

Lessons learned



Who to engage?

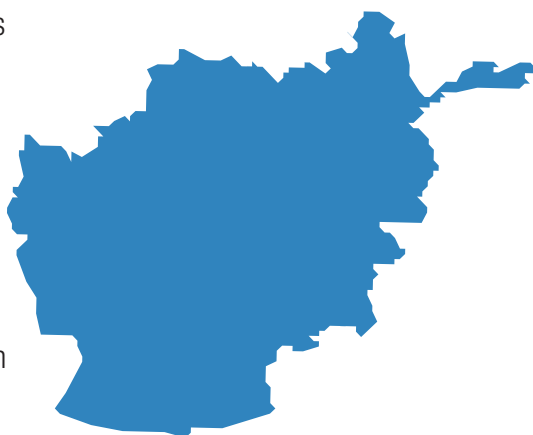


Key actors

Exclusion of key actors in power-sharing arrangements has previously created conditions for continued violence.

Exclusion of the Taliban post-2001 is considered a key factor in the Taliban's resurgence.

The system of government in Afghanistan is not designed for opposition politics.



Inclusion of key actors is essential to a sustainable peace process (Larson and Ramsbotham, 2018) – recognition of this led to the creation of a power-sharing National Unity Government in 2014.

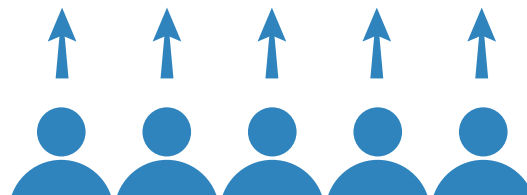
Civil society

Local



Support from the top is critical but not sufficient; civil society must be included in the peace process.

Transparency allows civil society to identify and articulate the agendas of non-elite actors, whose support is important in encouraging public support for a peace process (Lieven, 2019).



External



External actors – notably Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, India and the US – are crucial to prevent continual spoiling. Currently, all of these actors have an interest in the continuation of hostilities for their own ends (Larson and Ramsbotham, 2018), therefore any peace process designed by these powers and guided by their own national interests risks replicating mistakes from the Bonn Agreement, creating a settlement that is ultimately based on foreign interests and detrimental to peace in Afghanistan (Berdal and Suhrke, 2018).

How to engage?

1. Start with a good grasp of context and actors

A successful negotiation is predicated on understanding the actors and conflict cleavages (Gopal, 2017; Martin, 2014). The importance of local and contextual understanding should extend to peace process strategies that draw on Afghan cultural heritage (Semple, 2009).

Context: It is important to understand power dynamics, and where and how local conflicts overlap with broader conflict cleavages.

It is not only the Taliban we must understand; government-controlled areas of the country rest in the hands of elite networks. How the international community interacts with these networks is critical to ensuring that a brokered peace can be achieved and maintained (Jackson, 2018).



Actors: Knowledge about the Taliban movement is critical, but it has been largely understudied (Jackson, 2018).

There is no agreement on whether the movement is a monolithic entity, centralised and hierarchical, or fragmented and dependent on equally fragmented local support (Staniland, 2014; Baczko, 2013); the debate about fragmentation may be more political than valuable, but understanding the group, who they represent and how they operate is critical (Farrell and Semple, 2015).

Poor understanding has repercussions for how to engage and assess ability to carry out any actions that have been outlined in a peace agreement.

One key lesson is to rely on subject matter and area expertise over more generalised peace process expertise, and to invest more heavily in high-quality research on the armed actors engaged in the conflict.

2. Design the approach as realistically as possible

The most important lesson, repeated throughout the literature, is to ensure adequate time – a peace process cannot be rushed.

The most recent talks have been characterised by haste – the Bonn Agreement, negotiations surrounding the surge and the development of the National Unity Government were all rushed by the external actors brokering them, with deeply problematic consequences.

In recent talks, which have already collapsed, US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad mentioned the need for speed in finalising talks in Doha; this raised concerns among observers of past talks, who emphasise that success relies on approaching the process as a marathon, not a sprint (van Biljert, 2018).



3. The context is fluid, and the process long, therefore a feedback mechanism is critical

A keen grasp of the actors and context is a fleeting concept.

Power shifts, leaders die and alliances are strategic (Fotini, 2012), so learning must continue, and be incorporated, throughout the entire length of the engagement.

A flexible process that allows for evolution in response to shifting dynamics on the ground is key.

Equally important is a functional feedback mechanism to allow new information to flow into that evolution in a timely manner.

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