The international community should:

I. Ensure inclusivity and fair representation of conflict-affected groups, civil society, and ordinary people in formal peace negotiations.

Inclusive representation at the national level allows all groups affected by conflict conditions to jointly determine the future of their country. As conflict affects different groups in different ways, each stakeholder group has distinct contributions gleaned from their lived experiences and identities that are important in determining how to construct and implement a successful peace process. Inclusivity facilitates enduring peace as all grievances and hopes are addressed during a kairotic, publicly visual moment that both signals a commitment to and lays a concrete foundation for social change.

- In **Afghanistan**, international actors should push for more women, people directly affected by conflict, civil society leaders, and even university professors to be added to the negotiation teams.

- In the **Central African Republic**, where people did not see how they fit into the 2019 Khartoum agreement, international actors should prioritize the involvement of youth and other key stakeholders.

- In **Myanmar**, international actors should promote the representation of women, youth, and double minorities in the formal peace process. As one participant noted:

> *"Minorities can be because of ethnicity, gender, political inclusion, [and other identities], so we need to be mindful about what context we are talking about. We need to include minorities [...] But when we do this, there is not an answer yet. We need to think about how to let the people from the ground lead the process."*

- In **Yemen**, international actors should help to facilitate a Yemeni-Yemeni dialogue, negotiation, and reconciliation process without regional countries' involvement to establish a space for internal parties

to discuss peace without regional interference, prioritizing the involvement of groups most affected by conflict, civil society leaders, women, and youth.

II. Cultivate positive peace by committing to invest in sustainable peacebuilding work in the long-term as desired by local populations.

Positive peace comprises the attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies. Accordingly, achieving positive peace is a long-term process that defines and pursues the goals towards which systems need to evolve to end structural violence and facilitate peaceful living.[3] Building positive peace requires a sustained commitment to social cohesion and development. International actors must invest in peacebuilding efforts over the long-term in order to fully address root causes of conflict and resolve the grievances that led to violent conflict, which – if wholly resolved – will ideally prevent, or at least strongly mitigate the likelihood of, resurgent violence in the future. Peace agreements that are not followed up with efforts to create positive peace risk resurgent conflict to various degrees.

While international involvement is often useful in the short-term, relying too heavily on international partners once their involvement is no longer necessary can create long-term side effects that hinder internal progress and domestic changes that must take place in order to achieve sustainable peace. International actors should take care to focus their support on locally led peacebuilding work in order to facilitate sustainable change; avoid creating long-term overreliance on international assistance that would hamper nationally-owned economic, social, and political development; and leverage the leadership and insights of local peacebuilders.

- The Lomé peace process in **Sierra Leone** highlights the importance and difficulties of negotiating provisions for positive peace in peace agreements. Some respondents consider the Lomé Peace Agreement to have been rushed to end nonstop violence, noting that it focused predominantly on negative peace at the expense of positive peace because, as a civil society representative to the Lomé negotiations explained, *"the [rebel group Revolutionary United Front (RUF)] position was surprisingly very strong, [and] the government position was very weak at the time."* A former diplomat noted:

> *"People were war-tired – nearly everybody wanted peace. [There was] a lot of destruction [and] a lot of atrocities committed in the war, [so] people really just wanted peace."*

Accordingly, they explained that the public is experiencing the same drivers of conflict today that sparked the 1991 civil war:

> *"Many people have not learned any lessons. Some of the things that led to the war are still in place- either they have forgotten or are just still engaging in these practices, [such as] corruption and injustice," "national disunity and lack of political tolerance."*

3 Institute for Economics & Peace. *Positive Peace Report 2019: Analysing the Factors that Sustain Peace*. October 2019. <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/PPR-2019-web.pdf>

Several participants expressed concerns of resurgent conflict in coming years unless the public realizes the parallels between the 1980s-90s and today and begins to substantively address these issues. A former negotiator for the RUF in the Lomé peace process shared: *"I see the potential of disturbing the peace we worked hard to maintain. [...] You can see simmering disaffection. Nobody can pretend we haven't seen violence erupt in various parts of the country."*

- Participants from **Afghanistan** similarly described the complexity of negotiating for positive peace. While one respondent said that *"Afghans are not after a negative peace. The efforts should be centered on positive and sustainable peace,"* many others did not consider this feasible. One participant noted that *"people are so hopeless and they think that peace will never come in our region (Paktika)."* Another remarked:

> *"Indeed, that is too far from our people to have peace in that high standard in which we would have equality and freedom and good life conditions, but we are also satisfied by having the least of peace like lack of war and having safety."*

III. Support efforts to build social peace at all levels of society, rather than focusing predominantly on achieving political peace.

In many countries, achieving political peace has often been prioritized over social peace. Political peace focuses on establishing just, nonviolent, inclusive, and transparent procedures and structures for making and implementing policy decisions in government, while social peace entails creating and maintaining relationships between groups that prioritize human dignity, nonviolence, cooperation, trust, and equality to ensure peaceful coexistence.[4] Building social peace involves addressing community-level drivers of conflict, such as unemployment and ethnic discrimination, that often scale up to the national level. Accordingly, this facilitates enduring peace by allowing the tailoring of peacebuilding efforts to both specific communities and root causes of conflict. As social peace (and the lack thereof) is often what people experience most closely in their everyday lives, whereas political peace often seems farther removed and confined to newspaper headlines, individuals and communities will not see the relevance of political peace in their daily lives unless peace processes also address aspects of social peace.

- In **Afghanistan** and the **Central African Republic,** where political peace has been prioritized over social peace in past and current peace attempts, international actors should advocate for the inclusion of provisions in formal peace agreements that address key drivers of conflict that undermine social peace. International actors should also support programming initiatives by local civil society actors, such as media campaigns, that seek to promote social peace. A respondent in Afghanistan remarked:

> *"Political peace alone is not enough. Political peace is not lasting without peace in the lower strata of society. We must start peace from the lower strata of society and then reach political peace."*

4 National Academy of Peace. "Five Spheres of Peace." 2020. Web. <https://nationalpeaceacademy.us/about-us/5-spheres-of-peace>

- In **Myanmar**, one participant noted:

> *"When we talk about the national peace process, we need to think about how we will address peace on the ground in each state and region. [Political leaders are] currently just thinking about it at the national level, which is not enough and is not fair for the people on the ground who are suffering the effects of violent conflict "*

IV. Center their involvement around the leadership and needs of local peacebuilders and peace architecture at all levels of the peace process.

This principle is important to ensuring inclusive, effective peace for two key reasons: ethics and effectiveness. First, locally led and owned peacebuilding is ethical. Many participants noted that even well-intentioned international actors pursue their own interests when promoting peace in another country. International governments should not allow traditional discourses on pursuing their own national security objectives to overwhelm the concept and aim of ensuring human security when engaging in peacebuilding. It is of paramount importance to keep the focus on ensuring the security of *people*, as all levels of security – individuals, families, communities, regional, national, and international – are made up of people, remain inextricably interconnected, and are vital to address in complex violent confli ts to ensure lasting peace. Second, locally led and owned peacebuilding is effective. Local people know the context of their countries and communities better than any outside actor, including its history, key drivers of conflict, cultural nuances, and what has and has not worked to build peace. They have access to robust networks of people conducting groundbreaking peacebuilding work, and know how to build on these existing networks, the strengths of their country and communities, and the synergies across conflict-affected groups to advance peace and prevent future violence.

- In **Sierra Leone**, a founding member of the Inter-Religious Council (IRC) shared his experience with these practices during the Lomé peace process:

> *"We needed people to understand the society and our situation. [International actors] are not on the ground, they do not speak our language, they do not understand us, and yet they report incorrect information. We are on the ground, we know what is happening and we get positive responses when we present our own views without ego, presenting the facts of our experience. That was the turning point. Reporters come, talk to two or three people, [and] then they go with their own views of what is happening. It's not right, you must listen to the people on the ground and who have an interest and responsibility to move their nation forward –not those who come in search of information they cannot confirm That, for us, was a success."*

- In **Afghanistan**, for example, international actors should assist in strengthening local conflict resolution mechanisms, such as jirgas, or people's councils, which operate in villages and districts to resolve disputes between individuals, families, and tribes; support justice; and analyze drivers of conflict in

their communities. Jirgas should focus on improving representation, encouraging meaningful conflict transformation, and sharing conflict analysis and mitigation planning with provincial and high peace councils.

- In the **Central African Republic**, international actors should engage with Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees, traditional and religious leaders, women, and young people to support their existing groundbreaking work, design new initiatives that are better suited to their needs, and offer more opportunities to lead peace efforts to advance their contributions.

- In **Syria**, international actors have the power not only to engage with government officials at the governorate and national levels, but also to work with civil society organizations, vulnerable populations, and marginalized communities at the local levels. Accordingly, they should collaborate with policymakers, civil society organizations, women and youth, refugees and IDPs, and religious leaders. This would broaden their scope to maximize influence and move the needle toward peace.

Peace Across Conflicts: Similarities and Differences

While participants expressed several divergent conceptualizations of peace across countries, many broader, shared concepts surfaced about what peace means in their local contexts, what peace should deliver, and who is involved and how. Context-specific nuances among these generalizations provide rich insights useful to international actors seeking to understand local perceptions of peace, how to promote inclusive peacebuilding, and how conceptualizations of peace worldwide relate to each other, as many of these items can be considered "benchmarks of peace" that communities use to identify when a peace process is over and when lasting peace has been achieved. As we did not use representative samples for this study, these results may not represent what the majority of the population of each country believes. Further, it is important to note which groups bring up certain topics in order to understand how they see themselves fi ting into the peace process. Accordingly, the following four items capture the connections and discrepancies between distinct perspectives of groups in all countries surveyed which are influential in local se tings and important to the success of a peace agreement, but remain excluded from or underrepresented in peace processes. These nuances are detailed further in the following case studies.

I. Participants' conceptualizations of inclusion vary by conflict context.

Concepts of inclusion typically depend on the types of root causes of a conflict, national history, country demographics, societal power structures, parties to conflict, and individuals' intersecting identities among other factors.

- In **Myanmar**, participants differentiated between marginalized groups that ideally should be involved in the peace process to advance inclusivity, such as youth, and groups who must be included in order for peace to be successful, such as "minorities within minorities." As youth account for nearly one third

of the population, they represent a new generation inheriting the task of creating peace in the country. Their ability to connect to different ethnic groups, and their peacebuilding work with civil society organizations and youth networks, mark them as key actors in the peace process. However, the top-down formal peace process remains driven by elite actors, leaving limited opportunities for youth to directly participate and leading to further marginalization as informal participation with civil society does not feed into the formal peace process. "Minorities within minorities" consist of people living in a province where they are a minority group and the province is itself a minority within national demographics (for example, the Rohingya in Rakhine state or the Naga). Such groups include not only people of minority ethnicities, but also other minority and marginalized groups across religion, gender, language, the LGBQ+ community, disability community, and other identities. As these groups face much discrimination, participants noted the need to *"bring them into the narrative and address their grievances"* or risk the collapse of basic rights for countless minority groups. One respondent noted:

> *"[People in majority groups] might not know that a minority group is suffering because [they] have privilege [...] [Some] feel threatened by [minority] groups, [fearing] that their privilege at some point will be lessened somehow."*

- In **Afghanistan**, the inclusion of women remains central to the peace process due to its political context, as the Taliban have historically oppressed women and stripped them of their rights. Accordingly, participants voiced the need to include more women in the formal negotiations beyond the current *"symbolic contribution of women"* to ensure that their concerns and demands would be refle ted throughout the negotiating process and in the potential future peace agreement. One respondent from Herat said: *"Creating mutual understanding among all the people of Afghanistan and respecting each other's values is critical for achieving peace. Respect for women's rights is one of the most important issues."* Respondents also identified youth as a key stakeholder group given the country's large youth population and their integral peacebuilding work in their communities, enabling them to lead the pursuit of intergenerational peace in the years to come. As youth remain sociopolitically and socioeconomically marginalized, participants called for politicians to *"allow the young force to emerge to use their youthful strength and build this country."*

- In the **Central African Republic**, traditional and religious leaders have tremendous support from communities and are able to *"contain the anger of their followers"* by offering advice, raising awareness of peace, and holding dialogues with communities to spark forgiveness and reconciliation. Including these leaders in peace processes offers direct access to communities and partners in implementation efforts. Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees-which are ad-hoc structures set up by the Minister of Social Affairs and National Reconciliation in 2016 throughout the country to manage in the context of the state collapse-offer access to networks of peacebuilders and expertise on local peacebuilding initiatives nationwide. Respondents recommended that international actors collaborate with Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees for their resources and knowledge.

II. Participants from certain countries reflected on what their populations need to learn from past peace processes, while others focused on what peace means going forward.

While participants in all countries discussed their hopes for the future, some additionally drew upon their country's past attempted peace processes to provide lessons for future peace agreements. These participants analyzed key points of weakness that undermined these endeavors and described what their nations should do going forward to make a forthcoming or current peace process successful. Other participants focused on imagining a new foundation for what peace can deliver both in the short-term and the long-term for future generations.

Looking Back

- In **Sierra Leone**, several participants noted that because the Lomé Agreement focused predominantly on negative peace, the undesirable social, political, and economic conditions that led to the war continue today. Fearing resurgent violent conflict, a media producer and member of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) explained their views, respectively:

> *"Many people have not read the report of the TRC, particularly the chapter on 'Historical Antecedents to the Conflict' The political class does not seem to have learned the lessons-they are doing the same things as before the war."*

> *"Many students [have] only read about the crimes. They did not experience the war. I encourage them to [read] the report of the TRC, [which is an] impartial historical record [...] Students should also come to visit the [Sierra Leone] Peace Museum. [This will help them] appreciate what it means to keep the peace [and gain] a deeper understanding of the causes of the war."*

- In **Yemen**, participants identified many past peace agreements that either contributed temporarily to peace or had not succeeded. They recommended that the government draw on and implement several of these settlements, including the 2014 National Dialogue Conference Outcomes Document, 2016 Kuwait Agreement, 2018 Stockholm Agreement, and 2020 Riyadh Agreement, in future peace processes to build on what has already worked temporarily in the past.

- In the **Central African Republic**, participants explained that *"people couldn't find themselves within the [2019 Khartoum] agreement,"* or, in other words, that they could not see where or how they fit into the deal. The agreement focused on the political process of building peace, including negotiating for a ceasefire and dealing with armed groups, but neglected to address the need to build social peace by not taking seriously most of the public's demands. Accordingly, respondents advocated that the government include key groups, including traditional and religious leaders, youth and women, and members of Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees, in forthcoming peace processes to ensure a successful settlement.

- In **Afghanistan**, one university professor suggested looking to other countries' models of *"institutionalizing peace"* to apply what might work from these systems to the Afghan context. He described the Indonesian model of a pluralized system rather than a purely Islamic ideological system, which remains important to keep in mind as the secular Afghan government and Islamic Taliban deal with merging two ideologies into a unified form of government. He also brought up the European bottom-up model of building peace:

> *"Peace from the top down means a dialogue between politicians and the upper echelons, and if these politicians do not agree, it will make peace fragile. We must reach the European model of bottom-up peace. All citizens should see the context and the mirror of the society, mutual acceptance should be promoted in the society and we should all think trans-ethnic and trans-regional."*

Looking Ahead

- In **Myanmar**, instead of focusing on past attempts at peace, participants focused on determining what is essential to drive peace forward by comprehensively identifying the various challenges of the present political situation and accompanying solutions. For example, two long-term foundations of peace included ethnic, religious, and political tolerance and a federal nation.

- In **Sierra Leone**, participants not only emphasized the importance of learning from the successes and failures of the Lomé peace process, but also focused on ways to build positive peace going forward nearly two decades after the war. Two students noted the difference between the Sierra Leonean post-war context and other countries' active-conflict contexts:

> *"In Sudan, they would say 'I want the gun to be silenced.' Here in Sierra Leone, I want good governance, I want [...] a broader perspective [of peace]."*

> *"[When] I look to places like Syria or Yemen, peace would mean an end to violence. But here in Sierra Leone, peace has to do with issues of social justice, human rights, employment, structural violence, systematic HR violations, issues of leadership and bad governance."*

III. Participants agree that peace comprises more than a political result, but hold nuanced views on what both political peace and social peace entail.

Common themes among countries included non-corrupt government and good governance, youth political participation, women's political participation, transitional justice and rule of law, social cohesion, employment, civil rights, education, development, and peaceful lives. However, each topic means something different in each country.

- In **Myanmar**, good governance entails creating a federal state that offers local authorities more autonomy, while in **Afghanistan**, good governance entails a more powerful, centralized government that protects itself against political capture by self-interested elites and resulting disunity. One participant remarked: *"We all admit that we don't have a strong, independent government. If we had a powerful government, it could assist in the establishment of security or it could stop the foreign interference."* In **Sierra Leone**, participants noted that an independent judiciary and police remain an essential component of a non-corrupt government, as the executive branch currently holds unjustified influence over the judiciary.

- In **Afghanistan**, social cohesion centers upon *"mutual acceptance and elimination of ethnic, linguistic and regional discrimination,"* which participants describe as *"the key to achieving lasting peace."* In the **Central African Republic**, participants referred to the *"normalization of cohabitation"* between ethnic communities as evidenced by a willingness to collaborate without mistrust and even simply to greet members of other groups. In **Syria**, participants took a broader view of social cohesion as they framed peace and social cohesion as achieving *"social justice"* and *"equality"* throughout both communities and institutions for women, youth, ethnic groups, religious groups, and people in lower socioeconomic classes.

IV. Participants expressed widely varying degrees of openness to international involvement of any form in their countries' peace processes.

Participants' views are based in part on their countries' past experience with international actors in peace processes, the interest of the international community in their countries, and the stage of their countries in ending violent conflict and achieving peace. Perspectives ranged from supportive of to indifferent about to against international involvement in formal peace negotiations and implementation of peace agreements in their countries.

- In **Sierra Leone**, participants considered the international community to be less relevant in the country now than it was two decades ago during a nascent peace. While the country hosted the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) until 2006-four years after the war ended – Sierra Leoneans did not rely on international actors following the Lomé peace process, hosting peaceful elections without foreign interference. Respondents attributed this success to a strong government with a legitimate political commitment to peace. On the other hand, some participants noted that the previous Abidjan and Abuja peace attempts failed due to a lack of moral guarantors of the peace process, such as the United Nations (UN) or regional organizations who supported peace. Accordingly, participants noted that countries often benefit the most from international support during and immediately after negotiations, but international involvement should be phased out of a country following negotiations to make rebuilding locally owned.

- In **Myanmar**, most participants did not mention international actors unless prompted. Even then, they would quickly move on to discuss other parties to the peace process. With little involvement of outside governments or multilateral institutions in past peace negotiations and attempts, local communities either remain unaware of the potential role of the international community in peace processes or think it cannot help, as they have not seen any international actors play a large role in the peace process. Further, donors and INGOs typically seek to work with the government when creating programming in Myanmar, which harms trust-building between the international community and the public in certain conflict-affected areas given the tensions between the government and these groups.

- In **Afghanistan**, participants largely welcomed international support in the peace negotiations. They expressed a desire for the international community to play a larger diplomatic role in ending regional interference in the country by encouraging neighboring countries in the region to support the peace process. Some recommended that the United States (US) and UN take a more significant oversight role in ensuring that the formal peace agreement is implemented once signed. Some participants believe that their perceived legitimacy could uphold the progression of the talks and peace – unlike during the 1992 overthrow of the government when the US and UN were not substantively involved – noting:

> *"Afghans want guarantors who are reliable for the peace process. These guarantors could be major countries or reputable organizations."*

  Participants also recommended that the US provide more support to the Afghan government during negotiations, while the US and UN should ensure that transitional justice initiatives are both included in the peace agreement and implemented.

- In **Syria,** respondents focused more so than those in other countries on the downsides of extended international involvement in peace processes, as the considerable amount of international engagement in Syria has both promoted peace and hampered its progress. For example, Resolution 2254 provides a framework for peace processes throughout the country, but participants expressed frustration at its delayed implementation. Many of the challenges and crises this resolution sought to address continue unabated. One civil society leader from Azaz believes that *"there is no real international will for change,"* while another civil society representative from Hasakah remarked:

> *"As civil society actors, we are forced to rely on [international actors], especially in terms of support, funding and sustainability at work. [...] They do not take the needs of society into consideration and always try to impose their own agendas that do not often meet the needs of the region and its citizens."*

- In **Yemen**, respondents heavily emphasized the need for international involvement while also noting its many flaws in the country. Participants pointed out that lack of oversight over the implementation of local, regional, and international peace agreements – such as the 2016 Kuwait Agreement, Geneva Consultations, and various UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs)-undermined their effectiveness

and allowed the war to continue. Accordingly, some participants recommended that international actors should enforce stricter monitoring systems for the implementation of local, regional and international agreements. Additionally, participants advocated for increased international pressure on the conflict parties and their supporters to stop the war and begin an unconditional dialogue process. Some called for assistance from the UN, European Union (EU), or a country that has not previously supported any of the conflict parties, such as Kuwait, to conduct a Yemeni-Yemeni dialogue, negotiation, and reconciliation process without regional countries' involvement. Others believe that a comprehensive, UN-supervised DDR process for armed groups to give weapons to the new government, who was sworn in during December 2020, will be effective. Several participants recommended that international actors impose sanctions against any local, regional, or international parties obstructing the peace process, while others discussed the importance of international support to local community peacebuilding initiatives.

Case Studies and Recommendations

Afghanistan

Country Context

Since the 1978 Saur Revolution, Afghanistan has suffered enormous loss of life due to the Soviet-Afghan War and American invasion, as well as the twelve-year Afghan Civil War. The Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 set off a nine-year-long war with insurgent groups, known collectively as the mujahideen, fighting against the Soviet Army and the government. The final S viet troop withdrawal in 1989 preceded the beginning of a twelve-year-long, multi-stage civil war, first as a continuation of fighting between rebel groups and the Afghan government, and then as infighting bet een competing mujahideen factions, each supported by Pakistan, Iran, or Saudi Arabia, who were all seeking to gain influence in Afghanistan. This phase ended in 1996 when the Pakistan-backed Taliban took control of Kabul and the central government. Following 9/11, the US sent military forces into the country and removed the Taliban from power in December of 2001, maintaining a sizable military and diplomatic presence in the country afterward. While the Afghan government retains official ontrol of the country, the Taliban controls territory containing approximately 46% of Afghanistan's population, with most of its strongholds in the south of the country.

Since October 2018, the US has held six rounds of discussions with Taliban leadership in order to set the stage for intra-Afghan peace talks centering on territory, human rights, and foreign intervention. In February 2020, the US and the Taliban signed a conditional peace deal, which stipulates that the US will draw down its military forces to 8,500 troops within 135 days and fully withdraw from Afghanistan by May 2021 so long as the Taliban prevents territory under their control from being used by terrorist groups and begins genuine peace negotiations with the Afghan government. Many Afghans and non-Afghans believe that a quick drawdown of US troops would put Afghanistan at risk for a full-scale civil war that the government is ill-equipped to fight. The first official peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban began on September 12, 2020, but have seen fluctuating progress since as the Taliban continues to fight against the government, killing countless Afghans. Negotiations remain stalled as of early March 2021, but the government has expressed willingness to discuss holding new elections in an attempt to push forward the peace talks.

Consultation Groups

Search conducted ten FGDs with university students and professors across the country to better understand how international actors can approach peacebuilding in Afghanistan. Youth perspectives are especially important to understand and prioritize in the Afghan peace process. As approximately 63% of the population is under the age of 25, young people represent the vast majority of the population and remain key to building a strong intergenerational peace. However, youth remain sociopolitically and socioeconomically marginalized in their communities and lack forums to make their thoughts about the peace process heard. Accordingly, this study sought to provide them with a space to be heard. Further,

as youth are very open to discussing these issues and intimately know the ongoing realities and situation in Afghanistan, this study allows young people's expertise to reach international actors seeking to change their approach in the country.

Participants represented a diverse background across ethnicity, gender, geography, education, and language. All respondents chosen are very active in peacebuilding activities at the university level, where they often participate in peace clubs that host guest speakers to talk about their peacebuilding work, provide capacity trainings for youth interested in learning more about peacebuilding, hold debates among university students on various issues facing the country today, and conduct campaigns to promote awareness of and support for peace. They are also very involved in peacebuilding activities through their leadership with NGOs and civil society organizations, businesses, and other forms for political engagement in their communities. For example, one participant in the Balkh FGD leads several NGOs in the North, two respondents in Herat are directors of research organizations, and several participants in Khost are businesspeople involved in peacebuilding activities. In Nangarhar and Laghman, respondents included several peace activists, and in Kabul, one participant is the Media and Communications Advisor for Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, who chairs the High Council for National Reconciliation.

Challenges to Peace

Afghan participants analyzed many challenges impeding the progression of peace. Severe obstacles include:

Political Issues

- **Corrupt government actors:** Many participants noted that politicians pursue their own personal and political motives at the expense of those of the nation and the Afghan population. This lack of unity has weakened the government, limiting its effectiveness when attempting to negotiate peace with the Taliban as many politicians refuse to sacrifice their personal motives in pursuit of an agreement. Accordingly, one respondent considered peace to be *"a political behavior [...] in the hands of a group of incomprehensible politicians,"* noting the wider population's lack of trust in government. Respondents noted a need for politicians to reach an agreement among themselves concerning their approach to the Taliban to optimize chances of creating a successful agreement.

- **Lack of inclusivity in formal peace negotiations:** Many participants noted that negotiators from both the Taliban and government *"are not the real representatives of the people."* Because the negotiators have not experienced the conflict and *"felt the pain"* firsthand in the ways that ordinary people have, numerous Afghans believe that they *"don't know the true meaning of peace"* and will not be able to reach an agreement that addresses the vast majority of the population's desires for peace. As one participant noted:

> *"Authority should be given to those who really like the country rather than political players. Those who have felt the pain can comparatively bring peace easier and sooner. [...] The interlocutors should be picked from among the people who have really felt the pain."*

- **Lack of women's rights and liberties, and symbolic representation in negotiations:** Given the Taliban's history of suppressing women's rights, participants fear that if the Taliban gains power, they will *"impose restrictions on women and close educational institutions."* Respondents criticized the current gender structure of the negotiating team and urged a meaningful presence of women in the peace process and other peace structures.

- **Weak rule of law and justice systems:** Although many efforts have been undertaken to make Afghanistan a crime-free country, weak rule of law has contributed to urban insecurity, administrative corruption, and social discrimination. A lack of transitional justice initiatives when a new government was established in the 2001 Bonn Agreement has also fueled impunity for violent acts during war as armed actors *"gained resources, arms, safety, power, and government positions"* rather than facing punishment, setting a precedent for future actors to believe they likewise won't face retribution for violent acts.

- **Interference of neighboring countries:** As Iran and Pakistan provide weapons and logistical assistance to the Taliban, India-Pakistan rivalries play out on Afghan soil, Russia and China's influence in the region continues to grow, and US interest in the region continues, participants considered foreign influence on the conflict to have caused or exacerbated many other obstacles to the peace process. As no neutral international actors are mediating in negotiations, many respondents expressed little hope of achieving a stable peace.

- **Indiscriminate killing of civilians:** One of the greatest challenges facing Afghanistan is the killing of ordinary people in *"blind bombardment"* from *"explosions by all parties,"* which has increased public mistrust of the government and the peace process.

Social Issues

- **Poverty, unemployment, and lack of education:** Rising poverty and lack of economic opportunities remains a root cause of the long-standing conflict and has forced some people without jobs or other sources of income to join armed groups to survive. One participant remarked:

> *"Our people got war as a lifestyle [...] as long as war is a [money-making] industry in our country, that is an obstacle for peace."*

  This will remain the case as long as *"there will be enough cheap soldiers for each party to the war,"* another respondent noted.

- **Ingrained culture of violence:** Respondents believed that the country's long-standing history of war and violence has left communities without a culture of acceptance and tolerance across ethnic, linguistic, and regional differences. Some note that jihad has also played into the culture of violence by *"brainwashing"* youth into believing that *"fight[ing] against foreigners [...] is a job of rewards in the life hereafter."*

- **Lack of social peace:** Participants defined social peace in various forms, including lack of ethnic conflict and eliminating ethnic, linguistic, and regional discrimination. While social peace exists to varying degrees across the country – for example, by people of different ethnicities continuing to trade with and purchase from each other in big markets – ethnic discrimination is a key factor undermining more robust forms of social peace. As it contributes to unequal power-sharing and resource-sharing in certain communities, given Afghanistan's centralized form of government, many believe that resources should be shared equally across all provinces.

What Peace Means

Participants described what peace means to them and their communities, emphasizing the following:

Political Components

- **The cessation of war and violent conflict:** Many participants pointed out that ending violent conflict is necessary to sustainably build any aspects of positive peace, and shared their personal experiences with conflict. One participant was present when *"the Taliban broke and shred the windows and doors of our faculty by firing heavy weapons."* Another respondent shared:

> *"I was eye-witness to a violent and unforgivable incident by the Taliban that took place on the Kunduz-Badakhshan highway. There were five people who accompanied me who were forcibly abducted by the Taliban, and they took everything we had at hand."*

- **Inclusive peace negotiations:** If people affected by conflict and civil society leaders are involved in the national negotiations, participants expressed that the outcomes of the peace process would be more inclusive and more likely to succeed in the long-term.

- **Full access to civil rights and liberties:** Participants spoke of their desire to preserve democratic values, including equality and freedom, and ensure basic rights of citizens surrounding freedom of expression, women's liberation, rule of law, and other matters. One remarked that *"Afghans want peace as long as their freedoms and rights are not curtailed,"* alluding to widespread concerns about the Taliban reinstating their campaign of civil rights suppression should they regain power. However, another expressed skepticism about the feasibility of maintaining civil rights, highlighting the desires of some Afghans to simply end the war regardless:

> *"Indeed, that is too far from our people to have peace in that high standard in which we would have equality and freedom and good life conditions, but we are also satisfied by having the least of peace like lack of war and having safety."*

- **Improved rule of law and justice:** Some respondents believe that if the government had undertaken transitional justice initiatives in 2001, many of today's conflicts would have been avoided. Today, they believe that because that obedience to law and justice enables lasting peace, justice should not be sacrificed to *"political bargaining"* in order to eliminate the sense of revenge, resentment, and ongoing bloodshed at all levels in the country. Some noted that strengthened security institutions will be necessary to achieve justice.

- **Non-corrupt governance and sovereignty over national affairs:** Peace depends upon good governance by a strong government, which rests upon politicians who prioritize public interests over personal power. Participants noted that a powerful Afghan government could better establish security, promote sovereignty over national affairs and deter foreign intervention, hold war criminals accountable, and counter violent extremism by promoting job creation.

Social Components

- **Peaceful lives:** One participant expressed their dream to open a business without having to *"worry always where we should migrate to be safe, to work, to live."* Another noted:

> *"Peace is having safety. That is, if you go out of [your] home in the morning, you don't worry if you may be back home at night or not. When a person goes out, the other members of the family don't get frightened about what might happen."*

At its simplest, safety means lives free of violence, which would enable Afghans to plan for their long-term lives and professions rather than continuing to live and work in constant stress and fear. Others noted the importance of achieving financial and job security in addition to physical safety to ensure human dignity.

- **Social peace:** A vast majority of respondents noted that social peace has not been invested in as much as political peace. Accordingly, there is a need to create and promote mutual acceptance and understanding among all Afghans by living together peacefully; resolving ethnic conflicts; eliminating ethnic, linguistic, and regional discrimination (for example, in hiring practices); and respecting the common values of all ethnic groups living in Afghanistan. One participant expressed that Afghans should *"gather around a geography called Afghanistan and unite."* Interestingly, another said

> *"I wish we [can] work and work and work to make this place a "homeland" for all. For Talib Afghan. For secular Afghan[s]. For every Afghan."*

- **Economic improvement, employment, and education:** Many participants noted the need to pursue balanced development across the country to ensure and invest in employment and educational opportunities to empower youth and deter them from joining armed groups.

How to Build Lasting Peace: What Has Worked and What Needs to Improve

Many participants expressed little hope of seeing a peaceful Afghanistan in the next five years, in response to an inquiry question on the topic. Some agreed with a participant who remarked that she only wished not to lose improvements in social justice gained over the past two decades:

> *"I don't have any hope to experience peace in the next five years. I just wish not to worry about everything. I wish I didn't lose some of [the] least freedom[s], like my freedom to select my dress and scarf."*

Others shared the view of another participant, who remarked:

> *"A person who was born in war, grew up in war and lived in war [...] will [still] have many dreams for himself[,] his children and others.*

Participants shared numerous foundations necessary to build peace, including the following key items:

Political Foundations

- **A powerful government:** Many respondents consider a powerful government essential to ensuring peace. Unless politicians pursue the interests of the population above their own, the government will remain weak and unable to ensure lasting peace.

- **Transitional justice and criminal justice**: Participants believed that both forms of justice, enabled through strong rule of law, remain imperative to ensuring that conflict ends without leaving opportunities for resurgent violence. A lack of transitional justice initiatives in the 2001 government transition in part led to the reemergence of the Taliban, which was not taken seriously by the international community, as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the US, and other international actors did not work with neighboring countries, such as Pakistan, to prevent them from becoming sanctuaries for the Taliban and other armed groups.

Social Foundations

- **Social peace:** To examine how best to build social peace, a university professor participant noted that it would be useful to investigate different models concerning how other countries *"institutionalized peace,"* such as the European model of laying the groundwork for peace from the bottom-up at a grassroots, participatory, and inclusionary level, and the Indonesian model of a pluralized system rather than a purely Islamic ideological system, which remains important to keep in mind as the secular Afghan

government and Islamic Taliban deal with merging two ideologies into a unified form of government. Accordingly, some believe that social peace will naturally follow with inclusive political peace.

- **Strengthening traditional local conflict resolution mechanisms:** Some consider jirgas, or people's councils, to be effective actors in the peace process. These institutions operate in villages and districts to resolve disputes between individuals, families, and tribes; support justice; and analyze drivers of conflict in their communities. President Ghani held a consultative Loya Jirga (Great Assembly) in August 2020 to collectively consider peace process measures, including the successful release of 400 Taliban prisoners.
- **Promoting tolerance among and education for youth:** Many participants believe that investing in youth is key to ensuring intergenerational peace. One participant from Kandahar noted that the city maintains an active volunteer network, and encouraged young people to take advantage of it *"to be united and make a strong network to help each other and work for a better society."* Another noted that:

> *"Educational institutions nurture new generations with peaceful values and there are efforts from the civil society organizations around the country to engage people in the peaceful trends."*

Some suggested that media and academic organizations are well-suited to reinforce social peace discourse and messaging by raising public awareness of peace and forming peace clubs at universities. Academic institutions have a unique value-add by being able to contribute research and case studies on peace, extremism, and other conflict-related topics.

Recommendations

Most of the participants believed that the current peace process is not in the hands of Afghans given the extent of foreign intervention in the country, including by both neighboring and Western governments. Yet support for international involvement was fairly strong, as indicated by the following recommendations:

Political Recommendations

- **International governments should encourage neighboring countries in the region to support the peace process**, which will enable it to gain more momentum. International governments should **provide more financial support for peacebuilding activities**, including traditional development services such as healthcare and education, and **utilize less military action.** However, participants acknowledged the vast difficulty in determining how to solve regional conflicts, such as India-Pakistan rivalry, and addressing regional interests that play out in Afghanistan. Some suggested that diplomats should explore advancing the argument that a stable and peaceful Afghanistan will facilitate secure economic routes for neighboring countries, as a way to convince these governments to support peace. The Afghan government should also resolve historical disputes with neighboring countries, such as the Durand Line disputes with Pakistan.

- **The US and UN should play a more significant oversight role** in ensuring that the formal peace agreement is implemented once signed. Some participants noted that their perceived legitimacy could uphold the progression of the talks and peace – unlike during the 1992 overthrow of the government when the US and UN were not substantively involved – saying:

> *"Afghans want guarantors who are reliable for the peace process. These guarantors could be major countries or reputable organizations."*

The US should also provide more support to the government during negotiations, given the Taliban's increased belligerence following the February 2020 US-Taliban military withdrawal deal. As part of the oversight role, the Afghan government, US, and UN should ensure that **transitional justice methods are included in the peace agreement and carried out in full,** as well as **guarantees** to ensure that the democratic gains in social justice and equality over the past two decades will not be lost.

- **The Afghan government and Taliban should immediately sign a ceasefire agreement** to lay the foundation for stable negotiations and ending the conflict.

- **The Afghan government should include more women, higher educational professionals, and conflict-affected people in the peace talks** and make the Afghan High Peace Council a more representative body to ensure all perspectives will be included in a peace agreement.

- **The Afghan government should fight corruption by creating a unified front of politicians** who prioritize public interests over gaining personal power, advance equality by allocating resources equally to all provinces and ethnic groups, and ensure security by strengthening security forces.

Social Recommendations

- **The Afghan government, international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), and international donors should support job creation, education, and social cohesion programming** to enable youth to earn income and avoid joining armed groups, and to end discrimination based on ethnic, regional, and linguistic divides.

The Central African Republic

Country Context

Since its independence in 1960, CAR has experienced chronic instability and outbreaks of conflict due to competition over mineral resources, including diamonds, gold, petroleum, and uranium. A failed peace agreement between President François Bozizé and the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR) rebels in 2007 led to a resurgence of violence in 2012 as the new rebel coalition Séléka, predominantly Muslim, and opposing anti-balaka militias, predominantly Christian, emerged. Regional power struggles between armed groups and across borders, weak state security forces, and rampant human rights violations continue to plague the country even after the height of the crisis in 2013 when Séléka leader rebel leader Michel Djotodia took control of the country during an armed assault on Bangui. While President Faustin-Archange Touadéra's win in the 2016 presidential election and the signing of the 2019 Khartoum peace agreement revived hope for democracy and peace in CAR, insecurity and violence has displaced a quarter of the population and has left communities deeply divided and mistrustful. CAR currently faces a post-electoral crisis following the December 2020 presidential elections as fighting and mass displacement has increased.

Consultation Groups

Participants gather during consultations in the Central African Republic.

Search led FGDs in government-held Bangui and Bimbo, as well as rebel group Popular Front for the Rebirth of Central African Republic (FPRC)–held Ndélé, with women; youth; members of Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees, which are ad-hoc structures set up by the Minister of Social Affairs and National Reconciliation in 2016, as part of the country's DDR program, throughout various parts of the country to manage in the context of the state collapse; representatives of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA); media managers and talk-show hosts; mayors and municipal authorities; religious leaders; and traditional leaders including neighborhood and village chiefs.

Our team spoke with women to capture their lived experience as those "who strongly suffer [from] the crisis," as many have lost their husbands to violent conflict, take care of their families alone, and face displacement.

Participants discuss during consultations in the Central African Republic.

Youth are both party to and victims of violence, as some are recruited by armed groups and youth are killed the most out of all groups in the population. Members of Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees are typically young people who have shown a strong commitment to conflict management. They conduct peacebuilding initiatives with their communities with the support of many NGOs, from community well-being projects such as maintenance of public spaces to bring together local authorities and community members for popular expression forums to discuss problems facing the community and potential solutions. In addition to maintaining a military presence in the country, MINUSCA has also led many community outreach activities both directly or through other NGOs, allowing them a dual perspective of the conflict and what peace means to the population from the lens of hard security and the lens of building social peace. Media managers and talk-show hosts are strong influencers in the country given their effective use of media and radio programming to spread awareness of peace. It remains extremely important to involve mayors and municipal authorities: the peace process involves the national government and prefects, but mayors, who are locally chosen, are often seen as more credible and influential. They manage many conflicts between individuals, but people turn only to traditional and religious leaders when conflicts become larger. Given the religiosity of many Central Africans, religious and customary leaders hold significant influence as they offer advice, raise awareness of peace, and hold dialogues with communities to spark forgiveness and reconciliation.

Challenges to Peace

Consultation participants identified the largest challenges facing the country:

- **Insecurity and threat of armed groups:** Many are no longer free to carry out income-generating activities for fear of robbery and harm by armed groups, who *"mistreat"* civilians rather than protecting populations. One participant from N'délé noted:

> *"We are afraid even to go dig up our cassava in our fields It's hard when we know they can tear it away, molest us, and, if we resist too much, kill us."*

- **Discriminatory justice:** Because local authorities listen to armed groups and ignore the concerns of civilians, the population cannot access justice for such crimes.

- **Youth unemployment:** Young people face high unemployment rates across the country. They cannot invest in being entrepreneurial, building their own income-generating activities, and investing in the future because armed groups and others often steal capital and resources from them without facing justice, which *"blocks their entrepreneurial spirit"* because finding the capital to invest again is too difficult Further, some youth in desperation turn to activities such as robbery in neighborhoods to gain livelihood.

- **Discord between ethnic groups:** Misunderstandings and false information undermine collaboration and stoke suspicion between ethnic groups, contributing to the perception that they are fighting

What Peace Means

In the Central African context, participants defined peace as:

- **Freedom of movement:** In N'délé, respondents viewed freedom of movement as enabling access to gaining livelihood:

> *"Peace means that I can go to the fields without being afraid of being violated "*

In Bangui and Bimbo, residents considered freedom of movement to mean the opening of and access to markets and schools without risk of violence. A respondent encapsulated the various groups' feelings by stating *"if there is peace, then there is security."*

- **Social cohesion**, including good relationships between ethnic communities and normalization of cohabitation: Participants consider social cohesion to entail collaboration between ethnic and religious groups without mistrust. Some consider social cohesion to be manifested in something as simple as *"[having] normal collaboration and that the communities greet each other."* A participant from Bangui noted that tolerance will be reached when *"we no longer give into political manipulation,"* adding that *"we ask for the return of our Muslim brothers, as well as Christians, in their respective localities."*

Participants discuss during consultations in the Central African Republic.

- **Development (including employment, quality education, and basic social infrastructure):** Central Africans consider peace as a *"cry of the heart"* – they desire peace so they can build their lives. Young participants explained that *"when there is peace, everything is fine – especially the creation of a business which contributes to the employment base."*

- **Impartial justice:** Participants also viewed justice – especially transitional justice – as essential to peace, as many continually witness impunity for violent acts. While some prioritize retributive justice and formal accountability over restorative justice, others consider justice to be best approached through restorative means in order to foster reconciliation among individuals and communities. Most believed that both are necessary to achieve both reconciliation and healing. Many participants also mentioned that they must know the truth about what happened and who was harmed during these acts so they could properly grieve for their fellow Central Africans, as mourning is very important in the country.

How to Build Lasting Peace: What Has Worked and What Needs to Improve

Respondents noted that the following efforts have contributed to building peace:

Political Foundations

- **Early implementation of disarmament of armed groups:** However, while disarmament initiatives had recently begun to display signs of success in N'délé for the first time since 2013, the post-electoral crisis disrupted these efforts and led to a resurgence of armed groups.

- **Protection by MINUSCA to offset weak state security forces:** While the population has largely welcomed MINUSCA's presence, many noted that the mission needs to better address civilian protection to be effective.

Social Foundations

- **Mutual tolerance of religions and ethnicities:** While tolerance remains superficial and fragile in certain areas, it has played an important role in creating peace and must continue to be prioritized.

- **Reconciliation efforts by religious and customary leaders:** Religious and customary leaders have significant influence given the religiosity of many Central Africans. One participant stated:

> *"Many Central Africans fear God. [When] a pastor or an imam speaks, they obey. […] [Religious leaders] contain the anger of their followers by offering advice, raising awareness of peace, and holding dialogues with communities to spark forgiveness and reconciliation."*

- **Community programs by INGOs:** Ranging from organizing community sports teams to raising awareness of the Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC), participants noted that INGO programming has contributed to community reconciliation.

- **Coalitions of young people and women working for peace:** Respondents confirmed that these associations have *"contributed enormously"* to building peace in local areas and should continue to be supported given their influence.

Participants stated that government and local communities constitute the main actors in building peace given their political and social proximity to conflict and security. Yet despite laying a clear vision for the future of the Central African Republic, the hopes of the public have not been adequately reflected in past formal peace accords, including the 2019 Khartoum agreement. Participants explained that *"people couldn't find themselves in the agreement,"* or, in other words, that they could not see where or how they fit into the deal. The agreement focused on the political process of building peace, including negotiating for a ceasefire and dealing with armed groups, but neglected to address the need to build social peace by not taking seriously most of the public's demands, including those of young people who went to Khartoum and were treated as spectators rather than participants. Accordingly, respondents advocated for the following groups to be included in – and realized as crucial to the success of – peace talks, noting that any forms of peace negotiated without them would not be successful in the long-term without capitalizing on their ability to influence communities and their peacebuilding work:

Participants discuss during consultations in the Central African Republic.

- **Traditional and religious leaders:** Given these leaders' robust influence on their communities, peace efforts should support and elevate traditional and religious leaders as they promote involvement in and support for peace at all levels.

- **Young people and women:** International actors should consult with both youth and women to design new initiatives that are better suited to their needs and offer more opportunities to lead peace efforts to advance their existing contributions.

- **Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees:** Respondents noted the need to increasingly draw upon this vast network when implementing initiatives for social cohesion and enforcing local peace initiatives that have been in place for years, as both their expertise in peacebuilding and connections with communities provide natural avenues for influence and outreach.

Recommendations

Most participants expressed a desire to establish and maintain permanent collaborative relationships with international actors who can support implementation of locally-owned peace initiatives. They offered the following recommendations:

- **MINUSCA should reexamine its mandate and implement new measures to improve civilian protection**, looking to other UN missions with successful civilian protection efforts like the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO).

- **International governments worldwide should increase support for the peace process.** With strong ties to the country, France and the US are natural partners in this process, but these governments did not play a significant role in the Khartoum agreement. While Russia co-led the process, some civilians believe the process must include multiple international powers to succeed – for example, the P5 – in addition to continued involvement by the UN and African Union (AU), as Russia may not be able to single-handedly ensure security for the country.

- **INGOs should integrate both emergency humanitarian assistance and community rapprochement initiatives into their programming.** INGOs often offer only one option to communities, but participants noted the need to address the population's needs to both live and build peace. A respondent from Bangui remarked that "the hungry stomach has no ear: even if we are full, if we do not patronize [other groups], the division remains." Transitioning from humanitarian assistance to long-term development initiatives could provide a peace dividend, given the significant reliance on humanitarian aid and widespread desire for increased development efforts.

- **INGOs and international governments should support the leadership of traditional and religious leaders, young people, women, and Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees** in implementing local peace initiatives.

Myanmar

Country Context

Myanmar is an extremely diverse country, with 135 officially recognized ethnic groups and diverse religious identities. Throughout its history, these divides have been manipulated and exacerbated through "divide and rule" governance, often leading to violence and discrimination. The previous colonial and military regimes used structural discrimination to separate and destabilize groups and consolidate power in Myanmar, which solidly divided communities and set them against each other, spreading animosity and deep divisions. This led to serious human rights violations in the country and many ethnic groups felt excluded socially, economically, and politically, especially in the ethnic states – areas along Myanmar's borders that are heavily populated by ethnic minority groups. Despite a landslide election for civilian-led government that broke 60 years of military rule in 2015, many ethnic and religious groups unsurprisingly still differ in their vision for the future of the country. These tensions have erupted in different places across the country in a multitude of manifestations to release the pressure – in the most extreme cases, resulting in massive displacement, atrocities against civilians, and social conflict as armed clashes between ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and the Tatmadaw have raged for years.

Participants discuss during consultations in Myanmar.

Fervent anti-Muslim sentiments in Myanmar and neighboring countries, stoked by a Buddhist Nationalist movement, have created deep divisions and mistrust around the country, which has often led to violence against civilians. As the narratives of the violence diverge and international pressure grows, common ground has seemed elusive. The US, for instance, has reinstated some punitive measures such as targeted sanctions and downgraded military-to-military support. The Myanmar Government, in response to what it has perceived as adversarial statements from many Western countries, has leaned towards the support of countries they consider non-adversarial and has stepped backwards from the international spotlight. Elections in November 2020 have been contested by the military and progress on the peace process has stalled as the military launched a coup in February 2021 and continues to violently suppress peaceful protests today in March 2021.

Consultation Groups

Search held four FDGs with people coming from areas under government and Ethnic Armed Group control in Chin, Kachin, Rakhine, Shan, Mon, Kayah, Karen, Yangon, Ayeyarwaddy, and Tanintharyi States/Regions, including key youth leaders and members of "double minority" groups, which consist of people living in a province where they are a minority group and the province is itself a minority within national demographics (for example, the Rohingya in Rakhine state or the Naga).

To explore how to make the peace process more inclusive, our country team focused on groups that have a large stake in and an ability to significantly influence the process, but are excluded from the work. Myanmar has the largest youth population in Southeast Asia: youth account for nearly one third of the population and represent a new generation inheriting the task of creating peace in the country. People speak of the upcoming 2025 general elections as a chance for the first democratic transfer of power, as youth will be able to vote and push for reform after the election, including changes to the 2008 Constitution.

Youth hold a strong desire to be more involved in the peace process and democratization and can play a strong role in this pursuit given their ability to connect to different ethnic groups and their peacebuilding work with civil society organizations and youth networks. However, the top-down formal peace process remains driven by elite actors, leaving limited direct participation roles for youth and leading to further marginalization as informal participation with civil society does not feed into the formal peace process. While the government initiated its Youth Policy in 2019, which serves as a guideline for the welfare and development of young people and enable youth to play a major role in striving for the emergence of a Democratic Federal Union, many view it as a move to gain more political popularity, as the National Strategic Plan detailing the implementation plan for the Policy was released in January 2021 – two years after the Policy was announced.

Although the government officially recognizes youth committees involved in the Policy's development and implementation, most also consider the Youth Policy to be ineffective because youth participation in the initiative is achieved through nomination, various youth committees involved are not supporting each other substantively, and the government has not given them the necessary support to address issues in the Policy, such as the drug trade because powerful actors close with the government benefit from the drug trade in all areas of the country. Accordingly, participants noted that donors and embassies must commit to youth inclusion by supporting their informal participation in the peace process.

Participants brainstorm during consultations in Myanmar.

A complex and sensitive issue in Myanmar, "minorities within minorities" groups include not only people of minority ethnicities, but also other minority and marginalized groups across religion, gender, language, the LGBQ+ community, disability community, and other identities. With this in mind, "minorities within minorities" can be understood to be similar to intersectionality. As defining who exactly can be deemed a member of this category remains complex, it is helpful to look at the power dynamics of a given context to understand what groups constitute the lower strata. Search chose to interview members of "minorities within minorities" groups because their inclusion in the formal peace process is essential for its success. The formal peace process has thus far only included major ethnic groups, but without the participation of "minorities within minorities," any peace agreement is highly likely to be unsuccessful, as these groups hold many different, identity-specific grievances based on the types of discrimination and marginalization they have faced. These experiences and associated demands remain essential to address in order to ensure social peace and curb violence across the country, as they do in any national peace process because "minorities within minorities" exist in every country in some form. Participants noted that international actors need a clear understanding of the conflict context to understand how this complex, sensitive issue works and avoid ineffective or harmful engagement approaches if they don't understand the context.

Participants brainstorm during consultations in Myanmar.

Challenges to Peace

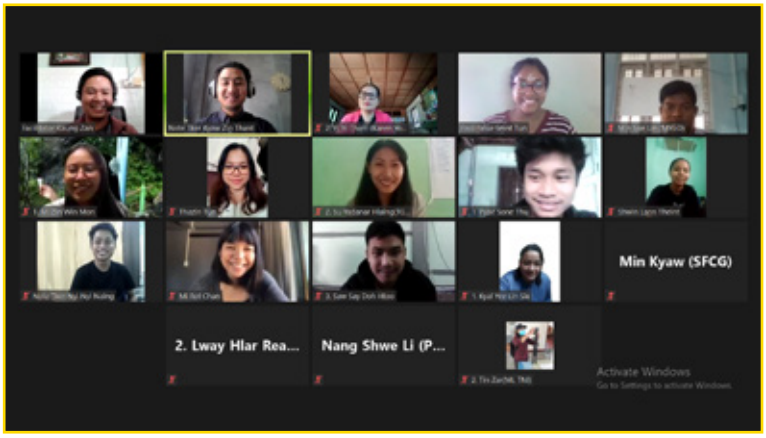
Participants identified the following obstacles to building peace and challenges facing their communities:

Political Issues

- **Active conflict:** Violence involving the military and conflicts between EAOs have a wide range of ripple effects on communities, who often have to flee their homes, lose private property, and/or lose healthcare, education, and other social services.

- **Noncompliance with the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA):** Continued fighting between the government and EAOs, paired with lack of cooperation between the Tatmadaw and the government in addition to continued marginalization of ethnic groups in several contexts, such as Chin state, has stagnated the peace process.

- **Centralized government:** Local actors are constrained by the centralized authorities as decisions are imposed on the subnational level, leaving them without the opportunity to work for their own local development and access a decentralized budget. As the Constitution itself is a system that allows peace deadlocks to happen, many of these problems can be resolved if federalism can be effectively constructed.



Participants discuss during consultations in Myanmar.

- **Lack of youth and women's participation:** As both groups lack representation in the peace process and the political process, many participants consider these proceedings to be exclusive.

- **Lack of transparency, poor access to information, and weak rule of law:** Respondents noted that these conditions create an unfriendly environment for already vulnerable groups.

Social Issues

- **The return and resettlement of IDPs:** IDPs attempting to return to their homes face challenges posed by non-compliance to the NCA by concerned parties, land mines, and land grabbing.

- **Communal violence:** Participants explained that polarized political parties in both rural and urban areas, who are driven by *"ignorance, bigotry, and populistic behaviors,"* continue to perpetuate communal violence.

- **Land grabbing:** As EAOs, military, and government actors working with business investors have engaged in land grabbing, farmers lost access to markets as they lost their land.

- **COVID-19:** The pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges as already vulnerable communities face cut services, closed schools, and insufficient healthcare due to the virus.

- **Illegal drug trade:** A direct consequence of peace-related issues, the illegal drug trade continues to greatly challenge many communities across different states and regions. One respondent reported that *"police target only the small users and never lay a hand on the dealers."*

- **Forcible recruitment of men into armed groups:** Young people and men are being taken as porters in many conflict-affected areas and forcibly recruited to become soldiers for armed groups, which also affects their spouses and children as children become exposed to the traumas of war.

- **Unemployment and lack of education:** Some youth without jobs or education turn to using drugs or participating in other criminal activities to cope and earn income. Participants from urban areas noted this more than those living in active conflict areas, who focused on access to basic services.

- **Tensions between ethnic groups:** Inter-ethnic tension continues to manifest in many ways.

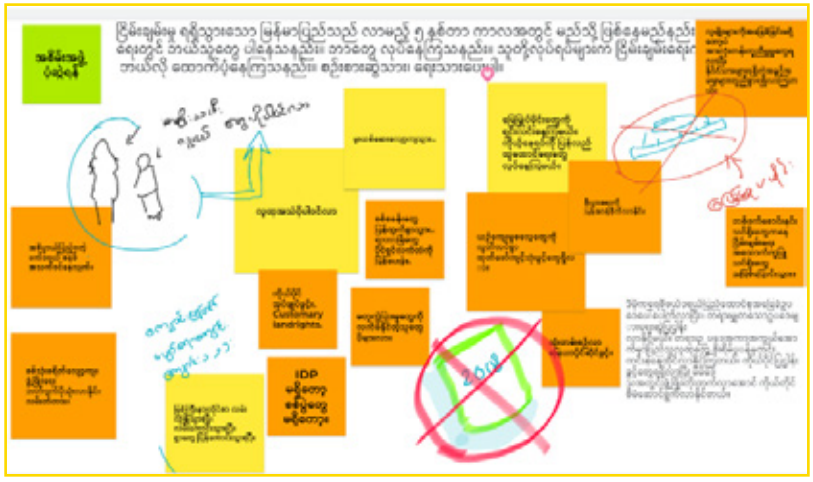
  ◊ **Inequality between the Bamar ethnic majority and the ethnic minorities** leave many afraid to freely express their ethnic identities. As one participant noted:

> *"Myanmar does not have an ethnic minority problem, it has an ethnic majority problem. There is Bamar Buddhist privilege in this country that controls the narrative and affects all aspects of the peace process."*

  ◊ **Minority groups lack representation in parliament,** leading to further political disenfranchisement.

  ◊ **Ethnic people are being *"forced out of their own languages."*** Many young ethnic people cannot speak their ethnic language, which is a side effect of the political context.

- **Lack of public awareness of the intersection between peace-related issues, politics, and peoples' daily lives:** Participants explained that some do not believe that the peace process pertains to them, hindering widespread understanding of the peace process and its aims.



Participants brainstorm during consultations in Myanmar.

What Peace Means

Participants envisioned a peace that contains the following features, which differed by geographic location. However, many participants noted that they could not imagine a peace this robust in five years' time, in response to an inquiry question on the topic.

Political Components

- **An absence of violence conducive to political dialogues:** Many participants expressed hope that compliance with the NCA would be able to prevent war and re-orient the country toward the peace process. However, if non-compliance continues, this will likely harm public trust of involved stakeholders. Participants also noted that peace means, on an individual level, lacking a fear of violence.

- **Good governance, including transparency, equality, and justice:** Participants expressed their desire for stronger political parties with effective checks and balances, transitional justice initiatives, and access to local judicial services. Most people in remote areas lack immediate remedies for violations of the law, such as losing property to land mine owners. In terms of transitional justice, respondents explained that the Tatmadaw has *"never apologized or returned the land they have acquired from local farmers or lands that are culturally and ritually important to ethnic groups."* Further, the judiciaries at all levels – from national to township – have been infiltrated with ex-military officials, compromising the courts' impartiality.

- **Federalism:** Participants saw federalism as a conduit to self-determination and equality across the country. Some discussed a revision of the Constitution to reach this goal by providing more power to leaders at the subnational levels. Many spoke of enhanced decentralization and ensuring that elected leaders oversaw local decision-making processes, which can be addressed in part through improved budget distribution and power separation between union-level and state/regional-level government.

Participants brainstorm during consultations in Myanmar.

Social Components

- **Development, including employment and education:** Participants viewed peace as a condition that enables people to freely pursue livelihood-generating activities, have access to increased wages and job opportunities, and gain education. It also entails improved and equal access to basic public services, including healthcare and infrastructure. Respondents also expressed their desire for drug-free zones for youth and a lack of drug-related violence.

- **Human rights and social cohesion:** These concepts comprise freedom of cultural expression and religious, ethnic, and political freedom and tolerance. A participant explained two instances of discrimination against ethnic groups by the military:

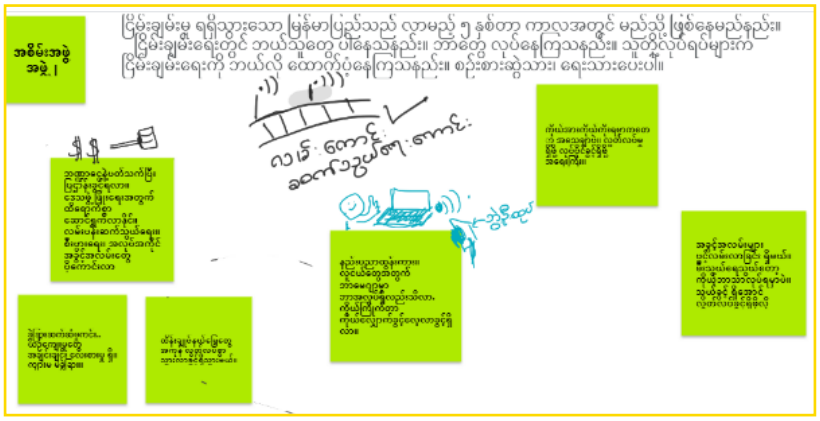
> *"The Tatmadaw often takes over land that is culturally significant to local ethnic groups and turns it into a new cultural or religious site [...] For example, in Kachin state, [the Tatmadaw] turned a [culturally-significant] piece of rock that looked like a dragon into a Buddhist monument so the local ethnic group would lose its cultural expression and heritage."*

> *"Several ethnic festivals are not formally recognized as ethnic festivals, so you are not allowed to hold them. You will also be arrested if you talk about your own ethnic heroes since the military wants to keep them purely Burmese – usually Burmese military war heroes."*

Participants noted the importance of mitigating or eradicating hate speech, ending discrimination, and ending stereotyping between the Bamar majority and ethnic minorities.

- **Youth participation in the peace and political processes:** Many participants noted the importance of including youth in order to achieve a truly inclusive and sustainable peace process given their representation among the population and local peacebuilding work.

- **Resolving systemic political disputes including land con iscation, migration, and IDP issues:** One participant noted that peace would allow IDPs, political prisoners, farmers, and workers around the country to share their experiences and build understanding among each other.



Participants brainstorm during consultations in Myanmar.

How to Build Lasting Peace: What Has Worked and What Needs to Improve

When discussing who was involved in the peace process and what peace entails, participants predominantly described themselves as actors in building peace by outlining the benefits that a peaceful country can offer to them, personally. Respondents saw themselves *"living in peace"* – from living harmoniously with different ethnic groups to religious groups enjoying their own festivals without tension – which underscores the importance of centering social peace in the negotiations for political peace.

Many participants did not address the role of international actors when discussing this question. With little involvement of outside governments or multilateral institutions in past peace negotiations and attempts, local communities either remain unaware of the potential role of the international community in peace processes or think they cannot help, as they have not seen any international actors play a large role in the peace process. Further, donors and INGOs typically seek to work with the government when creating programming in Myanmar, which harms trust-building between the international community and the public in certain conflict-affected areas given the tensions between the government and these groups.

Recommendations

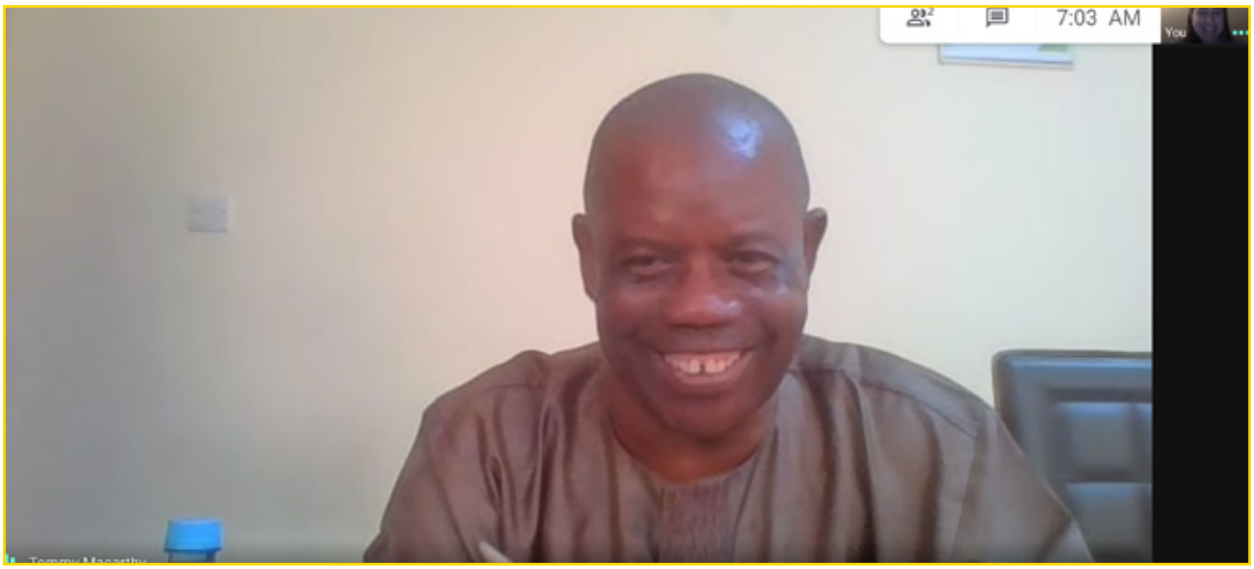
However, participants offered the following recommendations for the international community to become more involved in the peace process:

- **INGOs should create and support more inclusive dialogues with communities** to promote existing support for and awareness of the peace process.
- **International governments, multilateral institutions, and INGOs should:**
    - ◊ **Provide funds for peace process activities**
    - ◊ **Enforce robust monitoring for the Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC)**, which oversees the compliance of armed organizations to the NCA.
    - ◊ **Support rehabilitation of IDPs.**
    - ◊ **Move toward more sustainable aid and development initiatives**, including healthcare, education, and infrastructure.
    - ◊ **Assist with employment creation.**

Sierra Leone

Country Context

From 1991 to 2002, Sierra Leone experienced a civil war stemming from competition over and poor management of mineral and natural resources. The RUF attempted to overthrow the Sierra Leonean government in 1991, gaining control of much of the Eastern province. As the rebels continued to outperform the government, who could not contain the armed groups effectively, a group of soldiers launched a military coup, removed the government from power, and instated themselves as the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC). In 1996, the government and RUF signed the Abidjan Peace Accord to bring an end to the conflict. However, RUF leader Foday Sankoh did not abide by the terms, leading to a continuation of the war and a second coup until a second peace deal – the 1999 Lomé Peace Agreement, which largely mirrored the Abidjan deal – was established between the government and RUF. The agreement offered Sankoh control of the country's diamond mines in exchange for an end to the war and the deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission to oversee the disarmament process. With many RUF forces reluctant to comply, implementation of the accord went slowly, leading to an official end of the conflict in 2002. During the conflict, tens of thousands of civilians were killed and up to one-quarter of the population was displaced.



Interviewee shares thoughts during consultations in Sierra Leone.

Consultation Groups

Search led three FGDs and ten KIIs with key political leaders involved in negotiating and implementing the Lomé Peace Agreement; civil society actors involved in its implementation – for example, by coordinating transitional justice processes – and youth. As Sierra Leone is the only country surveyed who has maintained peace following a national peace process, our country team chose to interview people who had been on the frontlines of establishing peace to better understand what contributes to successful peace processes. Political

leaders included pastors and imams who were members of the IRC, which worked with Foday Sankoh and President Kabbah in the negotiations in addition to promoting harmonious interfaith relations and the end of interfaith discord among the public; members of the TRC; a parliament clerk, government ministers, and former member of parliament who were responsible for ensuring that laws relating to the Lomé Peace Agreement were enacted in Parliament, the 2000 TRC Act, and the TRC recommendations; a colonel in Sierra Leonean army, who was involved in negotiating between rebel groups; and a representative of the RUF in the Lomé negotiations. Civil society representatives included a university professor; media producers, who promoted awareness of and support for the peace process among radio listeners; NGO leaders, who promoted awareness of peace among the public; and delegates for the civil society coalition to the Lomé negotiations, who also promoted support for negotiations among Sierra Leonians. Facilitators also spoke with youth to capture the intergenerational span of the peace process, examining the extent to which young people understood the peace process and agreement, and how that may affect the likelihood of resurgent conflict.

Challenges to Peace

Some participants mentioned that the Lomé Peace Agreement was, in some ways, rushed because the country *"needed peace at all costs."* Accordingly, while Sierra Leone no longer faces large-scale violent conflict, there remain drivers of conflict throughout all levels of society that have made the peace fragile in the eyes of many participants. Respondents identified the largest challenges facing the country today:

Political Issues

- **Political polarization and violent extremism:** Polarization is gaining momentum in various communities as the country approaches the 2023 legislative elections for local councils, members of parliament, and the presidential office. As political parties in Sierra Leone are arranged around ethnic, tribal, and regional lines, increasing political polarization has led to an increase in political conflicts and highly polarized ethno-regional tensions, which have a disproportionate impact on women and young people.
- **Significant corruption in governance:** Evidenced by the limiting of civic space and moral freedoms and misspent, unaccounted-for funds, corrupt governance remains a core threat to peace in the country. Participants noted that both corruption and political polarization stem largely from the winner-takes-all system and weak government institutions. Members of parliament are appointed by or elected in with the ruling party, leaving no room for the opposition in the legislature and executive branch and fueling political polarization as opposition party members view this as discriminatory.
- **Flawed interpretation and application of law and the legal system:** Unjust application of the law undermines the impartiality of the judiciary.

- **Poor management of mineral and natural resources**: Although parliament has enacted legislation around mineral resource management, these laws have proven ineffective as the country remains poor while others exploit mineral wealth throughout the whole supply chain.

Social Issues

- **High youth unemployment rate:** Many youth feel as if the government does not care about their wellbeing and future. Even young university graduates have a difficult time finding jobs. Without a livelihood and a clear future for their lives, youth become susceptible to taking up arms and exacerbating conflict and violence. While there have been efforts made by the current and past governments to provide short-term jobs for youth, such as annually rotating positions, these are not enough to address the scale of unemployment.

- **Social injustice:** Various forms of social injustice threaten civic relations and contribute to community unrest.

- **Resurgent violence:** Post war recovery efforts have been undermined by violent situations, including inter-communal violence.

- **Running battles between the police and young people:** These clashes remain an omnipresent issue in many communities nationwide, undermining both trust and the social fabric.

- **Lack of contextual understanding of peace:** Because mass violent conflict has not been present in the country for years, participants noted that some Sierra Leoneans lack an understanding of what peace means today. To participants, it no longer means the absence of war, but rather, looks forward to the future and incorporates smaller-scale, community-level violence.

Interviewee shares thoughts during consultations in Sierra Leone.

What Peace Means

Many participants mentioned that people in other countries would consider peace to be the *"the silencing of the gun,"* or the end of violence. However, given the Sierra Leonean context, participants mostly focused on positive peace rather than negative peace.

- **Good governance and lack of corruption:** Respondents considered a non-corrupt government, including an independent judiciary and police, as an essential foundation for lasting peace.

- **Access to human rights and security to achieve inner peace:** Many participants linked having quality of life with maintaining one's inner sense of peace and security. One civil society actor described his vision:

> *"[Peace entails] a society where people can lead happy and full lives, where their rights are respected, not brutalized, [and] they can provide what is necessary for their children."*

  A student noted that employment does not just encompass a means of livelihood – for example, she wants *"[her] market to sell"* in *"a state of freedom where we are able to achieve our own success, security and calmness"* that will come when the country upholds good governance. Others focused on the immediate stressors of unemployment, noting that they would not *"be peaceful inside"* if they were not able to provide for their families. Several mentioned that peace begins with one's mindset and internal state.

- **The ability to live in harmony with differing groups:** In a peaceful society, respondents pictured diverse religious, ethnic, and other identity groups living alongside each other *"even within our diversities," "accepting each others' views"* while acknowledging that *"we may not agree on everything."*

How to Build Lasting Peace: What Has Worked and What Needs to Improve

Respondents noted that the following efforts contributed to building peace:

- One participant noted that because the war centered around access to resources rather than ethnic or religious divides, it was easier to establish reconciliation in Sierra Leone than it likely would be for conflicts with significant ethnic and religious components.

- In addition to the TRC, **DDR programs and rehabilitation commissions** targeted communities affected by the war, enabling conflict-affected people to have an opportunity to engage with the peace process beyond the TRC and garnering support for the peace process.

- Given the history of religious tolerance in Sierra Leone, **the IRC experienced significant success in bringing groups to the table to facilitate discussions on peace.** Accordingly, participants advised other populations seeking to build peace in their countries to locate the existing networks, strengths, and synergies in their communities upon which they can build.

In terms of missed opportunities for peace, most participants decried the full amnesty granted to Sankoh and all RUF combatants, in addition to the position in the transitional government offered to Sankoh.

- Participants considered this arrangement to essentially reward violent actors with impunity, which they believed set a precedent for other violent actors to believe they would not face punishment if they, in turn, committed violent acts. The amnesty guarantee resulted from the government's lack of power in negotiations, as the nonstop violence led negotiators to prioritize ending the conflict without much ability to negotiate for conditions surrounding positive peace.

When considering who is involved in peace, respondents discussed the role of international actors and youth both in the past peace process and today:

- **International actors:** Participants mentioned that international actors are less relevant now in the country because it is at peace. At particular points in the conflict, countries often need international actors to help maintain security, such as UN peacekeeping forces, but upon cessation of violent conflict, the issue turns to engagement with local actors to make sure that internationally-pursued peacebuilding efforts are locally-led and sustainable. Yet participants noticed that while the international community has good intentions, their involvement is based on their own agenda rather than what locals need and wish to push forward. Additionally, some participants noted that the Abidjan and Abuja peace attempts failed due to a lack of moral guarantors of the peace process, such as the UN or regional organizations that support peace. While the country hosted the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) until 2006 – four years after the war ended – Sierra Leoneans did not rely on international actors following the Lomé peace process, hosting peaceful elections without foreign interference. Respondents attributed this success to a strong government with a legitimate political commitment to peace.

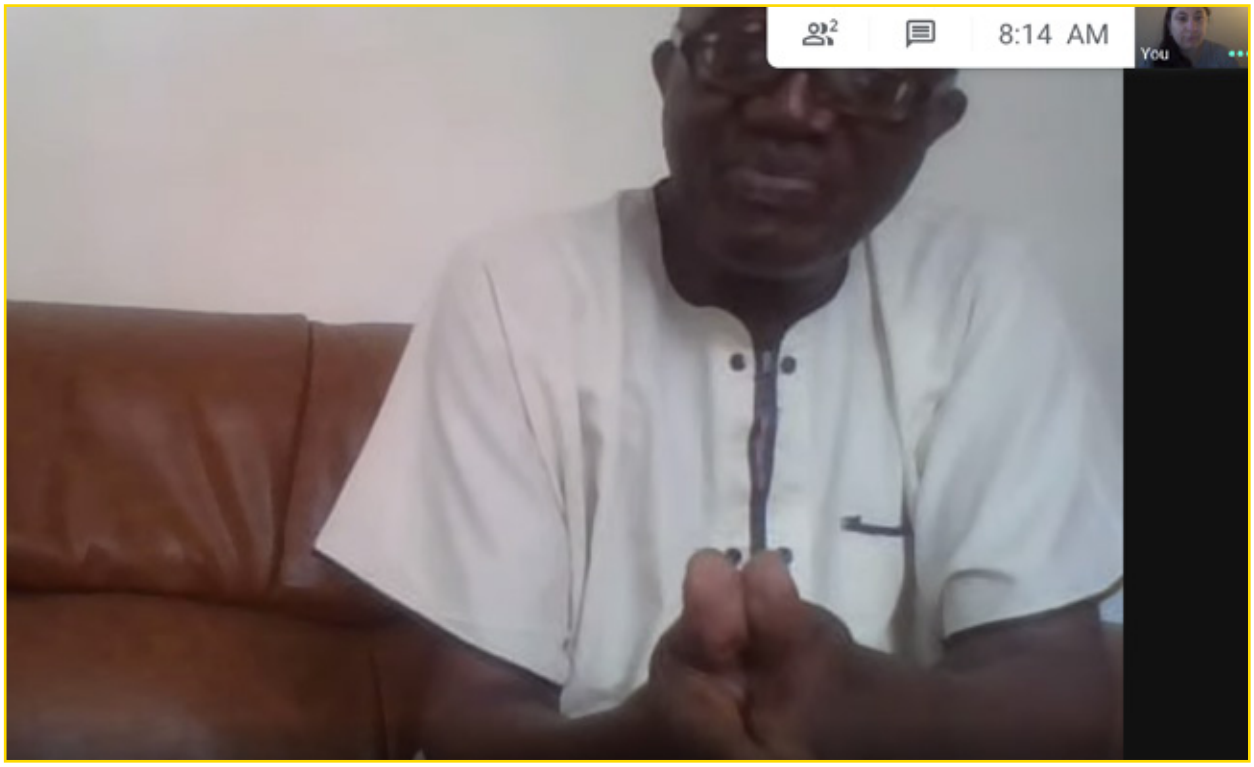
- **Youth:** Looking forward, participants focused heavily on the role of youth to ensure intergenerational peace. Some participants shared that there remains a divide between what students and young people understand about the history and causes of the civil war and the peace process, and the lived experiences and intimate knowledge of the older generation who lived through war and negotiated peace. One respondent mentioned that *"young people have been demanding space"* in the political and social spheres. Accordingly, respondents agreed that Sierra Leoneans need to think about how to invest in young people by connecting the two groups in order to offer some degree of mentorship and knowledge-sharing so that as older generations *"pass the torch"* to younger generations, young people will be equipped with an understanding of what has been attempted, what has worked, and what has not worked, rather than unknowingly repeating peacebuilding initiatives that have previously failed. Some participants

noted that the same causes of the civil war are repeating themselves today, worrying that the people have not learned any lessons. One civil society actor urged Sierra Leoneans to read the TRC report to understand what led to war, highlighting the importance of bridging these two generations.

Recommendations

Although participants did not raise many recommendations for the international community, given the country's lack of mass violent conflict, several noted that:

- **International governments should support a review of the Sierra Leonean constitution**, as recommended in the Lomé Peace Agreement, to reassess whether amendments need to be made to further ensure lasting peace.



Interviewee shares thoughts during consultations in Sierra Leone.

Syria

Country Context

Since the eruption of civil war in March 2011, conflict in Syria has become increasingly complex and nuanced. With internal religious and ethnic diversity, the presence of four foreign armies (Russian, Iranian, Turkish, and Israeli), the diffusion of multinational militias and mercenaries from the North to South, as well as influential spillover effects throughout the Arab world, there is a shared interest in affecting the outcome of this conflict. Currently, Syria is divided into three major areas controlled by different forces: (1) the opposition-held Northwest, including portions of Aleppo and Idlib, which is generally controlled by Turkey; (2) the Northeast, including the major cities of Raqqa (the former ISIS capital), Hasakah, Qamishli, and Deir Ezzor, which is controlled by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF); and (3) the 70% of the country under regime control, including the Syrian coast and border regions between Syria and Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, and Iraq respectively. For the purpose of this project, the two foci were the cities of Azaz (located in the Turkish-held Northwest) and Hasakah (located in the Kurdish-held Northeast).

Azaz is located in the northeastern section of the Aleppo Governorate with a population mostly consisting of Sunni Arabs and Turkish and Kurdish minorities. After falling under ISIS control from October 2013 to February 2014, it was overtaken by the Free Syrian Army. As Azaz currently houses the headquarters of the Syrian Interim Government, it has witnessed several attacks by ISIS and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) over the past few months. These increased security threats, including assassination attempts and bombings, have led to city council decisions to tighten security, increase military presence, and limit demonstrations throughout the city. Hasakah is a city located in northeastern Syria mostly populated by Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, and an Armenian minority. In the summer of 2019, it fell under ISIS rule, but was quickly liberated and is now controlled by Kurdish forces operating under the umbrella of the SDF. Despite broad stability, there have been several attacks conducted by ISIS sleeper-cells, particularly targeting SDF personnel and civilians. In addition to the SDF military council, Hasakah is further controlled by an SDF-controlled civil council comprised of Arabs and Kurds. Although both Arab and Kurdish peoples are represented on the council, the Kurds tend to have more power and support from the military council, and in turn, more leverage in policymaking. This imbalance has resulted in increasing tension between the two groups, as well as additional corruption and nepotism within the ruling body. Council policies have also influenced frequent protests amongst civilians, particularly policies relating to agriculture and livelihoods.

Consultation Groups

Search held four FGDs with women, youth, teachers, civil society leaders, labor syndicates, local council representatives, IDPs, and Arab Kurds, Muslims, and Christians in Azaz and Hasakah. The consultations aimed to be as inclusive and comprehensive as possible, and all groups were chosen for their active work at the community level, which allows them intimate knowledge of the subgroups with which they work. As each group forms a significant portion of the population, their insights are essential to ensuring an inclusive,

sustainable peace in Syria. While several of these groups have been included in peace processes, including lawyers, civil society representatives, and local council members, the remaining groups have largely been excluded from the process.

Often forgotten and historically excluded, women and youth provide new insight into old problems and hold distinct influence within their communities. Their networks and social circles further allow them to advance progress toward social cohesion that has not previously been made, especially at the local levels. Given the variety of communities that civil society organizations are able to reach and the breadth of their work, these organizations represent some of the most dynamic stakeholders at the grassroots level. Media actors remain important actors in peace processes given their capacity to either spark and exacerbate division and animosity between groups or disseminate accurate information and raise awareness of peace and conflict issues. Inclusion of local council members enabled our team to gain insights on the administrative approach to peace. A central component of any peace process, government officials and policymakers have the power to enact related laws and maintain access to influential networks to affect change at the governorate and national levels. As tensions between Kurds and Arabs drive local dynamics in the Northeast, the presence of both groups allowed their respective visions of a future Syria to be heard. The presence of Muslims and Christians provided perspectives on the religious demographics of the country and the calls for equal rights between Syrians noted in the consultations. Religious leaders, such as clerics, are in unique positions of power throughout communities: as communities deeply trust these leaders, participants noted that they can enhance communication between stakeholders in peace processes and raise awareness on certain crises. As Syrian citizens, refugees and IDPs constitute some of the most vulnerable people affected by the conflict, an inclusive, effective peace process cannot occur without their contributions. The inclusion of IDPs led to increased understanding of concerns about mass displacement and allowed for a larger geographic scope of views to be assessed, as these people did not originate from the regions surveyed.

Challenges to Peace

Consultation participants identified the principle challenges to achieving peace:

Political Issues

- **Lack of good governance structures:** The absence of these structures permeate all levels of society and stymie the establishment of freedoms and rights, such as freedom of expression. Weak governance has been repeatedly cited as a reason for civilians' decreasing confidence in policymakers and the ineffectiveness of bringing sustainable internal change. A university student from Hasakah explained:

> *"As a result of the absence of the foundations of governance for all the parties controlling the region, people are unable to speak and express their opinions freely, and security fears still exist. Even the media and civil society do not operate freely and transparently."*

Additionally, lack of good governance restricts the effectiveness of civil society, as one civil society activist noted:

> *"Power-monopoly and restrictions on the work of organizations and parties through security decisions and approvals largely decrease the role of civil society in achieving peace, as well as determining the role of parties as political and societal observers of the ruling authority. There are still concerns about raising many issues within the context and space of civil society for fear of the governor's authority."*

- **Lack of trust between citizens and government officials:** There is a critical disconnect between government officials and civilians. As various communities are often excluded from any formal discussions or peace processes, and others feel increasingly alienated from policymaking procedures, trust only seems to weaken. One of the female participants sitting on a local council in Hasakah stated:

> *"People are losing confidence in the usefulness of participating in correcting the course of governance as a result of negative practices, despite the administration's attempts to improve its governance."*

Another participant explained the relationship between bad governance and lack of civilian trust:

> *"The absence of the actual and proper implementation of the laws causes a weakening of people's trust in local authorities, and thus constitutes a stumbling block to the interaction between them, which has implications on the peace process."*

- **Overreliance on support from international actors:** Often positive in the short-term, when considering long-term effects, relying too heavily on partners and international actors can hinder internal progress and domestic changes that must take place in order to achieve sustainable peace. A member of civil society from Hasakah argued:

> *"All this external intervention in the region may not be for our interest as a result of its long-term side effects, but we, as civil society actors, are forced to rely on them, especially in terms of support, funding, and sustainability at work. However, they do not take the needs of society into consideration and always try to impose their own agendas that do not often meet the needs of the region and its citizens."*

Further, one civil society worker from Azaz affirmed that

> *"There is no real international will for change in Syria. The international community functions on the principle of force. Russia is in the Security Council and is participating in the war on Syria and controls decisions with the Russian veto, while at the same time covering chemical attacks in several regions in Syria. In addition, Resolution 2254 is highly problematic. The UN did not consider an army that kills its own people, but rather a government which is against an opposition."*

- **External threats throughout the country:** Attacks undertaken by foreign actors are a constant threat. Participants identified Turkey as a primary threat to Syria's peace process. One participant with a legal background explained that *"everyone is facing the tension and constant anticipation of any sudden attack as a result of the Turkish threats, and this hinders the peace process in the region."* Moreover, a Hasakah university student further asserted that *"Turkish threats make the region in a state of permanent instability, which is usually accompanied by an increase in prices"* that most citizens cannot afford.

Social Issues

- **Discord between various stakeholders:** Beyond the overall disconnect between stakeholders across government officials, civilians, civil society organizations, women, youth, and other groups, relationships within local communities and populations have begun to deteriorate. One participant from Hasakah asserted that:

> *"[External] threats and broader tensions have eroded peace even within the local components of the region and [have begun] to provoke strife among them. Hate speech [has] spread in an ugly manner. Among the people, especially between those displaced and the locals, there are many cases of ugly exploitation by both parties that affect the future of relations."*

- **Failure to address the needs of vulnerable populations:** Basic needs, such as access to food, adequate shelter, and healthcare, are not being met among much of the population. Without first fulfilling these immediate needs, it is unlikely that a peace process would be prioritized among local populations, as one local council member from Hasakah noted:

> *"The region needs real projects that support the economy and infrastructure, as well as projects that support dialogue and interaction, but you can't ask people to talk and share their experiences if they or their children are hungry, so the strategic plans developed for the region must be reviewed."*

- **Refugee camps and continued internal displacement:** Perpetual internal displacement represents a significant challenge, as IDPs are considered one of the most vulnerable groups in the region. As an Azaz civil society worker stated:

> *"Locals represent less than a third of the community. The rents are expensive, the local population has been affected by the increase in displacement, and with every wave of displacement the problem increases and exacerbates."*

Another civil society worker from Azaz asserted that *"camps lack resources and are rampant with conflict between IDPs and managing institutions. The area as a whole is in constant fear of displacement and the regime's occupation."*

- **Economic deterioration and unemployment:** A member of the Local Councils Union in Azaz explained that *"challenges include the financial situation, hunger, and poverty. The biggest challenges for peace are the economic situation, the absence of laws, the lack of trust, and the lack of political awareness at the community level."*

What Peace Means

In this context, participants defined peace as:

Political Components

- **Cessation of military operations and disarmament:** Due to the high levels of violent threats and armed attacks that occur throughout Syria, there was a clear emphasis on the permanent cessation of military operations and complete disarmament. These activities disrupt daily life and perpetuate constant fear amongst civilians. An Arabic teacher from Azaz defined peace as comfort and reassurance, explaining, *"I am from Idlib. We did not know safety because of the bombing, and I fear for my children and myself in my home and workplace, so comfort and security are the bases of peace."* A community development worker from Azaz alluded that a ceasefire is a launching pad for other forms of peace:

> *"Peace is achieved by a permanent ceasefire with an emphasis on protecting human rights, increasing the quality and quantity of the services provided, and strengthening community development processes and the economic market."*

Social Components

- **Inclusive community participation:** Community participation is critical to ensure peace and lasting solutions to conflict; it must be entirely inclusive, especially of traditionally excluded populations such as women and youth. One participant working with a local civil society organization (CSO) in Hasakah stated: *"Peace must be built on the foundations of difference and diversity. There can be no peace without respect for the rights of everyone regardless of their ethnicity and religion."* Additionally, a prominent economic activist in the Hasakah area further noted:

> *"Peace should be comprehensive and founded on equality between men and women, between ethnicities, and between classes, as class discrepancies can highly obstruct peace, creating cases of societal violence."*

- **Communal and institutional solidarity:** Within the citizenry, individuals recognized the value of supporting all communities despite their differences and encouraged institutions to provide appropriate support and opportunities for all. A member of local city council in Hasakah defined peace as *"the solidarity of community groups in general and the provision of opportunities and space for all groups, whether in the city or in rural areas."*

- **Stability:** Broadly, peace is synonymous with stability at all levels and within all facets of society. A healthcare worker from Hasakah characterized peace as *"stability at all levels"* while a university student from the same region described it as a stable environment *"where there are no crimes, robberies, looting and so on."*

- **Refugees and IDPs returning to their communities:** As some of the most vulnerable people in times of conflict, the safe return of refugees and IDPs to their original communities was central to many participants' definitions of peace. Excluding all other components that embody peace, one civil society worker from Azaz stated:

> *"The minimum requirements of peace [for IDPs] include the safe return to our homes and our country in a safe manner that preserves our dignity."*

- **Ability to realize freedoms:** After years of stymied progress and the indefinite suspension of many rights, participants affirmed their right to practice their freedoms safely and openly. A CSO worker from Azaz defined peace as the ability *"to create safe spaces, practice what we love and wish, and provide a safe space without the presence of criminals of the regime or of terrorists."*

How to Build Lasting Peace: What Has Worked and What Needs to Improve

Participants identified the following efforts as instrumental to building peace:

Political Foundations

- **Democratization:** Incorporating democratic principles into society and practicing the habits of a healthy democracy, such as a peaceful electoral process, were consistently identified as instrumental to lasting peace. As a CSO worker from Azaz explained:

> *"The democratic transition and the experiences that took place in our region provide a good model. We have seen successful electoral experiences in our regions, and we want to spread the idea in Syria. In addition, the area has been able to lay the foundations of the rule of law."*

Social Foundations

- **Work of CSOs and related organizations:** Participants acknowledged the critical role of CSOs, unions, and related organizations in improving community conditions, spreading awareness of peace, and engaging the population. A member of the local Reporters' Union in Azaz hailed unions and community organizations as key in providing opportunities and increasing agency by *"[ensuring] a safe environment"* and allowing *"for relative peace."*

- **Dialogue facilitation:** Dialogue between different groups was said to build social cohesion, reduce animosity, and increase understanding. One CSO worker from Hasakah stated: *"The openness that occurred in civil society in recent years and its spread contributed to the convergence of different ethnic and religious groups by providing spaces for dialogue, participation and interaction that did not exist previously."* Another participant from Hasakah explained:

> *"[In] the past years, there have been many peaceful initiatives for discussion and dialogue between the components and communities of the region. These initiatives have contributed to opening the door to convergence and acquaintance between the components, and have managed to resolve many deep-rooted historical differences between them, and to overcome these differences in order to achieve social stability."*

- **Youth and women's participation:** There was a consistent emphasis on the need to not only include women and youth, but also encourage their participation and amplify their voices during peace processes. A Hasakah CSO worker focusing on women's issues stated:

> *"The past years witnessed a revolution for women in every sense of the word. The rate of participation and effectiveness of women has increased significantly in all sectors, and this in itself is a real and positive indicator for spreading peace, and despite all the challenges, women are still seeking to create their safe spaces."*

Additionally, with respect to youth participation, one member of the Local Councils Union in Azaz argued:

> *"Young people and university students have broader outlooks and greater energies, and our society needs them. The problems we face [require] the efforts of people like them, and the role of youth must be activated. Peace as safety and security necessitates coexistence, and these young energies must be invested in order not to allow other parties to exploit them [with militarization and moral corruption]."*

- **Community inclusion:** Many participants cited complete community inclusion during peace processes as critical to developing a sustainable solution. There was a clear emphasis on the ripple effect of peace from the community and local levels to the national level. A CSO worker from Azaz asserted that:

> *"All parts of Syria are connected to each other. We cannot stop the bombing or the big problems, but we have the ability to solve the problems in our region. We have to work at the local level, and then the bigger scale."*

One youth participant from Hasakah further elaborated upon this point: *"The main factor in building peace is trust – trust within the group itself and with other groups – and therefore we must build trust to remove animosity in the region with the participation of all groups."*

Recommendations

Participants suggested a number of items necessary to advance a sustainable peace in Syria:

- **Inclusion of influential stakeholders in peace processes:** As described previously, it is essential to include the following groups to ensure sustainable and effective solutions, as each group holds distinctive positions and forms of influence within communities and policymaking spheres: women, youth, teachers, civil society leaders, labor syndicates, local council representatives, IDPs, and religious leaders. Respondents also noted the role of international partners and actors in conflict and peace generally, citing their ability to influence the longevity of a conflict, catalyze formal peace processes, and exercise economic influence.

- **Assurance of civil rights and freedoms:** Respondents most frequently cited the freedoms of expression, opinion, and safe movement throughout the country, focusing on the ability to practice these freedoms without fear of violence or retribution.

- **Unity across peace, religious, and political discourse in the media:** Rather than spreading animosity and feeding upon inconsistencies in reporting, media outlets must work to increase unity and cohesion in the information they circulate.

- **Improved social justice:** This was often explained in the context of gender equality, population inclusion, and upholding everyone's rights in a fair manner.

- **Creation of educational curricula that promote peace:** In addition to the peacebuilding processes that occur at the government and organizational levels, educational institutions should begin developing and teaching curricula that identify peace as a linchpin to a healthy society.

- **Political training sessions:** These workshops should be created with the intention of equipping individuals of all communities with the political knowledge and awareness to lead the country effectively.

- **Transitional justice initiatives:** Participants emphasized the need to repeal laws that infringed upon civilians' human rights and freedoms, as well as the creation of a formal reconciliation framework.

Yemen

Country Context

For over a decade, the Republic of Yemen has been torn apart by multiple armed conflicts. Following the Arab Spring in 2011, President Saleh agreed to a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)–brokered transition agreement in November 2011, in which he agreed to transfer power to his Vice President, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. In the time following the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), political infighting continued and most Yemenis did not feel that the Hadi had greatly improved their situation, instead viewing the government as ineffective. Ansar Allah, the Southern secessionist movement, and some youth groups officially rejected the GCC–brokered peace deal and felt that their interests were not represented.

When President Hadi proposed a new constitution in 2014, Ansar Allah militias rallied weeks of anti-government protests and mounted a military takeover of Sana'a backed by Saleh's strategic logistical support, vast patronage networks, and additional fighting forces. Ansar Allah militias took control of the presidential palace in January 2015 and installed themselves as an interim government. As they pushed increasingly southward toward Aden, President Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia. From Saudi Arabia, he coalesced an anti-Ansar Allah coalition with support from Western and GCC allies to counter their advance.

Backed by nine other, mostly Arab states, Saudi Arabia launched a military campaign after Ansar Allah's capture of a strategic military base north of Aden on March 25, 2015. This is generally considered the starting point of the current Yemen war, which has led to intense human suffering. Over 10,000 people have been killed, and 3.1 million Yemenis have been displaced since the start of the war in 2015. Today, Yemen is the largest food security emergency worldwide with over 17 million people facing crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity. The war in Yemen today is defined by four major conflicts over political control between national, regional and international forces: 1) the national conflict between Ansar Allah and the government; 2) the regional fight between Saudi Arabia and its Gulf partners and Iran; 3) violent extremist organizations that are taking advantage of conflict to entrench themselves in local communities across Yemen; and 4) the sectarian and tribal divides that are affecting local power dynamics.

Participants discuss during consultations in Yemen.

Consultation Groups

Search led five FDGs and eighteen KIIs with members of tribes and interest groups underrepresented in the peace process (including the al-Muhamasheen), women, youth, representatives of private sector industries, civil society representatives, media producers, university professors, and representatives of political parties. Of these, women, representatives of private sector industries, and tribal groups are those typically either excluded or underrepresented in conventional peace talks. Widespread illiteracy among these groups leaves them unable to access media to track the conflict and peace process As tribal groups are traditionally led by individual Shaikhs, many perceive them as fuelers of conflict who follow and implement the interests of key politicians. Most live in the countryside and lack access to political discussions, which occur in Yemen's main cities. While women representations have played essential roles in previous dialogues on peace, such as the 2014 National Dialogue Conference and the Constitution Drafting Committee, today they are hardly able to gain access to platforms to raise their voices in public. While some support for women's political participation does exist, such as efforts by the UN to include women in advisory groups in peace talks, their numbers have been limited in formal processes. Their participation remains essential to securing lasting peace to address new patterns of violence and needs that have shifted over the years as the war has continued.

Participants discuss during consultations in Yemen.

Private sector groups typically have not demonstrated interest in political dialogues because private sector concerns are not well represented, leading businesspersons to believe that politicians do not understand their concerns. However, the private sector remains an important player in the peace process, especially if a future peace agreement is implemented, for its ability to offer jobs and revenue to the Yemeni people, which can reduce the impact of the war economy by curbing the humanitarian crisis as money begans circulating in the economy, reduce the appeal to youth of joining armed groups to earn a livelihood, and increase GDP of the country. The conflict has constrained its capacity to do so due to the fragmentation of authority and resultant lack of transparency, in addition to (to some extent) the focus on regional and international aid that has left some entrepreneurs feeling abandoned. Accordingly, it is vital to engage the private sector in the peace process to break down the false split between its and the public's interests and move toward economic development.

Challenges to Peace

Consultation participants identified the most significant challenges facing the country:

Economic Issues

- **War merchants and economic actors:** Respondents considered these actors to represent the greatest challenge to any peace process in Yemen given their benefitting from the protraction of the war. As achieving lasting peace will halt their profits from the war's continuation, participants expected that they will work to thwart any peace process.
- **Sustained humanitarian crisis:** The Yemeni people face the largest humanitarian crisis in the world as economic and living situations have exponentially deteriorated over time. The most prominent manifestation of this is the absence of job opportunities, especially for youth and those whose work has been disrupted by the war (including professionals, craftsmen and small professions). Out of desperation, many become involved in the conflict to earn income. Many youth and war-affected people from Taiz had no other choice but to travel to the Saudi Arabian-Yemeni border in Al-Buqa to generate income for their families.

Participants discuss during consultations in Yemen.

Political Issues

- **Regional and international intervention:** Saudi Arabia, its Gulf partners, and Iran continue to fuel the conflict by supplying funds and weapons to internal conflict parties, while the US (until recently) and United Kingdom (UK) continue to supply arms and resources for Saudia Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). A peace process will not occur as long as regional powers continue to conduct their proxy war on Yemeni soil and seek to control parts of the country, as evidenced, for example, by the UAE's financia and military investments in Socotra Island.
- **Exclusion of key community and political blocs:** Participants considered political exclusion to be one of the main causes of conflict and hindrances to peace. However, the new Cabinet established in December 2020 following the 2020 Riyadh Agreement included the Southern Transitional Council (STC) for the first time, which is a good indicator for stability in the areas controlled by the internationally

recognized authority. It also makes the Hadi government a stronger negotiating partner for Ansar Allah. However, a female activist leader in Aden noted that *"excluding women is a shame."*

- **Emergence of violent extremist organizations and militias:** As such groups take advantage of the conflict to entrench themselves in local communities across Yemen, their proliferation undermines the prospects of enduring peace.

Participants discuss during consultations in Yemen.

Social Issues

- **Lack of confidence in internal parties involved in the conflict:** Participants noted that most Yemenis consider these parties unable and unwilling to establish a peace process in Yemen given the dual internal and regional nature of the conflict.
- **Disintegration of the national and local social fabric:** Economic collapse continues, women's social and political participation remains low, young people join armed groups to earn livelihood, the IDP population swells, and countless other effects of the war have spurred social fragmentation that deeply undermines the prospects of enduring peace.

What Peace Means

Participants created a widely encompassing definition of what peace means in the Yemeni context:

> *"Inclusive and equitable peace that guarantees national reconciliation, equal citizenship, reparation, and transitional justice that achieves true accountability for everyone who has caused a violation, injustice, or killing of others under a strong federal state that preserves the sovereignty of the homeland."*

Additional aspects include:

Political Components

- **An end to the war and violence:** All forms of violent conflict – from regional intervention to indiscriminate violence by illegal militants to fighting between Ansar Allah and the government – must be eradicated to end the war.

- **The release of prisoners and forcibly detained persons.**

Social Components

- **The right to a safe and stable life:** Participants described their desire to live in a *"livable environment"* that preserves human dignity by enabling peace of mind without constant fear and material need, which requires economic security, social inclusion, and political stability.
- **Peaceful coexistence with others:** This rests upon the unobstructed exercise of civil freedoms; absence of non-sectarian, regional, and sectarian extremism; and *"general loyalty to the state, including prioritizing it over other regional, tribal and personal loyalties"* that have contributed to conflict.
- **Achieving sustainable development, including quality education, health services, and employment:** Participants noted that these efforts will improve public wellbeing and dissuade young unemployed people from joining armed groups out of desperation. They also noted the need to preserve service institutions and community infrastructure from destruction.

How to Build Lasting Peace: What Has Worked and What Needs to Improve

Numerous attempts to build peace in Yemen have yielded varying results. Participants identified several agreements and initiatives that temporarily contributed to peace over the past three decades, including the:

- 1994 Covenant and Agreement Document (which participants also described as a missed opportunity for peace)
- 2012 Gulf Initiative
- 2014 Document of National Dialogue Conference Outcomes (which participants also described as a missed opportunity for peace)
- 2014 Peace and Partnership Agreement
- 2015 Geneva Consultations on Yemen (I and II)
- 2016 Kuwait Agreement
- 2018 Stockholm (Hodeidah)
- 2020 Riyadh Agreement
- 2020 Prisoner and Detainee Exchange Agreement between the government and Ansar Allah

An additional missed opportunity includes various UNSCRs related to the Yemeni crisis, of which Resolution No. 2216 (2015) is most important, as it sought to impose a targeted arms embargo against individuals or entities designated by the Committee and urged Ansar Allah to withdraw from certain areas.

As individuals and with civil society organizations, participants stated that they have contributed and will continue to contribute to achieving the vision of peace by:

Participants discuss during consultations in Yemen.

- **Working with civil society organizations, youth, and women to spread a culture of peace among community members by raising awareness** of the concepts of inclusive and sustainable peace through meetings, social events, and social media

- **Advocating for security, stability and disarmament** outside the framework of the official state

Recommendations

While many participants expressed a lack of hope at seeing peace realized soon, especially those in Ansar Allah-held areas, some also noted that Yemeni society across all levels and regions are increasingly seeking peace given their exhaustion with war as the conflict continues. Respondents outlined many recommendations to lay a foundation for enduring peace, including:

Political Recommendations

- **Conducting a Yemeni-Yemeni dialogue,** negotiation, and reconciliation process without regional countries' involvement and with assistance from the UN, EU, or sponsoring countries that have not previously supported any of the conflict parties, such as Kuwait, to establish a space for internal parties to discuss peace without regional interference. Almost all participants saw the EU as a viable partner, as its neutrality renders it acceptable by various conflict parties and it maintains the ability to propose, finance, and supervise the implementation of peace initiatives. Some believe the UN should take a more direct role. Some respondents noted that these actors should **impose sanctions against any local, regional, or international parties obstructing the peace process**.

- **Establishing a binding national vision for peace, in part by forming a competency-based Cabinet that involves all political entities** without marginalizing or excluding any political, social, or geographical bloc. Some participants believed that this should only include people who have not served in previous governments. Respondents recommended that the government should:

  ◊ **Implement past peace agreements** to build on what has already worked temporarily in the past, including the National Dialogue Conference Outcomes Document, Kuwait Agreement, Stockholm Agreement, and Riyadh Agreement.

  ◊ **Form a federal Yemeni State, conduct a referendum on the federal constitution, and hold public elections for the new state.**

  ◊ **Carry out national reconciliation and transitional justice initiatives.**

  ◊ **Execute rapid interventions to address the collapsing economic and living situation**, with support from the UN, EU, and donor countries.

- **Opening the crossings** from time to time to allow easy movement of citizens.

- **Undertaking a comprehensive, UN-supervised DDR process** for armed groups to give weapons to the new government, which was sworn in during December 2020.

- **Formulating a strong and unbiased civil state that guarantees equal citizenship** for all in accordance with the law.

Social Recommendations

- **Implementing emergency interventions** to save the deteriorating economy and address the people's livelihoods.

- **Facilitating a safe return for IDPs** to their original places of living.

- **Providing civil society organizations and leaders with technical support on peacebuilding approaches and unconditional financial support** for their peacebuilding initiatives, especially those focused on youth.

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