



## **Armed groups and peace processes – Pondering and planning engagement**

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The most recent figures, for 2003, show 29 major armed conflicts, of which all but three are *internal* conflicts involving one or more armed groups fighting either government forces or other armed groups, or both.<sup>2</sup> Including conflicts of lesser intensity, or in abeyance, other studies point to upwards of 176 armed groups in 64 countries worldwide.<sup>3</sup>

Given these statistics, it follows that armed groups will figure prominently in efforts to contain, resolve or mitigate the worst effects of these conflicts. Where negotiation is an option, mediators will need to confront two questions: whether they should engage with armed groups; and if so, how to do so effectively. This brief paper will address both questions, focusing on the dilemmas posed in bringing armed groups to the peace table. The paper does not address the related issues of how best to engage such groups on humanitarian and human rights matters.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Human Security Report, 2005, pp 22-23.

<sup>3</sup> Amnesty International, Annual Report 2004. On the definitional question, this paper includes all organised groups that are armed and use force to achieve their objectives, and are outside state control as armed groups. This definition omits paramilitaries that act with the support or connivance of the state, and leaves aside the difficult question of whether only to include groups with clear political motives.

<sup>4</sup> On these questions, see International Council on Human Rights Policy (ICHRP), *Ends and Means: Human rights Approaches to Armed Groups*, 2000. The author of the present paper also wrote the *Ends and Means* study. See also the various background papers prepared for the conference 'Curbing Human Rights Violations by Non-State Armed Groups', held in November 2003 at the Centre of International Relations,

## **1. Background – a confused context**

Contradictory trends appear to be both encouraging and penalising engagement with armed groups and while making such engagement easier in practice, perhaps undermining its overall effectiveness. Three such contradictions are worth noting:

### **i. From freedom fighters to terrorists**

Half of all peace agreements concluded since 1946 were negotiated from 1989 onwards, and in the 1990s the average number of conflicts ended through negotiation was double the average number in any other decade since 1946.<sup>5</sup> At present, third party mediators are officially engaged with armed groups in 20 conflict situations, and certainly more if we consider confidential processes. At the same time, the global “war on terror” creates a general climate that ostracises such groups, discouraging and even in some cases penalising contacts. In an era where particular armed groups aim deliberately to kill as many civilians as possible, it is not surprising that armed, insurrectionary violence in general loses legitimacy. This is not only as a result of Al Qaeda and Islamist armed groups. The RUF in Sierra Leone, and the various ethnic-based and/or state sponsored groups roaming the eastern DRC are good examples of situations where armed groups have killed, mutilated and raped tens of thousands of civilians. The public image, at least in the mass media, of rebels is changing, from the 1960s “freedom fighter” image of Che Guevara in a red beret, to an image of a West African youth, eyes bloodshot from drug use, toting an AK47, and roaming streets looking for loot. Whatever the cause – blacklists of “terrorist” groups, greater international attempts to suppress trans-border aspects of terrorism, public horror and outrage at the tactics used – the cumulative result is a de-legitimisation of the resort to force by armed groups. For conflict resolution purposes, this may not be all bad news, as such a climate creates pressure for armed groups to abandon the military struggle and sit down to discuss peace. Yet while this is so, the political space for doing so is shrinking.

### **ii. International Outlaws**

International legal rules are increasingly extending to actors other than states, and this includes greater accountability for the actions of armed groups. Whereas accountability efforts at the end of World War II focused on states and state agents, contemporary international tribunals include armed groups within their purview and it is now settled that the actions of armed groups, no less than states, may make those committing these

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University of British Columbia, Vancouver, at <http://www.armedgroups.org>, and the two case studies published by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in 2003, *Humanitarian engagement with armed groups – The Colombian paramilitaries*, *Humanitarian engagement with armed groups – The Central Asian Islamic opposition movements*, available at <http://www.hdcentre.org>.

<sup>5</sup> Human Security Report, 2005, p.153.

acts liable to international criminal prosecution. This is a welcome development, but it creates dilemmas for mediators and may further de-legitimise efforts to engage armed group leaders. It also gives rise to a further complication, namely that increased legal accountability has not been accompanied by increased rewards in the case of good behaviour, or better international regulation of well-intentioned processes of engagement. In other words, this legal trend appears, at least from the perspective of the armed groups, as all stick and no carrot.

### **iii. Global contact, diffuse control**

Osama bin Laden notwithstanding, it has never been easier to find, make contact and enter into dialogue with armed groups. Technological developments, and globalized telecommunications and travel provide ready links to rebel leaders in the field or the Diaspora. Armed groups maintain websites, publish newspapers abroad and control satellite television stations. Migration patterns (and asylum laws) allow exiled armed group leadership a presence in the capital cities of influential countries, or in global media centres. But this visibility and access can mask the fact that actual control may be diffuse and un-centred. Anecdotal evidence suggests growing Diasporas abroad play a pernicious role in perpetuating and financing armed group insurgency, even when local compatriots are eager for peace. Tensions between exiled and field leadership are commonplace, and bedevil efforts to get agreement on a peace package. A globalized economy creates opportunities and incentives for financial enrichment through conflict, and armed groups morph into criminal conspiracies. The ICRC argues that in today's "unstructured" conflicts, where local grievance, criminal urges, or simple insecurity may be the drivers for conflict, outside states and/or alliances of states see no need to take sides. Outside powers "don't have a dog in the fight", as it were, and the paradoxical result is that in the post Cold War environment, having abandoned their role as sponsors, the major powers lose control over armed groups. And *globalized* armed groups outpace local efforts to engage them on specific issues.

It is within this confused context, where engagement seems both natural and suspect, where the law is a sword but not a shield, and where access is straightforward but impact uncertain, that we must grapple with the dilemmas of engagement.

## **2. Pondering engagement**

Some would argue that in every instance dialogue is an option, we cannot rule out the possibility of engaging with any armed actors, regardless of their methods, ideology, or goals. Such a position might find two justifications. First, "deep" peace activists, or committed pacifists, are compelled by their convictions to be strong advocates for dialogue. If war is always illegitimate, it follows that dialogue must be the preferred solution to address grievance, even when it presents itself armed to the teeth. Where such a conviction is genuinely held, there can be no outflanking it with appeals to self-interest or practical objections.

Other justifications, however, are grounded in more practical concerns, and begin with the pragmatic point of view that since armed groups are a major feature of contemporary conflict there is no escaping that they must be a significant part of efforts to end such conflicts peacefully. The military option has proved, in the overwhelming majority of cases, insufficient in itself to defeat a determined insurgency, especially where this arises from, and plausibly claims to represent, legitimate grievances. No mediator treats lightly the fact that negotiations may involve sitting down with war criminals, and neither would they want the peace process to excuse such crimes. At the same time, state actors seem equally culpable in most conflicts, and while the idea that some armed groups use such heinous tactics as to put themselves beyond the pale is attractive in theory it is difficult to apply in practise. Dialogue is a necessary option, therefore, because even if we feel intuitively that there are situations where dialogue should not be pursued, any attempt to objectively identify criteria for excluding parties from peace processes on the basis of their misdeeds is doomed to failure. Further, if a peace process is to achieve more than a mere cessation of hostilities, and bring about a real transformation, then the armed groups themselves must be transformed. Engagement, exposure to international actors, dialogues on democracy, human rights, etc. – all will be useful steps towards this goal.

Put this way, the practical argument in favour of engagement rests on a number of assumptions:

- that engaging armed groups is the preferred means to bring an end to armed conflict, not least because state military operations against insurgents rarely succeed;
- that armed groups will actually *negotiate*, that is, they will articulate demands that lend themselves to rational, or at least reasoned, debate;
- that through engagement, armed groups can be made to moderate their behaviour and their demands, and through international exposure make them amenable to the required transformation from the military to the political struggle; and,
- that the risks arising from engaging armed groups are outweighed by the prospects of achieving an end to the armed conflict.

Are these valid assumptions? The answer to this question deserves close attention. As noted, there is an increasing distrust of any association with armed opposition groups. Mediators who do engage need to be prepared to articulate and defend their reasons for doing so.

#### **i. Give war a chance?**

On the military point, the evidence supports the pro-engagement case. At least in recent times, almost all internal armed conflicts are ended through negotiation. On the other

hand, though few, there are examples where states have inflicted more or less complete defeats through military means, perhaps coupled with a “hearts and minds” strategy, but in any event without negotiation.

No doubt there are particular explanations and circumstances. The few examples of a successful military approach cannot undermine the general argument that negotiation is often likely to be necessary. Similarly, we can agree that an argument for a military strategy is unacceptable unless it can be shown that it would succeed at less human cost than a negotiated solution – an unlikely result in most cases. But there is a more fundamental issue here, namely that in many cases the use of military means has, *at least at some point in the conflict*, inflicted sufficient harm on the armed group to ease a negotiated solution. Theory tells us that a “hurting stalemate” provides a “ripe” moment for peace talks, but armed groups, no less than governments, are in the nature of things unlikely to feel any pain unless someone hits them. This is an uncomfortable fact for those urging negotiated solutions, as it implies that the use of force also plays a role, and that the choice between the two might be one of timing and tactics and not high principle.

## **ii. Negotiate what?**

The case for engagement rests also on the notion that once engaged there is something to talk about. Those opposed to negotiations with armed groups often ground this opposition, however, in the argument that the group in question has no rational demands, or presents demands no democratic government could ever accept, or makes demands that are beyond the capacity of any government(s) to address. Al-Qaeda is said to fit this mould, for example by arguing for the imposition of Islamist government throughout the Muslim world and the end of the State of Israel; so too the Lord’s Resistance Army, with their demand that no one in Northern Uganda should be permitted to ride a bicycle.

No 3<sup>rd</sup> party mediator would want to pursue negotiation where it was clear that no sensible result were possible. On the other hand, in this, as in much else, such a judgment is bound to be subjective. Governments will always, at least initially, dismiss armed groups as irrational, bent only on violence, and making impossible demands. This is understandable - separatism will seem unreasonable to any government. In short, who is to say what is irrational? Further, without engagement, how do we know this irrationality will not be tempered and tamed?

There remains, nevertheless, the lurking suspicion that there are situations where an armed groups aims and objectives are so unfathomable, or so clearly unachievable, that making the case for dialogue invites ridicule. Diplomatic initiatives, at least, are constrained somewhat by the notion that there is no point in convening parties unless “there is something to talk about”.

## **iii. My fair rebel?**

The case is repeatedly made that through engagement armed groups learn to moderate their behaviour and their demands, to become more – well –civilised, and indeed to make the transformation from the gun to the pen, from the jungle to the conference room, and

from the revolutionary military council to the parliament. There are certainly many examples to support this view.

What if this isn't the result, however? What if, on the contrary, the ups and downs of the peace process simply strengthen the 'hardliners'? More worryingly, what if this is not only an accident but an intended result, whereby a highly disciplined and strategic armed group uses engagement to gain legitimacy without giving up its commitment to armed struggle? In some conflicts it is alleged that this is precisely what is happening. Further empirical research might help identify the types of situations where engagement is more likely to bring about the transformation from warfare to politics, but at the end of the day much will depend on particular, local factors. Suffice it to say that where such a change is not readily forthcoming through the process, and where other evidence points to increasing risks of armed group misuse of the process (see below), then it is clear that government tolerance for continuing will rapidly diminish.

#### **iv. Unintended consequences of engagement – the legitimisation dilemma**

What are the risks of engaging, and how to judge whether these are outweighed by the prospects for peace? Two clear risks are (i) that through engagement the armed group gains in stature, and uses this to further its armed struggle; and (ii) engagement may be seen to reward those who resort to force by giving them a seat at the table, and indeed many will do so precisely for this reason. Common to each is the notion that engagement legitimises an armed band, giving it an undeserved credibility.

If the UN or a government agrees to meet, negotiate or establish contacts and "relations" with an armed group it confers on that group a degree of respectability, whatever its protests to the contrary. It may also imply that whoever is making contact recognises that the armed group is the legitimate representative for a particular cause (or community), or indeed that there is some basis for the grievance the group articulates. The fact that armed groups appear in many cases to use such meetings and contacts precisely to make them more respectable at an international level suggests those who fear such developments have some reason to do so. A formal meeting with a UN official, or senior diplomats from a powerful state, does bring with it some enhanced status. It might as well lead to enhanced expectations on the part of the armed group regarding its demands.

The risks of legitimising an armed group through opening contact and negotiations must be seriously considered. In some cases, a particular armed group may enjoy little or no local legitimacy; it might use international contact to justify the decision it made to take up arms, whereas other local actors may have pursued grievances through non-violent means. Indeed, some argue that this is precisely the intention of several armed groups – to gain greater international attention to a cause by taking up arms. By "internationalising" a local conflict they hope to gain greater leverage to advance their particular cause. They do this in different ways, but one tactic is to provoke government forces into using strong-arm and repressive measures precisely to attract international attention, and thereby set the scene for international mediation.

Some argue that this tactic was used very effectively by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in Kosovo in 1998-99, provoking not just efforts at international mediation but, eventually, NATO intervention. Others point to the manner in which the National Liberation Army (NLA, also Albanian) in neighbouring Macedonia appeared to mimic this tactic a year later. Similarly, the conflict in Darfur, Sudan, is partially attributed by some to the fact that the Darfurian armed groups, the SLM and JEM, saw the Sudanese Government making far-reaching autonomy and wealth and power-sharing agreements with the armed groups in south Sudan through the Naivasha peace talks, and they feared their region would be forgotten. In a situation where there are a plethora of armed groups, outside decisions regarding which one or two to speak with, or to treat as representative, not only run the risk of getting it wrong, and of potentially encouraging the formation of new groups, but also of being a further reason for armed groups to fight among themselves.

Responses to the legitimisation problem lead us to other assumptions, dealt with above, i.e. that dialogue is the only option, or that legitimisation may be a good thing because through winning international legitimacy an armed group is more likely to accept international norms and transform itself. In regard to allegations of bad faith negotiation, mediators can be manipulated by states no less than armed groups, and it is not clear that armed groups pose particular problems in this regard. A small state may resort to similar manipulative tactics against a bigger neighbour to provoke outside mediation. On the multiplication problem, further research is needed to determine how real this risk is in practice, and how causal the connection between peace negotiations and armed group formation. There are plenty of examples where engagement has not resulted in a proliferation of armed groups, and similarly examples where there are a large number of armed groups and no engagement or peace process at all.

One further point: so long as engaging armed groups is seen as exceptional, it is quite natural and normal for states to lobby against outsiders or the UN doing so, and to denounce such contacts when they occur. The trick then is to make such contacts less extraordinary, less status-enhancing and altogether more 'normal', so that opening them in any particular case became a matter of little significance. In other words, the more the international community engages with armed groups, the less likely it might be that such groups gain any greater legitimacy, as this derives from the "shock" and exceptional value of engagement today.

At the end of the day, however, the only way forward is to recognise both the risk of legitimisation and the possible benefits arising from engagement, and, therefore, to proceed in ways which minimise the risk and maximise the benefits.

### **3. Planning principled engagement**

What would a model of *principled engagement* look like? As a starting point, it is doubtful whether a single template is achievable or desirable. Each situation is different, and needs to be looked at on its own merits. If the problem is to avoid being manipulated, and to understand when engagement might be effective, then clearly much rests on being well-informed. The next sections of this paper sketch out useful information in relation to two key categories - the character and ideology of the armed group, and the strengths and weaknesses of the mediator.

#### **i. Analysing armed groups**

The aims, ideologies, modes of operation, means of fighting, structure and essential character of armed groups vary widely. They are certainly responsible for some of the most notorious atrocities of recent times. Indeed, it can fairly be stated that most of these groups routinely show little regard for human rights and humanitarian principles, and many operate internally in ways reminiscent of state totalitarianism. It would be unwise, nevertheless, to conclude in all or even most cases that they are any worse than the governments they confront.

Armed groups range from very small bands, living as urban terror cells, through large, army-like formations fielding thousands of soldiers. Command and control may be very tight and orders dutifully obeyed and rigidly enforced, or the “group” might actually have no coherent military strategy or very little sense of shared purpose beyond creating havoc. Armed groups with an educated, urban leadership will differ considerably from those whose leadership and constituency are essential rural and/or uneducated. Where leaders have experience of international politics they will relate in more sophisticated ways to international actors. Some groups will have strong internal accountability mechanisms, perhaps even subordinating a military wing to civilian control, and in other cases one or two military leaders will rule the group in dictatorial fashion. Armed groups may in some cases be supported by a majority of the civilian population and genuinely seek to represent the views of that population. In others, a leadership cult may be so strong that the group itself seems to exist solely to perpetuate that leadership. Where armed groups express a coherent ideology, and where attachment to it is genuine, then clearly the values flowing from this ideology will impact on the group’s proclivity to end abuses and seek reasonable solutions to the conflict. But in a number of cases, there appears little ideological basis for a group’s armed activities.

In short, armed groups share little in common beyond the fact that they do not (yet) wield state power. This suggests we need to be cautious in preparing any typology, or in arriving at any general conclusions concerning their likely behaviour.

As noted, one part of the answer to problems of legitimisation and manipulation is for mediators to plan carefully their engagement with armed groups. Conflict mediation is more art than science, and it would be pointless to attempt a rigid methodology. There are

also numerous factors that ought to be considered in thinking about ways to win an armed group's confidence and acceptance of a potential mediator. Most of these are obvious, and the purpose here is simply to list them for ease of reference. As noted above, armed groups are as diverse and varied as the situations and countries that spawn them. Generalisations are (generally!) unhelpful. Thinking about the following points will help to pin down some of the most salient features:

- **Leadership** - Who's in charge, and how did they get there? What degree of command and control do they have over their forces? What mechanisms of accountability, if any, are in place in relation to the decisions they make? What role do civilian/military, urban/rural, "legal"/clandestine and exile/home divisions play in the exercise of leadership? Answers, even if only partial, to all of these questions will be of central importance in determining how to engage, and with whom.
- **Ideology** – While perhaps increasingly hard to decipher in many conflicts, most armed groups still have some shared vision or purpose, even if identifying a coherent ideology might be difficult. What is that shared vision? If it includes an aspiration to political power and statehood then it ought to be possible to engage the armed group within an existing framework of international law and institutions, as achieving their purpose usually requires accepting this framework. While this seems banal, it is crucially important as the legitimacy of this international framework can be invoked to justify insisting on certain minimum standards of conduct.

Outsiders tend to conclude too readily that an armed group's ideology or value system is incoherent, absent or of little relevance. The cohesion of the group usually requires some shared vision even if that might appear obscure or indecipherable to outsiders. In this regard it is worth noting that where a religious motivation is claimed, it may prove harder for interlocutors to engage the group through the secular, internationalist language of standard diplomacy.

- **Insiders and constituencies** – It is not always easy to win an armed group's confidence to be accepted as a mediator, and more difficult still to convince them of the idea that a negotiated solution is desirable. Doing both is essential. Who are potential allies who have influence with the armed group?

In most civil wars, there are various civil society organisations (NGOs, trade unions, faith groups, etc.) who might be sympathetic to or supportive of the armed group involved. Whether or not they are formally aligned (even if clandestinely) such groups can play a very useful role as "insiders", with access to and listened to by the armed group leadership.

An armed group's willingness to accept the need for talks, for a particular mediator, or for accepting a particular element of an agreement, will be greater if those they trust and depend on are pushing for such acceptance. (This, by the way,

is another reason why it is important that Track 1 mediators maintain close contacts with the peace building efforts of civil society.)

Similarly, most armed groups have some sort of constituency – those they claim to fighting on behalf of (the poor, minority X, religious group Y, etc) Diasporas sometimes form a critical constituency. The degree to which the group actually fairly represents its claimed constituency will vary, of course, and where there is little support for the group the constituency will have little influence (although this might be a reason to find means of ensuring their views are taken into account in the peace process).

- **Sponsors** – Many armed groups still have external state sponsors, even if the end of the Cold War means there is less great power interest in controlling such groups. Obviously, identifying these sponsors and other sources of external support will be important in building leverage over the group.
- **Capacity** – As already noted above, many armed groups lack the technical expertise or resources to effectively negotiate. They may lack too the means to implement agreements, or to ensure their forces abide by agreed provisions. No doubt the same might be said of states, but, again, in relation to armed groups building capacity will present problems for outsiders, at least those representing official institutions. It would seem sensible for potential mediators to think carefully about an armed group’s capacity to engage in serious negotiations and, if necessary, identify creative ways in which to strengthen that capacity.

All of these factors should influence decisions on engagement, and certainly on the questions of whom and how to engage. On the question of whether to engage at all, factors such as the armed group’s leadership, ideology and capacity are key.

## **ii. Fraternalisation – an occupational hazard?**

There is a risk arising from working with armed groups that deserves special mention, and should be considered carefully in planning such engagement. This is the fraternisation problem – where the mediator stands accused of being too close to the armed group, losing his/her impartiality (or the appearance of such). While an accusation of bias might arise regarding relations with any belligerent, there is perhaps a greater in relations with armed groups in a number of cases:

- Where the government in question enjoys very little domestic or international legitimacy. That is, where a particular armed group is seen to be waging a legitimate struggle by a majority of the population, and by outside actors, the group will naturally gain sympathy and support.

- Where the government is responsible for serious human rights abuses and war crimes, and the armed group's struggle is at least in some ways a means of defence against such abuses.
- Where the armed group has considerably less capacity than governments to engage in ceasefire or peace negotiations. They may lack technical expertise in a number of crucial areas, and lack too sufficient resources to mobilise this expertise. Problems of legitimisation may make it difficult for international organisations to assist in building this capacity. The mediator may find her/himself compelled to 'fill in the gaps'.
- Where the armed group is ill-equipped to present its case, or its side of the story, to international media in particular, for whatever reason, the mediator may find her/himself thrust into the position of explaining the armed group's position, even if only in order to ensure a barrage of slick government propaganda doesn't derail the process.

The first two situations may well overlap with an unwillingness of the part of the government to engage in talks, which itself could tend to push the mediator towards sympathy for the other side.

Little can be done in relation to the first two situations. Mediators must retain the trust of the parties in order to be effective, and doing so will usually require that they remain impartial. This does not imply, however, that the mediator has no position in relation to repression and violence. Provided her/his yardstick is grounded in international standards, and is applied equally to both sides, s/he can take a position. The party affected, of course, may not understand or accept this point.

In relation to the third and fourth situations, mediators might avoid the problem by looking for third parties – other states, private foundations, NGOs – to provide needed support where an armed group's negotiating capacity is weak. It is not always easy, however, to find willing third parties, or to fund such activities, especially where the opponent government disagrees with capacity-support to an armed group. Explanations of a party's position may be called for, but if the mediator does this once too often for the same party then the public will begin to doubt her/his objectivity.

Finally, it should be noted too that showing partiality towards an armed group may increase one's leverage with the group.

### **iii. Analysing the 3<sup>rd</sup> party interlocutor**

Possible interlocutors should assess carefully their own identity and assess too how they will be perceived by the parties to the conflict. There might be situations where 2 or 3 different governments and 1 or 2 intergovernmental organisations might be acceptable

mediators. In such a case, which potential mediator (or combination thereof) would be the least likely to confer unwarranted legitimacy, or best be able to resist manipulation?

The need to assess one's own strengths and weaknesses is clear, but ideally such an assessment must account too for the strengths and weaknesses of others. Even if most of the ticks fall in the weakness column, the potential interlocutor might still have more strengths than anyone else. The essential point here is to understand the range of possible interlocutors and weigh decisions on engagement by an objective assessment of who is best placed to minimise risk and maximise beneficial impact.

A relatively weak mediator (e.g., small states or private foundations) may mean less risk of legitimisation, but more risk of lacking the clout to resist manipulation or make an agreement stick. This suggests the need to think about co-operation and sequencing. For example, the role of the weak interlocutor might be simply to initiate an engagement, opening the door for the UN or other stronger interlocutor to enter when circumstances permit. Certainly weak interlocutors will need to ensure through partnerships, advisory groups etc., that where needed they are applying the leverage of others. Co-operation and co-ordination are key, and it might well be that mediation efforts should be seen as multi-party endeavours, where a lead actor is able to involve others as and when needed.

One of the difficulties in relation to such comparative assessments, of course, is that there may be tensions or competition between different potential interlocutors. The fact is that the number of possible international mediators is expanding, as regional organisations pay greater attention to preventive diplomacy, as private foundations increasingly pursue Track 1 efforts, and as individual governments pursue more bilateral initiatives. The question of how to respond constructively to this competition, and to refine the art of "baton-passing" within the mediation business deserves further attention.

#### **iv. Policy options**

If the foregoing discussion fairly presents the issues and dilemmas arising, the task ahead is to develop some possible solutions.

Clearly, mediators themselves, through careful planning, can minimise the risks of engagement and maximise the chance of a successful negotiation. **Better analysis** is the key, and this should focus on understanding the character and ideology of the armed group and on honest self-reflection concerning the mediator's own strengths and weaknesses.

Are there, however, institutional solutions to some of the problems identified?

- (i) Assessing the comparative advantages of potential mediators is crucial. In some cases, only private or bilateral contacts are possible with an armed group, in others such relatively weak interlocutors will lack the clout to carry through. Is there a way to ensure that the UN, regional IGOs, mediating states and private

foundations work more closely together in making such assessments? What type of **co-ordinating mechanism** might work, and where should it be located?

- (ii) A key task remains **to make engagement with armed groups more routine, and therefore less status-enhancing**. The UN has found ways to engage with all manner of NGOs, including many that are actively opposed and disliked by governments. Is there a way to allow some kind of ‘soft’ representation for armed groups in international forums? This would have to begin in an obscure and less-threatening area of concern – the UN’s cultural or educational work, for example. The point would be to make one of the UN’s many tents big enough to accommodate armed groups.
- (iii) Peace agreements ending civil wars almost always require painful compromises, and the pariah groups of yesterday are often the opposition parties of today and the elected governments of tomorrow. Recognising this fact, it should be possible for the international community to accept **means through which armed groups could be brought further within and subject to structures of global governance**. There is a precedent in regards to the treatment given “national liberation movements”. The PLO, SWAPO, and ANC were all accorded observer status at the UN and Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions included provisions whereby these movements could declare their willingness to abide by its provisions. Without going this far, it should be possible to find ways to encourage all armed groups to make declarations committing themselves to human rights and humanitarian law principles. One example is the “Geneva Call” initiative, whereby a small NGO (associated to the ICBL) accepts and publicises armed group declarations that they will not purchase, stockpile or use anti-personnel landmines. Though few groups have done so, an expanded and perhaps more formal initiative might be worth pursuing.
- (iv) Further empirical research is needed on a number of questions, in order to allow a much more solid appreciation of the risks of engagement. Such research might include, for example:
- Terrorist lists and proscribing armed groups as “terrorists” – what actual impact does this have on peace processes? Anecdotal evidence points to both negative and positive outcomes (i.e. discouraging and encouraging negotiation), but it would be good to test assumptions.
  - The *multiplication* problem – is there a means of ascertaining through comparative research the factors under which engagement would more likely lead to a proliferation of armed groups? And, on the contrary, is the likelihood of a negotiated settlement a factor that stimulates a diffuse struggle to coalesce around a unified platform?