Dissolving conflict. Local peace agreements and armed conflict transitions

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ABSTRACT

The lessening likelihood and the often-sobering outcomes of comprehensive national peace processes directed attention to local peacemaking in recent years. Difficult to distinguish and define, local peace agreements work on a broad range of issues and engage a multitude of diverse actors. Local peace agreements construct a world of peacemaking that contradicts an ordered and levelled understanding of conflict. Instead, they reveal hybrid conflictscapes that are enmeshed in ways analytically hard to distinguish. In such an environment, local peace agreements can employ various functions: they can connect and strategise relationships between actors, mitigate and manage conflict settings, or disconnect localities or communities from the broader conflict landscape. In doing so, they do not necessarily work towards a linear and sequenced resolution of a conflict but towards dissolving it by undermining the conflict's logics and conditions.

Introduction

Recent years have seen growing interest in local peace agreements from academics and peacebuilding practitioners alike. Such interest results from two parallel and interrelated trends. First, the era of comprehensive peace agreements, which are still perceived as the gold standard in international peacemaking, appears to be in decline. Fewer comprehensive peace agreements are signed today compared to the heyday of comprehensive peace processes in the mid-2000s. Even if comprehensive peace agreements are concluded, such as recently in South Sudan or Sudan, the subsequent peace processes are challenging and troublesome. Comprehensive peace agreements do not succeed in the way peacemaking practitioners want and expect them to.

Second, local peace agreements, often an outcome of customary, long-standing local conflict management practices, become increasingly accessible to international peacebuilding. The practice of local peacemaking is not new. It is ancient, most probably, as old as the experiences of armed conflict. Such long history notwithstanding, local peacemaking experience increased recognition in recent years. The number of publicly available, written local peace agreements has risen drastically. They occur in conflict contexts as different as Syria, Pakistan, South Sudan, or Kenya. Online available and well-

distributed agreements and international reporting, often facilitated by extrenal obser-vers, mediators, or peacebuilders present in the region, support the visibility of these processes also at the international level.

While local negotiations on peace have always been a part of the grey zones produced by armed conflict. Yet, the written and formal character of many of these agreements suggests that their functionality in conflict landscapes has changed. Local peace agreements pose serious questions about what is perceived as peace or conflict, how this difference is argued and measured, and how armed conflict is negotiated and managed. Ultimately, the prevalence of local peace agreements, allegedly increasing, challenges the hierarchical assumption often encountered in analyses on contemporary armed conflict. In the conventional analytical approach, a politically motivated armed conflict at the national level would be accompanied by – and, sometimes, even cause – essentially de-politicised violence, commonly labelled as 'inter-communal' or 'tribal'.[1] In this line of reasoning, the comprehensive peace at the national level would eventually pacify this violence through functional governance arrangements, especially concerning the security sector, and, ideally, the integration of the practices of local peacemaking into formal government arrangements.

The argument put forward in this article questions this assumption on two grounds: First, the often-raised view distinguishing between a political process at the national level and diverse unpolitical and customary processes at the local level is misguided. Peace agreements are always political. They tend to apply the same mechanisms to manage or resolve armed conflict, irrespective of their 'local' or 'national' character. Second, a logical order based on labels such as 'national', 'sub-national', or 'local' does not reflect the hybrid and convoluted character of contem-porary armed conflict.[2] Most armed conflict settings globally encounter a mesh[3] of diverse landscapes of conflict, or what we may call 'conflictscapes'.

Conflictscapes work in different logics and to different aims. They appear at different levels in parallel. Local peace agreements reveal insights into these aims and logics. In doing so, they help to overcome the problematic assumption of different levels of conflict appearing in a hierarchical relationship. Instead of either a top-down approach, from the (inter)national level, or a bottom-up approach, from the local to the (inter)national, this article proposes a non-hierarchical view on armed conflict and efforts of peacemaking. This view also concerns the understand-ing of interrelatedness and impact. In contrast to focusing on issues such as agreement implementation and, ultimately, transitions at the national level, rationa-lising armed conflict in terms of intermingled conflictscapes requires divergent benchmarks to assess transitions that focus not on superficial political processes but on everyday realities.[4]

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[1]CSRF – Conflict Sensitivity Research Facility, and WFP – World Food Programme, *Adjusting Terminology for Organised Violence in South Sudan* (Juba: CSRF, 2020), 1.
[2]On hybridity in such settings see Roger Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
[3]On the concept of mesh, see Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
[4]Roger Mac Ginty, 'Everyday peace: Bottom-up and local agency in conflict-affected societies', *Security Dialogue* 45, no, 6 (2014).

For underpinning these arguments, the article develops a typology of local peace agreements – from local ceasefires to humanitarian agreements and the negotiation of local 'peace zones' – and discusses their functionality towards the overall conflict landscape. Local peace agreements, pragmatically defined as agreements that do not attempt to resolve the fault lines or do not include the main actors of the national conflict, impact conflict transitions only indirectly. They work in complex and non-linear ways. Nevertheless, local peace agreements may have two transformational effects. They may reshape the conflict context by undermining the factual preconditions of armed conflict, and they may contribute to a shift from logics of conflict towards logics of 'civicness', or peace. In doing so, they can offer a critical avenue to disintegrate a conflict setting. Without engaging in stipulating pathways for solving to the overarching lines of political contestation, local peace agreements so have the potential to undermine the conditions on the ground required for the pursuance of armed violence.

The empirical part of the investigation draws on two main sources. The PA-X peace agreements database developed by the Political Settlements Research Programme (PSRP) at the University of Edinburgh provides the local peace agreements primary data. After initially focusing on peace agreements at the international and national level, PA-X expanded by developing a local peace agreements database. PA-X local does not claim to be fully comprehensive (as PA-X aims to be for international and national-level agreements signed since 1990). However, it is fairly large, with 286 local agreements included at the time of writing. Importantly, for the development of the argument of the article, the question of what agreements to include into PA-X local triggered stimulating debates on the definition of local peace agreements and what delineates them, in spatial terms, but also regarding its content and context, from other forms of peace agreements.

To substantiate these debates by first-hand insights, PSRP organised two so-called Joint Analysis Workshops (JAWs) in London and Nairobi, inviting around a hundred participants (parties, mediators, observers) from local peace processes around the world. These workshops' regional focus was on local conflicts in East and Central Africa, the Horn, the MENA region, South-East Asia, and South Asia. The proceedings and a subsequent report[5] serve as a second source of primary data.

In developing its argument, the article starts by discussing the challenges of defining what local peace agreements are, especially considering the broader conceptual assumption of a non-hierarchical landscape of conflict. The second part engages in the empirical richness of local peace agreements, the topics they engage with, and the logics and aims they follow. Based on this empirical assessment, the third part elaborates on how peace agreements can be understood and conceptualised in a non-hierarchical logic of conflict that eschews methodical nationalism. This discussion also asks about the impact or, more precisely, the way or method of the impact local peace agreements may have on a given conflict landscape. This part elaborates on conflict logics and the idea of dissolving – rather than resolving – armed conflict. Finally, the conclusions reflect on the consequences for the support of conflict transitions and suggest exploiting the potentialities of local peace agreements in the reasoning of dissolving armed conflict.

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[5]Jan Pospisil, Laura Wise, and Christine Bell, *Untangling Conflict: Local Peace Agreements in Contemporary Armed Violence*, ASPR/PSRP Report No. 5 (Stadtschlaining, Austria: Austrian Study Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Political Settlements Research Programme, 2020).

Local. Peace. Agreements

Defining the phenomenon of local peace agreements is challenging in several respects. The complications already arise when defining 'peace agreements' in a general sense. Christine Bell was one of the first pointing towards an empirical definition when she argues that peace agreements eschew any legal definition but are diverse documents, whose commonality 'lies in a set of common features'.[6] These common features are clarified by the definitory work of the database projects that gather peace agreements since they had to engage in constant decision-making on which documents are to be classified as peace agreements and which not.

The PA-X database project defines peace agreements as 'formal, publicly available documents, produced after discussion with conflict protagonists and mutually agreed to by some or all of them, addressing conflict with a view to ending it'.[7] In contrast to the main PA-X database that relies on the UCDP definition of armed violence, which requires a threshold of more than 25 conflict-related deaths per year, PA-X local does not engage in a clear-cut definition of (armed) conflict. That enables a potentially broader base of local peacemaking, although with limited practical consequences – even Kenya, not characterised by an armed contestation at the national level, matches this threshold. UCDP, in turn, incorporates the component of 'incompatibility' between the warring parties when referring to its dataset of peace agreements. Per design, peace agreements should entail a 'plan to regulate the incompatibility' (UCDP definitions[8]).

These different approaches have significant implications for how local agreements are seen. Dealing with incompatibility highlights the various aspects of 'peace' as a broad umbrella term. The predominant type of agreements concerned by this conceptual question is ceasefire agreements that, most commonly, do not – and do not intend – to regulate incompatibilities. Ceasefires focus on establishing a truce, often for purely tactical or humanitarian reasons. Yet, they are an often-used component in local agreements. Further, ceasefires are rarely dealing with peace or even a temporary cessation of hostilities. Local agreements found, for instance, in Syria deal with groups agreeing to a ceasefire with the intention to join forces and collaboratively fight a common enemy. Such ceasefire agreements might stipulate that the warring parties agree 'to strive to form a joint chamber of operations against the criminal regime and its allies',[9] which resembles a declaration of war rather than a peace agreement in the common sense.

These patterns demonstrate the difficulty of conceptualising 'peace' in local peace agreements. The empirical comparison of the agreements thus relies on a broad definition of peace. A substantial number of agreements across contexts are less about peacemaking than conflict management. Management is especially prevalent when the conflict concerns economic issues between communities, such as cattle raiding and grazing rights. Local peace agreements may refer to more transcendent or ideological aspects of peace, yet, most of the time, they remain restricted to the concrete issue at hand.[10]

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[6]Bell, Christine, *On the Law of Peace: Peace Agreements and the Lex Pacificatoria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 47.
[7]Christine Bell and Sanja Badanjak, 'Introducing PA-X: A new peace agreement database and dataset', *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 3 (2019): 453.
[8]https://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions/.
[9]*Agreement between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Nour al-Din al-Zenki, Aleppo Countryside*, 16 November 2017, PA-X Local, document no 2174.
[10]See, for instance, the agreements between Misseriya and Dinka Ngok in Abyei, Sudan/South Sudan, which are negotiated almost on an annual basis since the last 2000s. For a typical example for regional conflict management, confer the *Conference Agreement, Misseriya and Dinka Ngok Conference*, Kadugli, January 2011, PA-X Local, document no 1671.

An often-difficult distinction concerns the difference between peace agreements and established customary law practices. The resemblance is close since a number of local peace agreements, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, the MENA region, and Central Asia, refer to customary courts or even trigger their establishment. Agreements might be even classic deferrals, whereby an issue is transferred to a court for legally binding decision-making.[11] In some cases, local peace agreements directly resemble court decisions. The 'Ramada Peace Agreement', signed in Puntland/Somalia in 2005,[12] treads like an appeal decision to existent court rulings, stating, for instance: 'In the case of the first killing of the checkpoint, the committee agreed to follow the judgment of the court since the offenders acknowledged the killing and the court ruled on that basis'. Consequently, the payment of *diya* (compensation money) was ordered.

Besides the agreements' goals, the spatial dimension is the second element that factors in their definition. The term 'local' provokes debate. It implies a limiting territorial notion while, at the same time, referring to relationship-types, the character of the involved actors, and the aims associated with an agreement. Divergence of actors and aims from the national level contestation is a common denominator across context. To be considered 'local', agreements usually eschew addressing the fault lines of a national-level armed conflict. However, this does not imply a hierarchical relationship between conflict levels. For stakeholders of such processes, 'local' peace agreements may indeed bear more relevance and tangible impact compared to peacemaking at the national level. The significance of everyday relevance, especially in the context of everyday security, is underlined by the regular occurrence of agreements that only want to keep the national conflict out of a particular area.

Another striking empirical feature is the agreement's diversity. Being considered as 'local' could point towards remoteness. In many cases, however, this sentiment is misleading. Local peace agreements appear in remote areas in the countryside, but they are as well negotiated in urban areas. They also can serve strategic interests in international operations. Local peace deals haven been negotiated in support of military hearts-and-minds operations. One such example is the numerous local ceasefires brokered by the US military under General David Petraeus in their attempt to secure Baghdad in the early 2000s.[13]

A similar pattern can be observed when looking at the actors involved. They are often customary groupings or local militias who rely on traditional conflict management and peacemaking methods. However, conflict parties engaged in a contestation at the national level and regional and international brokers and mediators can also be part of the mix. Without the practice of international peace mediation in civil wars, local peace agreements would not exist in the form we see them emerging at current.

This article does not attempt a comprehensive quantitative investigation of local peace agreements. Therefore, it does not need to develop criteria that enable clear decision making for deciding whether an agreement fits the category 'local' or not. Most of these

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[11]An agreement between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham closed on 15 June 2017 in Syria on a construction on a road barrier, for instance, stipulates 'the barrier will remain in the hands of Ahrar al-Sham until the Jaysh al-Fath court makes a decision'. PA-X Local, document no 2181.

[12]*The Ramada Peace Agreement*, 2005, PA-X Local, document no 1852.

[13]Mary Kaldor and Saskia Sassen, 'Introduction: Global Insecurity and Urban Capabilities', in *Cities at War: Global Insecurity and Urban Resistance*, ed. Mary Kaldor and Saskia Sassen, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2020), 12–13.

criteria would unhelpfully look for smallness that distinguishes local peace agreements from 'big' national peace agreements. The peculiarity of local peace agreements is not to be found in the distinction between 'small' and 'big' peace.

In many instances, they would not exist if they would address the fault lines of the national-level conflict that is, often, ongoing in parallel. Against this background, it can be derived that their 'local' character is, first and foremost, a deliberate decision to *not* aim for national or even international peace. The precondition of their functioning relies on the humility and confinement of their aims, which focuses on impacting a concrete, sub-national setting in a tangible way. Such humility is not to be mistaken as a limitation of their impact, in the same way as the claim of comprehensive peace does not necessarily render national-level peace agreements more effective or substantial.

The logics of local peace

Before engaging in any discussion on quantitatively assessing content and aims of local peace agreements, it must be noted that all the numbers that are presented in the following come with two caveats. While the PA-X peace agreements database, on which this section predominantly relies, can legitimately claim to have a reasonable level of completion in its collection of national and international peace agreements negotiated since 1990, PA-X local is necessarily incomplete. PA-X local itself advises against quantitative comparisons due to the limited explanatory power of its N. Therefore, any comparison of local peace agreements has to face severe limitations, even when focusing on specific case studies. The N is unreliable.

Even though they are not meaningful in terms of statistical significance, the numbers presented in the following give some impression of the particularities of local peace agreements, which makes the exercise worthwhile irrespective of its limitations. Exploring local peace agreements' elements empirically demonstrates that they follow specific logics that construct their 'humble' character. These empirical elements also tell a peculiar story of conflictscapes that is often overshadowed by the focus on national level peacemaking, even ifbeing of essential relevance to affected communities.

Local peace agreements are exceedingly diverse. They are negotiated in a wide variety of contexts. In most instances, their content is highly specific to these contexts. Therefore, in contrast to agreements at the national level, local peace agreements do not rely on templates and predefined stipulations. They follow specific patterns that are, at times, repeatedly used, especially when it comes to repetitive conflict management exercises related to seasonal migration. Agreements tend to be shorter and more issue centred. A crude number demonstrates this characteristic: the average length of the 286 local peace agreements in PA-X local is three pages. The average length of the remaining 1,582 agreements in PA-X general (excluding the local agreements), a fair number of them very short, is about seven pages. The difference is vast and shows that local peace agreements have less regular density and a stronger focus on specific issues at hand that are in need of settlement.

The second difference concerns the difference in aims. While aims are diverse, a global comparison still suggests that local peace agreements tend to focus on the concrete situation on the ground. 110 out of 286 agreements in PA-X local, about 38%, are classified as ceasefires compared to only about 18% (278 out of 1582) of national and

international agreements. Indeed, the most common provisions in local peace agreements concern ceasefire modalities and the security sector. Some of these stipulations would fit the markers of what is commonly perceived as disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) and security sector reform (SSR). The intended impact is still different.

The agreements rarely aim to restrain armed forces or systematic disarmament like in DDR campaigns. The main concern of these processes is the demilitarisation of localities in community-led processes. One method is community-based armed declarations. An inter-communal conflict mitigation agreement negotiated and signed in Central Kenya exemplifies this: 'The communities in search of pasture and water should declare arms in their possession and they will rightfully use them to protect their livestock'.[14] Such agreements might come with provisions providing the (re-) establishment of a formal monopoly of force. In the Central African Republic, one comparable agreement attempted to link the demilitarisation with improved cognition and legitimisation of military actors: 'To prohibit the carrying of weapons and wearing of military uniform throughout the prefecture, except with authorization from a hierarchical officer'.[15]

Demilitarisation efforts may also be linked with resurrecting political hierarchies, often underpinning wider ceasefire provisions. Such provisions often occur in multi-faceted but still comparably formalised conflict settings like in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s or the currently ongoing war in Syria. In the absence of existing state structures, local peace agreements can be used to formalise the function of traditional authorities as a counterpart to armed groups through their linkage to disarmament processes. An example from an agreement negotiated in the village of Hazano in December 2018 demonstrates this function: 'The unstable factions of Hay'at Taḥrīr al-Shām are obliged to coordinate with the council of dignitaries and notables on the town to stand neutral and not carry weapon unless they want to patrol'. This short stipulation manages not only to put the 'dignitaries and notables' in a formal position but also transfers one of the fighting factions (Hay'at Taḥrīr al-Shām) in a policing role that supports the local governance framework.[16]

These attempts in formalising the control of armed actors demonstrate the demobilisation dimension of local peace agreements. Per definition, the agreements are not concerned with restructuring and democratising a national security apparatus or integrating non-state armed groups. Should they do so, they could hardly be considered to be local. Nevertheless, they are concerned with the structural role of armed actors, especially in relation to other public authorities. The supervision of demilitarisation triggers a variety of processes concerned with legitimacy, either by formalising the role of customary authorities or by the legitimisation of armed actors by making them accountable for complying with the agreement.

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[14]*Resolutions of the Conflict Mitigation Strategy between Elders from Garissa (Lagdera Sub-County) and Isiolo (Garbatulla Sub-County) Counties*, attended by National Government Officials together with Building Bridges Initiative at Sportsman's Arms Hotel, Nanyuki, closed on 1 April 2019, PA-X Local, document no 2316.

[15]*Feuille de Route, Prefecture of Haute-Kotto*, Central African Republic, closed on 19 December 2017, PA-X Local, document no 2204.

[16]*Agreement between Tahrir al-Sham and the elders of the village of Hazano*, Syria, closed on 17 December 2018, PA-X Local, document no 2283.

Besides their focus on security provisions, local peace agreements show other peculiarities that structurally distinguish them from other peace accords. The categories developed by the PA-X database suggest a strong focus on mobility, access and aid delivery, the reliance on traditional conflict management methods, and their concern with pastoralist nomadic rights and reparations. References to internationally acclaimed norms and the presence of international actors are negligible. The most prominent features include:

(1) *Customary methods of conflict management.* The references to customary authorities – either to traditional or religious leaders or traditional laws, or both, while avoiding formalised processes of state governance – feature in many local peace agreements.

Customary and religious authorities engage in the negotiations of peace agreements in diverse ways. Often, what we categorise as local peace agreements are, in fact, transcriptions of broader peace conferences lasting for several days and attended by a diverse range of customary authorities. These actors then sign the outcome document and, subsequently, guarantee the implementation. Monitoring and safeguarding implementation is the usual structural role customary and religious authorities play.

Since external monitoring and evaluation is, in most instances, not available or sought for, other forms of implementation guarantors are required. Customary public authorities, like elders or religious leaders, can act as such. In many contexts, they are the only instance able to provide these guarantees that is not relying on arms or deferred political power but on public legitimacy. If customary authorities sign and guarantee an agreement, the compliance of the parties and the communities becomes an imminent matter of their legitimacy. Their function fundamentally relies on their ability to influence and guide communities. A local peace agreement signed by them can so turn quickly into a matter of personal concern. If parties or communities do not comply, the legitimacy of the guarantors inevitably suffers, and it does so immediately.

(2) *Pastoralist nomadic rights and reparations.* The second specific element the comparison reveals is references to pastoralist rights, such as grazing rights, movement of communities and livestock, or land rights. In the written agreements available in PA-X, these references exclusively occur in Sub-Saharan Africa – yet, in places as different as Nigeria, the Central African Republic, or Somalia. Usually, agreements address armed conflict that has already occurred or is expected immediately because of contested natural resources such as water points. The agreements then regularly turn to traditional authorities for supervising them. A typical example from the Tamalet area in Mali stipulates: 'For access to water sources, livestock breeders must apply to the committees or traditional authorities responsible for the management of said sources. They must strictly observe the rules or conventions regulating access to these water sources'.[17]

The reference to local authorities and local legal code is another prevalent pattern. The embeddedness in customary practices places agreements in a legal realm, making them perhaps even more legally valid than national-level agreements, where the question of the role of peace agreements in national and international law remains a constant challenge. An agreement from the Central Equatoria region of South Sudan concretises the traditional compensation laws with specific amounts charged if livestock destroys crops. The

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[17]*Understanding between the Tarbanasa, Ibawen and Targaitamout communities in the Tamalet area*, Mali, closed on 28 April 2018, PA-X local, document no 2292.

agreement assigns the regulation of these affairs to 'local authorities and committees'. Furthermore, it links these regulations with arms control: 'County authority and Town Council, with support from security organs, shall regulate the number of guns used by cattle keepers, who should be disarmed, if possible'.[18]

The reference to pastoralist rights represents a power-sharing element that local peace agreements usually do not frame in a language of political governance. Critical peace studies would tempt to categorise these methods as small-minded conflict management that only wants to span a safety net across conflict triggers without dealing with the so-called 'root causes' (such as gradual desertification, which could only be addressed indirectly). Such a view appears narrow. It neglects the possibility that continuous management might be a legitimate and long-term pathway for regulating violent conflict. As it is with power-sharing as a method, the management arrangements agreed upon might either have a long-term impact, or they might be re-negotiated. The alleged lack of vision in non-liberal conflict management practices mirrors the unrealistic and chronically failing expectations towards political power-sharing. The liberal hope of designing political transformation along a predefined sequence is deeply embedded in both reasonings.[19]

(3) *Mobility and access.* Another regular feature of local peace agreements is their concern with mobility issues, for instance, the movement along roads and to markets, and access, especially the access of humanitarian relief. Even though access to humanitarian relief is a frequent concern of non-local agreements, it is still more common in local ones. More than a third of all local agreements in the PA-X database address these issues. Furthermore, these concerns are often the reason behind the negotiation of agreements. Local ceasefires might unspin the joint use of infrastructures such as water pipes, electricity, or roads. Respective provisions are usually very concrete, such as this example from Libya demonstrates: 'Open the Agricultural Road in al-Qurdah [neighbourhood] for a period of seven days effective from Tuesday 10/04/2018 so as to make room for the efforts of the High Community Council for the Tribes, Cities and Villages of Fezzan'.[20]

Humanitarian provisions regularly accompany ceasefires, especially temporary ones. They evolve as standard features in many spatially localised agreements in highly disruptive conflict settings, ranging from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Syria. These provisions are usually very concrete, albeit their impact on the work of relief agencies is doubtful.[21] Especially Syria is a case where such provisions might be linked to political power-play. 'The two sides urgently take all necessary measures to improve the humanitarian situation in the ceasefire area. To achieve this goal, both sides facilitate the urgent entry of food and medicine relief as well as other humanitarian needs through the four crossing points side one controls by the entrances of Dhameer, Raheeba, Jeerood and Nasriyya. The same applies to the evacuation of injured people to Syrian or Russian

[18]*Pageri Peace Forum Resolutions*, South Sudan, closed on 6 March 2020, PA-X local, document no 2310.
[19]Christine Bell and Kimana Zulueta-Fülscher, *Sequencing Peace Agreements and Constitutions in the Political Settlements Process* (Edinburgh, Stockholm: International IDEA, 2016).
[20]*Statement by the Council of Tebu Tribes to Coordinate and End the Crisis in Sabha*, Libya, closed on 9 April 2018, PA-X local, document no 2102.
[21]Lisa Dorith Kool, Jan Pospisil, and Roanne van Voorst, 'Managing the Humanitarian Micro-Space: The Practices of Relief Access in Syria', *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 7 (2021).

hospitals, according to their will'.[22] As with national or international peace agreements, local ceasefires are by no means neutral but have to be interpreted in their relation to the wider conflict setting.

(4) *Norms promotion*. References to international rights catalogues feature in many peace agreements. According to PA-X, over 40% of the peace agreements – excluding what PA-X defines as 'local' – have specific references to human rights and human rights frameworks. This outcome represents a vast difference to local agreements. While several indeed refer to rights, in almost all instances it is not clarified if these rights were human rights. References to democracy, elections, the constitutional process, or civil society are widely absent. Apart from some isolated stipulations, human rights are regularly occurring only in agreements in the Central African Republic (probably due to the strong role of the UN peacekeeping mission MINUSCA in supporting the drafting of agreements) and in Kenya (where a relevant part of the local agreements deal with election-related violence and refer to the constitution[23]).

The neglect of human rights cannot be interpreted as an indication that local peace agreements lack a normative underpinning. It is only that such underpinning does not fall in line with liberal arguments claiming to provide a universal, rational pathway out of the conflict by complying with a certain legal framework. The normative underpinning of local peace agreements is predominantly procedural. The presence of customary and religious leaders in these agreements refers to their role as expressions of public authority. It invokes their role in guaranteeing the norms and values of the communities and negotiating parties. A community agreement signed in Maikona, Kenya, in 2009 makes this exceptionally explicit: 'We don't have to run to the government to sort out our issues. We can use our own systems. We can sort out our daily life issues through our own traditional system'.[24] Especially in Islamic contexts, such invocations are supported by references to God. In other cases, this normative role of public authority is more implicit. Local peace agreements are hardly ever non-normative, even though the normative dimension is not presented in the liberal language usually applied in peace agreements at the national or international level.

A non-hierarchical landscape of conflict

The empirical comparison shows that local peace agreements approach armed conflict differently than national or international agreements.[25] The main differences concern which goals are set, how they are approached, and how political symbols, especially symbolic referencing, are used. While national and international agreements are often drafted with the support of international law firms and strong external mediators, and routinely incorporate references to international rights catalogues, local peace agreements tend to confine themselves to regulating and managing the immanent.

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[22]East Qalamoun Ceasefire, Syria, closed on 5 September 2017, PA-X local, document no 2001.
[23]Cf. Emma Elfversson, 'The Political Conditions for Local Peacemaking: A Comparative Study of Communal Conflict Resolution in Kenya', *Comparative Political Studies* 52, no. 13–14 (2019).
[24]*Dukana-Dillo-Maikona Declaration*, Kenya, closed on 19 July 2009, PA-X local, document no 1944.
[25]Using the example of South Sudan, a similar argument is made in Alan Boswell, *Do local peace deals work? Evidence from South Sudan's civil war* (Kampala: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Uganda and South Sudan Office, 2019).

Nonetheless, there are references to superordinate frameworks, to God and the human obligation to peace, and to human rights. The regulatory aspect of local agreements is significantly stronger. As shown, this aspect is less about concretising a peace vision or even about triggering a transitional process. It is about managing the present. This difference is probably the main reason local peace agreements are commonly rendered subordinate to peacemaking at the national level by the peacebuilding community.

The focused goal setting is reflected in the topics local peace agreements try to regulate. The PA-X database does not offer a typology of local agreements based on what they seek to achieve. However, when looking at the available agreements, six broad categories of agreements can be distinguished:[26] (1) ceasefires aiming to stop fighting in a specific locale for a determined amount of time; (2) humanitarian agreements agreed to enable aid delivery or the joint use of basic infrastructures such as water supplies or electricity. Often, these agreements take the form of humanitarian ceasefires that link a truce to the delivery of humanitarian relief; (3) conflict mitigation, such as the temporary settlement of migration routes and grazing rights; (4) agreements to manage ongoing conflict (distinct from conflict mitigation), which entail forging new alliances and enabling armed actors to settle or move through territories; (5) disrelation agreements, which most commonly take the form of the establishment of local 'peace zones'; finally, (6), agreements supporting the implementation of an established national framework by 'mopping up' local resistance groups in order to include them into the ongoing transitional process.

The empirical investigation also allows assessing local peace agreements regarding their impact on a given conflict landscape. In a heuristic comparison, three main functionalities can be identified: connecting and strategising, management and mitigation, and active disconnection. Connecting and strategising agreement see the various warring parties using local agreements as a violence strategy to improve their situation and control of territory. Managing and mitigating is about limiting the worst effects of conflicts, whereas disconnecting agreements are negotiated to end the armed conflict in a specific area. Table 1 gives an overview of these functionalities and what agreements and agreement types address them.

Connecting and strategising

Most of the agreements in this category aim at impacting several conflictscapes at the same time. In so doing, they want to reshape the conflict landscape. These aims can be achieved in different ways. Agreements to 'clean up' remainders of armed factions that broke away from larger conflict parties are one example that has been used, for instance, in Nepal or Myanmar. Such strategising can also feed into bigger strategies. In Syria, the armed opposition groups settle on bilateral ceasefire agreements to join forces based on common tactical interests. In turn, the Syrian government increasingly used local peace agreements as a substitute for a broader national settlement to compartmentalise the armed opposition. Such relational patterns interconnect several conflictscapes, either through their functional impact – such as forging alliances between armed groups – or through the strategic calculation of one of the involved parties that commands the means to work across a relevant part of the conflict landscape.

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[26]Given the incompleteness of the data and the highly contextualised ways in which the agreements are negotiated and appear, it is not useful to provide proportions for the respective types.:

Management and mitigation

This functionality usually focuses on one specific conflictscape and attempts to manage, mitigate, or even settle a particular conflict. The category encompasses the 'classic' form of local peace agreements, whereby customary or religious authorities engage with local militias, often related to specific communities, to address the conflict between them. Such agreements are neither unpolitical nor subordinate to a national-level process. Armed conflict is political. Even in what is often perceived as 'tribal fighting' in East, Central, and Western Africa, there are politics at play. These politics might be challenging to understand and approach for external actors. Yet, they play a significant role in the contextualised approaches to conflict management, mitigation, and settlement that communities use.

These agreements are not subordinate to national-level processes. They differ since they concern different conflictscapes. Seeing local agreements as subordinate to a national peace process is solely methodical prejudice. Local peace agreements might just occur in parallel. They are always interconnected but not necessarily directly impacted by other conflictscapes ongoing in the same regional context.

Disconnecting

The third category of local peace agreements tries to disentangle the conflict landscape by actively disconnecting a certain conflictscape, a spatially defined territory, or a socially defined community. The establishment of community-led peace zones, as it was, for instance, pursued in the Philippines,[27] in Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone,[28] or Tuzla in Bosnia and Herzegovina,[29] is one example of this tactic. Agreements between tribes in Somalia or Pakistan that agree on a ceasefire and joint measures to defend the communities from the wider conflict setting are another. Disconnection is not necessarily peaceful. Actions could even reach the paradox of armed defence against armed conflict. However, in general terms, such agreements represent a disruption to the connecting and integrative character of war that tends to suck in all social constellations in its reachable surroundings.

Conflict disintegration

When comparing the diverse pathways of local peace agreement impact on conflict landscapes, it appears that the only feature all these agreements share is absences – mainly the absence of any attempt to cut the Gordian knot of the whole conflict mesh. However, they also share productive and positive implications. For making these implications visible, it is necessary to critically scrutinise habitual views on armed conflict and even discard some of them.

Local peace agreements are often analysed and reflected in their relation to the 'big' and comprehensive peace at the national level. Do they support a national peace process? Do they supplement areas left out by processes at the national level? Can they be scaled up or

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[27]Ed Garcia, 'Filipino zones of peace', *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 9, no, 2 (1997).
[28]Jeremy Allouche and Paul Jackson. 'Zones of peace and local peace processes in Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone', *Peacebuilding* 7, no, 1 (2017).
[29]Christopher Mitchell, 'Comparing Sanctuary in the Former Yugoslavia and the Philippines', in *Zones of Peace*, ed. Landon Hancock and Christopher Mitchell (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2007), 123–136.

interconnected to lead towards peace at the national level? This way of approaching local peacemaking rests on a misleading hierarchical and linear way of thinking. These assumptions might even work in a self-reinforcing way, especially when they go hand in hand with substantial peacemaking initiatives at the national and international level. Besides the simplified view on relation and causality, the approach is also methodically nationalist. It is unable to think of armed conflict and peacemaking beyond the state-based framework enshrined in the United Nations that dominates contemporary international politics.

Interpreting local peace agreements independent from national-level politics offers some structural insights into contemporary peacemaking. Even though these insights are nowadays widely accepted at a superficial level, they are still neglected in what is done as concrete conflict analysis, academically as well as in policy: the hybrid character of peacemaking, its equal involvement at all levels, and the non-directionality of peace formation.[30]

First, local peace agreements are not necessarily 'local' because they neglect or even 'exclude' external stakeholders or external views on conflict and conflict transformation. In some instances, there may be elders negotiating the management of cattle grazing routes under the shades of trees. However, such appearance does not preclude considerable external impact or involvement by international actors. For instance, in South Sudan, the Central African Republic, or Sierra Leone, UN and other international agencies have provided and do provide logistical and other types of support. Local peace processes may look hyperlocal but are, in fact, hybrid.

The increasingly written character of local peace agreements is an expression of their hybridity. Sometimes, they resemble codified laws. Sometimes, they use the same style and language as national or international peace agreements. Mediation support, often involving international humanitarian agencies or peace support operations as well as implementation structures, also points towards the essentially hybrid character of local peacemaking, even though this can have problematic implications on power dynamics.[31]

Second, local peacemaking is a long-standing and steady practice. While the number of local peace agreements shows an increase in recent years, the agreements' character and the issues they tackle suggest an explanation of this increase due to their improved availability and accessibility. Even with comprehensive peace agreements in place, the demand for local peacemaking does not vanish. Local peacemaking appears as a structurally necessary element of armed conflict transition.

Internationally led peacemaking and peacekeeping efforts increasingly accept this functionality. United Nations peacekeeping missions, such as UNMISS in South Sudan or MINUSCA in the Central African Republic, support local peacemaking efforts through their civil affairs divisions. Still, such support is commonly seen as a support to a peace process at the national level. This alleged role is also reflected in peacemaking vocabulary. Terms like 'spoilers' or 'hold-out groups' (in cases where armed actors refuse to sign a comprehensive peace deal) express this problem. Another similar issue is the deliberate application of ambiguous concepts like 'armed violence' or 'armed criminality', which want to neatly distinguish uncontrolled conflictscapes from an ongoing peace process.

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[30]Oliver P. Richmond, *Peace Formation and Political Order in Conflict Affected Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[31]Gearoid Millar, 'For whom do local peace processes function? Maintaining control through conflict management', *Cooperation and Conflict* 52, no. 3 (2017).

Third, local peace agreements manifest a way of peacemaking distinct from hierarchical thinking that distinguishes between peace 'from above' and peace 'from below'. It is tempting to categorise local peace agreements as peace 'from below'. But they are not. The empirical comparison of their content reveals that they are less concerned with building positive peace and are not an expression of grass-roots and civil society engagement. Instead, just like national or international peace agreements, they are political products negotiated within the institutionalised political settlement of a given conflictscape. Rendering local peace agreements as a peace 'from below', therefore, is misleading. It neglects their political character and misinterprets the positionality of the involved actors. It is precisely artefacts like local peace agreements that demonstrate the political character of customary authorities, religious leaders, militia 'strongmen',[32] or clan elders, and their embeddedness in power politics.

If, however, local peace agreements do not fit into a vertical logic of peacemaking, what role can they play in the broader armed conflict transition? When interpreting a conflict landscape as a mesh, this role cannot be one of ordering or disentangling. A mesh cannot be differentiated into layers, levels, or pockets, neither in analysis nor in peacemaking practice. A mesh always tends to (re)connect. In such a context, local peace agreements may work not towards conflict resolution and peacebuilding but, rather, towards dissolving armed conflict and peace formation.

How do these processes unfold in practice? First, such an understanding invites us to think about logics and practices of peace formation instead of institutionalising and formalising sophisticated political frameworks.[33] Local peace agreements represent a definite potentiality. They demonstrate what is possible and, in several instances, provide the most tangible peace dividend – and an improvement of everyday security – to affected populations. In doing so, they invite and institutionalise non-violent forms of conflict management, even if – or, perhaps, precisely because – they do not provide a spelt-out governance framework.

Second, they directly and tangibly impact a conflict setting. This achievement only becomes visible when discarding the hierarchical logic of 'conflict levels'. Local peace agreements do not only contribute to a shift in logics. They also concretely undermine armed conflict in a number of ways. They might impede the recruitment of fighters, might support disbanding local militias, might lead to a reduction of firearms. Local peace agreements can thus offer concrete peace dividends beyond immediate security concerns, such as improving livelihoods through better access to markets and infrastructure. At the minimum, they often lead to increased resilience to conflict, enabled by improving structures of protection and self-defence. While certainly not matching the ideal of liberal peacebuilding, such steps must not be underestimated.

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[32]Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 244.

[33]See, for instance, Marika Theros and Mary Kaldor, 'The Logics of Public Authority: Understanding Power, Politics and Security in Afghanistan, 2002–2014', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 7, no. 1 (2017).

Table 1. Local peace agreements and their impact on a conflict landscape.

Functionality	Type	Example
Connecting and strategising	Ceasefires	*Terms on the Departure of Armed Factions from the Remaining Eastern Neighbourhoods of the City of Aleppo*, Syria, 13 December 2016[34]
	Humanitarian agreements	*Grassroots Agreement to Promote National Dialogue in Yei River State and South Sudan*, South Sudan, 30 April 2017[35]
	Conflict mitigation	*Kafanchan Peace Declaration between Grazers and Farmers*, Nigeria, 23 March 2016[36]
	Mop-up agreements	*Agreement between the Government of Nepal and Madheshi Janadhikar Forum*, Nepal, 30 July 2007[37]
Management and mitigation	Ceasefires	*Acte d'Engagement Entre Les Groupes Anti-Balakas de la Nana Membere et 3 R*, Central African Republic, 14 December 2017[38]
	Humanitarian agreements	
	Conflict mitigation	*All-Jonglei Conference for Peace, Reconciliation and Tolerance, held in Bor*, South Sudan, 1–5 May 2012[39]
	Conflict management	*Azaz City Agreement between Ahrar al-Sham (AAS) and Jabhat al-Sham*, Syria, 13 November 2016[40]
Disconnecting	Ceasefires	*Draft agreement of Western Tribal elders on the battle of al-Zawiyya*, Libya, 31 January 2016[41]
	Conflict mitigation	*Peace Agreement between the Sa'ad and Saleman sub-clans*, Somalia, 18 February 2007[42]
	Disrelation	*The Historic Iligan Royal Declaration*, Philippines, 19 December 2017[43]

Conclusion

The conventional way of conceptualising peace and conflict is hierarchical and thinks in 'levels'. It categorises conflict as international, national, or local. It discusses whether it is better to establish peace governance from top-down or to engender peace 'from below'. Such logic is linear. It neglects the hybridity and complexity in which violent conflict and peacemaking efforts are usually entrenched. This article has argued that a critical comparative reading on what can be considered 'local' peace agreements – agreements that are not directly impacting processes at the national level – enables alternative ways of conceptualising armed conflict.

Armed conflict can be interpreted in a non-hierarchical and interrelated way that renders the diverse conflictscapes as part of an overall conflict landscape. In most contemporary settings, armed conflict is not ordered and linear in its intra-relations. Instead, it resembles a complex mesh. Such thinking questions contemporary modalities of peacemaking. The focus on forging a political agreement at the national level, most commonly around a power-sharing deal, misleadingly expects that such a deal will eventually trigger comprehensive peace also at what is called the 'subnational' and 'local' level.

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[34]PA-X local, document no 1992. The agreement concerns only parts of the city of Aleppo but is signed by representatives of the Syrian and the Russian government, which demontrates its strategic functionality for the main conflict actors.
[35]PA-X local, document no 2071.
[36]PA-X local, document no 1921.
[37]PA-X local, document no 1745. The Nepali government signed 20 further 'mop-up' agreements with mostly Madheshi armed groups from July 2007 to May 2010 to support the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Accord from November 2006.
[38]PA-X local, document no 2198. The agreement, mediated by the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, is a humanitarian ceasefire that combines a truce with stipulations referring to the delivery of humanitarian aid.
[39]PA-X local, document no 1819.
[40]PA-X local, document no 1991.
[41]PA-X local, document no 1956.
[42]PA-X local, document no 1859.
[43]PA-X local, document no 2129.

This hierarchical and linear analytical framework is not *a priori* wrong. However, it has severe limitations since it can understand 'local' efforts of peacemaking and conflict transformation only as functionality of national peace. Social processes such as conflict and peace are not logical trees. They are interwoven in non-linear and complex ways and, often, embody all the different 'levels' contemporary peacemaking likes to carefully disentangle: the international, the national, the subnational, the local. Reading local peace agreements in a non-hierarchical way regarding their contribution to peacebuilding in messy environments provides conceptual and practical opportunities.

Based on these insights, peacemaking may be approached differently – as an effort to disintegrate rather than to resolve armed conflict. Local peace agreements have an integral part to play in such disintegration. While they often have an ambivalent impact and can support repressive power structures, local peace agreements are achievements in their own right. They are an integral part of complex and arduous transitions that stretch across a conflict landscape. Like national peace agreements, they can provide levers of conflict landscape architecture that may contribute to the institutionalisation of non-violent methods of managing and transforming armed conflict.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

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