Power-sharing

KEY FINDINGS
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Power-sharing is one of the most common ways in which conflict is brought to an end. While popular as a way to persuade conflict actors to engage in an inclusive political process, it can be controversial, and there are many alleged pitfalls such as corruption, instability of government, social division, blockage of popular legislation, and exclusion of non-dominant groups that can continue long after conflict has finished. Strategies to counter these problems depend on which of the many forms of power-sharing is present (see also PSRP’s power-sharing infographics).

For key PSRP publications related to power-sharing, visit our website at www.politicalsettlements.org/key-findings.

Key Findings

Power sharing can take several different forms. Political power-sharing involves establishing an executive grand coalition, proportional representation in legislatures, mutual veto and segmental autonomy. Economic power-sharing means joint participation in economic institutions. Military power-sharing refers to provisions which share power in the institutions of police, army or security ministries. Territorial power-sharing is divisions of power on a territorial basis.

Power-sharing can be successful at ending the violence but often ‘splits power’ between groups and in a sense builds the conflict into new institutions, rather than resolving it (Bell & Pospisil 2017). It will therefore have to be supported over time, and supplemented by other modes of inclusion and rights, if it is to build beyond an ‘elite pact’ into a broader social contract (Bell 2018a).

Political power-sharing involves both hazards and opportunities for the inclusion of women, depending on the function is has (Bell 2018b). While power-sharing can emerge as an elite pact that largely excludes those non-dominant groups not directly involved in the conflict, there is evidence that power-sharing peace agreements are much more likely to have provisions for women and that these are more likely to be implemented (Bell & McNicholl 2019; Bell 2015; Wise 2018a).

Economic power-sharing shares resources between groups to address inequalities that often lead to conflict. Political disputes over natural resources should be approached where possible as technical problems to be concluded after talks. Mediators should attempt to re-frame power-sharing debates so as to manage the tension between the political drivers of economic power-sharing, and the need for functional and accountable economic institutions (Bell 2018c).
Military power-sharing involves sharing the armed forces between factions to the conflict. This can take the form of a merger of forces or joint command structures. It means those involved in conflict control the military so rule of law and human rights protections are important. While it encourages inclusion of different groups, it can also create an incentive for smaller groups outside the process to assert claims violently (Bell, Gluckstein, Forster & Pospisil 2018).

Territorial power-sharing is the delegating of some of central government’s responsibilities to different geographical areas. Some creativity may be required to accommodate different national groups' within one state to statehood. This may involve: incremental decision-making powers, ‘fuzzy borders’, and new choices for the territory in the future through referenda at a later date (Wise 2018a; Wise & Bell 2018b).

Territorial power-sharing comes with potential opportunities and risks for women’s inclusion. New post-conflict institutions can be designed to be more inclusive but fundamental rights and protections can also be at risk. Risks are also different for different women depending on whether they are part of the majority or minority community in the sub-national territory (Wise & Bell 2018b).

Peace agreements that create sub-state entities only rarely contain provisions that support the participation of non-dominant minority groups within sub-state or devolved institutions. They do however tend to include provisions for non-discrimination based on gender. This means there are opportunities for alliances between non-dominant groups, women and other civic actors who do not fall within the main social divisions to support a broader inclusion agenda (Wise 2018b).

Power-sharing is sometimes intended as an interim measure to be replaced at a later date with another form of governance. When power-sharing is temporary, the democratic arrangements designed to replace it may also need to provide for the political accommodation of groups. Where power-sharing is focused on bringing armed actors into an interim transitional arrangement, these actors need to retain some hope of having access to power post-transition if they are to be incentivised to ‘complete’ the transition (Bell 2018d).

Power-sharing arrangements tend to focus on the rights of groups rather than individual level rights, so human rights for individuals are important. Local actors often push for human rights as part of the power-sharing deal as well as more abstract commitments to the rule of law and international norms (Bell 2018d).
PSRP Key Findings Series

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