

# Pluralism and Peace Processes in a Fragmenting World

## SUMMARY ROUNDTABLE REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CANADIAN POLICYMAKERS

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This report provides an overview of key ideas and recommendations that emerged from a roundtable held on October 27, 2016 with Canadian policymakers and practitioners.

Canada has committed to promote pluralism and to reengage in peacemaking and peacekeeping internationally. In light of this, the Global Centre for Pluralism and the Geneva-based Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue hosted a roundtable discussion in October, 2016 focussed on how Canada could embed pluralism into mediation efforts and peace processes, and ensure that societies emerging from conflict are able to sustain pluralism over the long term.

### Global Centre for Pluralism

The Centre is an international research and education organization jointly created by His Highness the Aga Khan and the Government of Canada. It was created to advance understanding of pluralism and positive responses to the challenge of living peacefully and productively together in diverse societies.

### HD Centre

The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) is a Swiss-based private diplomacy organisation founded on the principles of humanity, impartiality and independence. Its mission is to help prevent, mitigate, and resolve armed conflict through dialogue and mediation.

### *What is pluralism?*

Most modern societies — from established democracies to fragile states—are diverse in some way, whether due to migration or historic border making. Rather than a valued resource, this diversity is more often viewed as a liability. A sharp rise in global migration since the Cold War, coupled with an eruption of intra-state conflicts and transnational extremism, has generated a global politics of fear.

There is an urgent need to change the conversation about diversity. Human differences need not produce division. When valued, diversity can be an asset. Defined simply as an ethic of respect for human differences, pluralism offers a different path.

Pluralist societies are diverse societies that value and accommodate human differences. In pluralist societies, each person is able to realize his or her potential as a full member of the state without jettisoning distinct identities. National identity widens beyond narrow ethno-cultural markers to include peoples of different ethnicities, religions and national origins.

At its heart, a commitment to pluralism is a commitment to enhancing and expanding the terms of state membership and to widening our conception of who belongs.

#### *Why is this discussion warranted?*

The inability or unwillingness of societies to positively engage with their ethnic, cultural and religious diversity is at the source of many contemporary armed conflicts. Once violent conflict begins, accommodating diversity becomes even more challenging. The longer conflicts continue, or when they recur following a peace process, the harder it becomes to lay the foundations for reconciliation and coexistence between groups. However, not doing so carries long-term risks. The failure to embed pluralism in mediation efforts can sow the seeds of renewed conflict in the future.

## I. A CHANGING LANDSCAPE FOR CONFLICT AND MEDIATION

The conflict and mediation landscape has undergone major changes over the last decades. The fields of peacebuilding and peacemaking have had to adapt to confront new complexities. Many contemporary conflicts now occur within the borders of a state; involve multiple, non-state actors; and stem from the inability of a society to manage ethnic, cultural and religious diversities. Many conflicts today are fought along ethnic or religious lines. The longer the conflicts go on, the more the narratives of division become entrenched and the harder it becomes to lay the foundations for reconciliation and coexistence once fighting stops.

- **Traditional peacekeeping, as pioneered by Canada, has evolved significantly.** A complex and multifaceted peacebuilding paradigm has emerged. Peacebuilding now encompasses a range of inter-related and mutually reinforcing areas, including conflict prevention, conflict mediation and resolution, peace enforcement and post-conflict recovery and development.
- A key early element is the peacemaking process, which often centres on mediation and the search for agreement to end conflict. **However, the field of conflict mediation has also undergone major transformations.** Most significantly, the era of large-scale, comprehensive “grand bargain” peace agreements is over.

- **The new context for conflict mediation and peacemaking is characterized by fragmentation, both of actors and processes.** Modern conflicts now involve an increased number of competing armed groups, as well as a large number of third-parties involved in peacemaking and peacebuilding. This presents challenges in identifying which actors need to be engaged to achieve the desired outcomes.
- **The linear, logically-sequenced “peace process” has also undergone fragmentation.** Peacemaking has become part of a larger, multifaceted peacebuilding paradigm with a large number of actors involved. As a result, numerous processes occur simultaneously, sometimes without coordination or connection. A formal mediation effort involving only certain groups may be taking place while reconstruction and redevelopment programs are underway. At the same time, a social movement may be growing in strength and popularity. This has very real consequences for the effectiveness of peacemaking efforts. More study is needed of the impacts of these multiple processes.
- **The rise of social media has further contributed to societal fragmentation.** Social media is increasingly being used to reinforce the beliefs of narrowly-defined social, political or ideological groups making it harder to achieve consensus or compromise. On social media, users rely on sources that confirm their pre-existing beliefs and/or biases. This has an effect of moving people even further away

from a shared understanding of reality. When this social media echo chamber also includes explicit or implicit demonization of opponents, it becomes even harder to have open lines of communication or engage in constructive dialogue.

## II. PROMOTING PLURALISM IN AND THROUGH PEACE PROCESSES: A VALUES-BASED APPROACH

Violent conflict within a society is often the extreme manifestation of pluralism breakdown. Given the dynamics of conflicts today, embedding pluralism into a peace process may help address the root causes of conflict and decrease the chances of renewed violence.

### *Peace Processes – Through a Pluralism Lens*

Durable, lasting peace requires widening the scope of the process. Recognizing pluralism as a value must be a guiding principle of the work. A decision by Canada to engage in a given peace process would take into consideration from the outset how the peacemaking process may contribute towards a pluralistic outcome or how Canada’s role might enhance the agenda for pluralism. Pluralism can act as a lens for decision-making around a process as a first step.

- **People in conflict situations tend to have a limited imagination of the possible**

**alternatives or outcomes that can emerge from conflict.** Promoting a values-based approach to mediation or peace processes can assist parties to envision a viable alternative path. In this respect, the context-specific nature of pluralism plays an important role in enabling flexibility and compromise. Given the different forms of diversity and dynamics of conflict, pluralistic outcomes will differ from case to case. While the specifics require time and discussion to define, at a minimum there needs to be a willingness to embrace pluralism's value proposition: that diversity can be approached in a positive way with the interests, values and participation of different groups being respected. For a peace process to get the traction or buy-in it requires, this values-based approach needs to tie the concept of pluralism to the interests and grievances that inform the conflict in the first place.

- If pluralism is acknowledged as the desired outcome, then third parties must assist conflict parties at each stage of the peacemaking process to make choices and decisions that contribute to that outcome. However, it is often the case that one or more parties to a conflict will not state outright that they want a pluralistic outcome. It may therefore become necessary to incorporate pluralism in less direct ways. The systems or actions that further pluralism can be proven to be beneficial for other reasons, such as making governance mechanisms or institutions more effective and responsive, providing quick economic benefits, or addressing the concerns and grievances of constituencies that could become important bases of support.

- **A pluralistic outcome of a peace agreement is a long term project.** It is important therefore to consider what building blocks can be put in place that have the best chance of leading towards pluralism and trying to incorporate these early on in agreements. Pluralism can be advanced in many ways through constitutional provisions, political systems, reconciliation, education policies and economic development. A big question is how and where to incorporate the concept of pluralism in order to contribute to stable, durable peace and, eventually, to a prosperous society that embraces its differences. A values-based approach sometimes means incorporating the value implicitly, rather than explicitly.
- A key example of this is found in the design of an inclusive process. **Inclusion as an outcome is important but there are many different ways of getting there.** Depending on the context, considerations must be made to determine which actors to include at the bargaining table. In some cases, the people at the table are not always representative of the people on the ground.
- **In order to succeed, therefore, some processes may need to be more narrowly targeted and private** – for example, dealing with the cessation of hostilities between armed groups and governments. Broader and more inclusive processes can follow only once a pause in the fighting has been achieved. Sequencing of this sort is an important consideration. Certain confidence-building measures are best conducted more discreetly, with a

limited number of participants and a certain degree of confidentiality to facilitate sensitive compromises and open dialogue before being opened up for broader participation.

- **When considering inclusive processes, priority should be given to issues rather than individuals.** All too frequently actors are included in negotiations that have little, if any, possibility of influencing the content or the outcome. While the optics of this form of “inclusion” may be good, it is not necessarily an effective use of the time, resources and efforts of mediation teams. Instead, more attention should be paid to ensuring that the specific issues and grievances which are at the heart of the conflict are well represented, conveyed and addressed during the process. The Kenyan dialogue and reconciliation process in 2008 provides a clear example of this. While the number of “people at the table” was actually very small, the mediators conducted very broad, inclusive consultations with a wide range of groups, including traditional elders, women, civil society groups, and so on. They were able to accurately represent and table the specific concerns of many affected communities, while also keeping the process manageable and effective. Such an approach would avoid the tokenistic presence of certain actors in peace negotiations. A genuine inclusion both of individuals and issues is most likely to contribute to a pluralistic outcome.
- **A values-based approach also has implications for the timing and manner of engagement with actors who explicitly reject the value of pluralism and are**

**unwilling to compromise.** In cases where these actors can significantly influence the outcome, their inclusion or exclusion from the process poses considerable challenges to mediators who are committed to pluralistic outcomes.

### III. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CANADA

The changing nature of both conflict and mediation has made it unhelpful to conceive of a peace process as a rigidly defined sequence of distinct actions involving a small number of clearly identifiable actors and agreed upon outcomes. Instead, a range of processes involving increasing numbers of actors now often play out concurrently and with differing degrees of connection. While recognizing that a strict and rigid sequence of events is no longer the standard, the discussion focussed on different points during which Canada could engage. These include building in pluralism as an objective and/or desired outcome when designing the processes as well as strengthening pluralism “at the table” and while implementing a peace agreement. The discussion brought to the surface some specific ideas and recommendations that could be of value to Canadian policy-makers and those called upon to enact Canadian policies.

- **Ensure comprehensive, context-specific information is accessible and shared with all parties.** It is vital that peacemakers and negotiators have access to accurate, high-quality, comprehensive, contextual and

disaggregated information about the drivers of a conflict at all stages of the processes – including an understanding of the diversity dynamics of a conflict. This includes both the historical context of the diversity dynamics and the different actors involved. The actors may be direct and indirect parties to the conflict, as well as those invested in ending or de-escalating the fighting or having it continue or escalate. It is crucial to understand the different power dynamics and internal and external pressures that inform how the conflict plays out across groups (ethnic, religious, cultural, gender, etc.). It is also necessary in order to accurately identify and understand the incentives that different actors have for pursuing certain courses of action, whether that be continued fighting or searching for peace.

- **Generating and enhancing public information, education and other forms of awareness-raising.** For instance the use of public opinion polling can be very effective and powerful. This information can help to confront official propaganda or other narratives that impede the ability of parties, their bases of support and the wider population to see pluralism as a possible outcome. These efforts can also help demystify violence, dispel harmful rumors, prevent needless escalation, amplify positive outcomes or induce a change in position or behaviour by specific actors.
- **Leverage international and local networks to inform processes and mitigate the insular nature of mediation.** Due to confidentiality issues that are built into

official negotiations, collaboration is made more difficult. Potential allies or groups with similar interests or concerns are not easily included. Oftentimes, the entire process is shrouded in secrecy.

Several factors lead to mediation efforts often being confidential and not open to the wider public. Some have to do with the concerns of the conflict parties themselves, while others are linked with the nature of the international system which privileges official/formal actors to others. As a result, third parties engaged in official negotiations have difficulty engaging with unofficial actors who are not represented in the negotiations. This ends up creating an insular set up to Track I mediation efforts.

One way that Canada could address this challenge is to support dedicated liaison positions in mediation teams. Their job would be to engage with actors who are not formally represented in the negotiations but may have useful analysis, networks and points of view to share with the mediation team. This may ensure that teams and participants in peace processes have a broader, more accurate understanding of the dynamics outside the negotiation process.

- **Provide long-term support to transition processes.** It is well known in the mediation field that achieving a peace agreement or negotiating a successful peace process is but one stage in a long-term, complex and very delicate transition, which often also requires a long “pre- and post-agreement” phase. In many ways, the implementation of the agreement can

be more challenging and complex than reaching the agreement in the first place. This highlights the need for sustained, long-term international engagement and support that lasts beyond the signing of a peace agreement and addresses the challenges of implementation. This is a crucial point for Canada to consider as it seeks to engage in this field. As Canada becomes involved in peacemaking and peacebuilding, it will be necessary to consider at what stage Canada's involvement would be most effective and how long that involvement will need to last in order to achieve sustainable outcomes.

- **Identify issues that will support pluralistic outcomes** as areas for Canadian support in a given peace process. Beyond the engagement of different actors in the process, Canada can play an important role in developing mechanisms – constitutional, reconciliation, educational, structural or otherwise – that will support the development of an agreement that would contribute to pluralism outcomes.
- **Identify broader sites of civil society engagement.** In addition to working with government and/or official actors, civil society organizations can play a critical role in service delivery and other quality of life issues during post-conflict transitions. However, it should not be assumed that civil society will always favour pluralism. It is important to identify the pockets in civil society that are supportive of pluralism and support those. This should include organizations and initiatives that are working to strengthen pluralism outside of the formal peace processes, whether or not they explicitly

frame their efforts in this way. This could include efforts that are focused on traditional “development” work, or humanitarian assistance or other fields which may, at first, seem to be removed from the specific peace processes.

## CONCLUSION

It is both fitting and timely that as Canada is emerging as a global leader in the promotion of pluralism, it can also position itself to play a key role in transforming how peace processes and peace-making efforts are designed. While pluralism as a normative concept is relatively recent and not universally accepted, the Canadian experience demonstrates that pluralism is a strong driver of stable and prosperous societies characterized by diversity. It is therefore well placed to actively facilitate the introduction and uptake of pluralism, and the various mechanisms through which it can be supported, into peace-making efforts.

By applying a “pluralism lens” on peace processes, Canada can support pluralism outcomes into the organization and operation of mediation and peace processes. Access to comprehensive and diverse sources of information; open, inclusive and reciprocal lines of communication that extend beyond the limited capabilities of small, insulated teams of mediators; important questions of sequencing, inclusion and representation at the negotiating table; and above all the vital need for sustained, long-term and comprehensive support that encompasses the pre- and post-agreement phases, are all areas into which the principles and practices of pluralism can be introduced. Canada

has the ability to provide conflict mediation and peace process professionals with much needed awareness and expertise in pluralism and the role it can play in reducing the likelihood of renewed conflict, and laying the foundations for fair and lasting peace and stability in the aftermath of conflict.

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**The Global Centre for Pluralism** is an applied knowledge organization that facilitates dialogue, analysis and exchange about the building blocks of inclusive societies in which human differences are respected. Based in Ottawa, the Centre is inspired by Canadian pluralism, which demonstrates what governments and citizens can achieve when human diversity is valued and recognized as a foundation for shared citizenship. Please visit us at [pluralism.ca](https://pluralism.ca)