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Conflict sensitivity in Track II dialogues
A case study of South Asia

Over the past few years, national organisations in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India have been running bilateral dialogues and exchanges in a private capacity – known as Track II dialogues – between Pakistan and its neighbours, with the aim of encouraging constructive engagement between them. This briefing explains how these national organisations use their contextual knowledge, access and legitimacy to manage risks and increase the impact of Track II work. Based on a conflict sensitivity review of three years of programming, we present learning points for national partners, international organisations and funders looking to support nationally led Track II dialogues.

Track II dialogue processes between states tend to be led and facilitated by international or third-party actors. This is based on a long history of the need for impartiality in mediation and dialogue. In contrast, there are very few processes where national partners run dialogue events, agree agendas, select participants and share policy recommendations. Saferworld's experience of working in consortium with national organisations that carry out such dialogues demonstrates that national partners are ideally placed to understand how their work interacts with their context and push for meaningful change in their communities. In this briefing, we outline how nationally led dialogues are run, why this works well and where there might be challenges, and explain how this model can be used to ensure more conflict-sensitive programming in other cross-border work.

INSIDE

Introduction

Since 2017, Saferworld has been leading a consortium of organisations in South Asia from our head office in London. Saferworld's role in the consortium has been to oversee the overall management and coordination of the programme, promote conflict and gender sensitivity, and ensure monitoring, evaluation and learning processes are in place. Within the consortium, our national partners run bilateral Track II dialogues between Pakistan and Afghanistan and between Pakistan and India. For these dialogues, Saferworld has played a background support role, with national partners leading the development and implementation of the process in all cases. Across the Afghanistan and Pakistan strand, the consortium includes the Islamabad-based Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), the Kabul-based Organization for Economic Studies and Peace (OESP), and the Pakistan Afghanistan Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PAJCCI) with chapters in Karachi and Kabul. Together, CRSS and OESP have been convening the 'Beyond Boundaries' process, with PAJCCI collaborating on economic discussions.[1] Across India and Pakistan, the consortium includes the Jinnah Institute in Islamabad, and the Council for Strategic and Defense Research (CSDR) in New Delhi. These organisations have been leading the 'Chao Track' process, hosted in Bangkok, Thailand.[2]

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> **The Beyond Boundaries and Chao Track dialogues aim to support constructive engagement and confidence-building between Pakistan and its neighbours, as well as exploring opportunities for regional prosperity in South Asia.**
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Both these processes consist of a series of **Track II dialogues**. National organisations arrange bilateral dialogues that bring together groups of policymakers and other influential actors from India and Pakistan, and separately across Pakistan and Afghanistan. These groups include retired government officials, politicians, business people, journalists and civil society activists. The dialogues are structured, regular and sustained engagements, rather than being held as a one-off following a particular crisis or event. Through these meetings, the Beyond Boundaries and Chao Track dialogues aim to support constructive engagement and confidence-building between Pakistan and its neighbours, as well as exploring opportunities for regional prosperity in South Asia.

To support these dialogues, partners also run numerous activities in each of their countries, working closely with national and sub-national decision makers who may not directly attend the core Track II dialogues. These activities include **policy roundtables**, **side meetings**, **focus group discussions**, **youth summits and dialogues**, and **women-led conferences**. The recommendations and discussions created through the Track II processes are disseminated and amplified through joint social media engagements such as **Twitter conversations**, or through publishing **policy briefs**, **op-eds** and **other forms of media**.

Beyond Boundaries Track II dialogue

In June 2018, a nine-member **Pakistani delegation travelled to Kabul** to meet with a group of eight Afghan politicians, journalists and civil society representatives, as part of the Beyond Boundaries process. At this Track II dialogue, both groups discussed changes in the regional context, with a particular focus on the Afghan peace process, bilateral and transit trade between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and visa policies for Afghans travelling to Pakistan. During this visit, official representatives agreed to change the Pakistani visa policy for Afghan business travellers and students – confirming they would issue longer-term, multiple entry visas to legitimate business people and students looking to travel to Pakistan for work or study.

Track II work can result in numerous conflict sensitivity risks throughout the design and implementation process.[3] The majority of these risks are disproportionately faced and managed by the local and national organisations directly responsible for frontline implementation. The following sections identify some of the emerging practices that partners across the consortium have used to manage these risks. The Beyond Boundaries and Chao Track dialogues are diverse processes, tailored to the specific political contexts and governance structures of each set of countries; however, this paper focuses on the overarching similarities between them, in order to highlight trends, risks and opportunities.

Participants at a roundtable meeting with Dr Abdullah Abdullah, Chairman of Afghanistan's High Council for National Reconciliation, in September 2020.
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Conflict sensitivity in Track II dialogues

This review draws on Saferworld's previous work to define conflict sensitivity as 'the ability of [an] organisation to understand the context in which [they] operate; understand the interaction between [their] intervention and the context; and act upon the understanding of this interaction, in order to avoid negative impacts and maximise positive impacts'.[4]

Building on this definition, different organisations have offered guidance on how to assess whether partners and implementing organisations are operating in conflict-sensitive ways. The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) suggests looking at the ways partner organisations analyse the context in which they operate, how they assess the interaction of planned activities with pre-existing conflict risks, and how they identify peacebuilding opportunities in the strategic choices they make.[5] Guidance from other organisations also includes an emphasis on strategies that continuously monitor results, to make sure negative impacts are minimised and positive impacts enhanced. Guidance from the UK government's Stabilisation Unit on conflict sensitivity in programmes can be grouped into practices that cover a) inclusive processes (such as stakeholder engagement and context review); b) internal expertise and experience; c) policies and procedures (for risk monitoring and management); and d) reflection on personal and organisational affiliations and interests.[6]

This briefing applies this understanding of conflict sensitivity to the bilateral dialogues outlined earlier. As the dialogues currently stand, both channels of conversation (across India and Pakistan, and across Afghanistan and Pakistan) fall into a category widely identified as Track II dialogues, with influential actors from government, media or other important institutions participating in unofficial or private capacities.[7] There is, however, one key difference between the broadly held definitions of traditional Track II dialogues and the dialogues discussed here: the dialogues in South Asia are bilateral Track II processes that are run entirely by national organisations, rather than by an impartial third-party facilitator.

From a conflict sensitivity perspective, the fact that these sustained processes are managed by national organisations is a unique feature. This offers fresh entry points and opportunities, such as the potential for inclusive processes, credible context analyses, relevant experience, heightened understanding of challenges – and ways of managing these. At the same time, it also presents risks, such as elite capture[8] or the perpetuation of existing and damaging conflict dynamics.

An initial review of existing literature on regional or bilateral dialogue processes indicates that conflict-sensitive practices are particularly under-explored in programming that aims to work regionally rather than nationally, and there is a gap in understanding how conflict sensitivity is operationalised in programmes that aim to support regional stability and policymaking.[9] The majority of existing work is also focused exclusively on third-party facilitators (usually international organisations or states) rather than on local organisations that may play a role in nurturing bilateral dialogue processes.[10] While there are numerous analyses available on how to navigate the overall sensitivities involved in dialogue or mediation processes, and how facilitators need to frame their role to be seen as credible by all parties, these are rarely adapted to local organisations.

To examine these risks and opportunities, Saferworld undertook a conflict sensitivity review of this area of programming. We collected evidence in three ways: a desk-based review of existing literature and programme documents; three focus group discussions held with consortium partners and separately with funders; and a validation workshop held with consortium partners in December 2019. Carried out between August and December 2019, this review explicitly focuses on dialogues held from 2017 to 2019. However, some of the risks identified and practices put in place by national partners draw on the experience gained in previous iterations of dialogue work across Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Pakistan and India.

Managing conflict sensitivity risks in South Asia: strategies and practices

Our experience demonstrates that in Track II work, there are four key areas where partner organisations should take conflict sensitivity into account: agenda development, participant selection, policy recommendations and results management. Each of these components presents an opportunity for decision-making: partners have to consider the ways in which the content of the dialogue agenda, the people who attend, the recommendations they make and the results they capture will be received in the current context.

Agenda development

When developing an agenda for a particular dialogue, national partners use two main strategies that ensure conflict sensitivity: stakeholder consultation and ongoing context analysis.

The first of these strategies – stakeholder consultation – ensures that the content of the agenda is attuned to the prevailing discourse in each country. The purpose of this consultation is to understand the views of trusted senior decision makers on what can be discussed during a Track II dialogue process, based on the way that specific issues are handled in each country, and what issues these decision makers – as insiders – would expect to have the most traction politically and publicly. The second strategy, context analysis, looks at a range of issues: an analysis of recent changes in the domestic or geopolitical context; recurring concerns; the possibility of policy traction and issue resolution across specific areas (for example, the likelihood of policymakers taking action on a particular issue); and possible human security issues that are time-sensitive (such as refugee rights, for example). By collecting information in these ways, organisers are able to use their knowledge of the context to focus on practical issues that will gain policy traction within a strategic and decision-making community.

These issues need to be integrated into dialogue agendas in ways that avoid inflaming sentiments on either side. Partners therefore consider escalation management to be an important factor in deciding on the content of an agenda, as they are aware that particular topics might prevent constructive discussion if they are not framed in an appropriate manner – or if they are included in the first place. Knowledge of the national discourse, gained through stakeholder consultation and ongoing context analysis, is necessary in facilitating potentially explosive discussions that require careful framing and management.

Funders and international organisations might also provide additional ideas for the agenda, such as a push to include topics that explore how current trends or developments in the regional context affect women and men differently. In practice, however, there is a wide range of structural challenges to the inclusion of women in high-level security discussions in South Asia. Partners find that it is usually more feasible to include the representation of women and women's insights and concerns in dialogues if this is done in a parallel process of youth-oriented dialogues, which bring together new voices in the policy space rather than established decision makers. This creates an interesting tension: it is sometimes difficult for core strategic dialogues to address issues that challenge pre-existing views and structures, or which

go against established interests. Such issues are then moved to the youth-focused dialogues, which are more productive areas in which to promote progressive social change – as participants are less tied to traditional institutions and power centres.

Overall, the strategies for agenda development outlined here are useful for establishing an agenda that takes into account contextual information that might not otherwise be accessible to third parties. This ensures that the agenda is built around credible and relevant information that is sensitive to the local context. However, the current tilt towards practical issues that focus on policy change carries the risk of favouring 'what can be done' over a long-term vision of the transformation of relationships and behaviour. This is particularly true when it comes to including the views of and issues relevant to traditionally under-represented groups such as women, young people and ethnic minorities. The trade-offs go beyond wider representation – there is a risk that some contentious issues may be left off the agenda altogether, and will not transition from the youth-focused dialogues or any parallel formats to the core dialogues. In all cases, elite capture of the agenda also remains a risk, and the process depends heavily on organisers investing in an inclusive national consultation, supported by a robust conflict-sensitive context analysis.

Participant selection

Partners balance numerous considerations when selecting individuals to participate in Track II dialogues and related activities. Four major areas are considered when deciding on participants:

- the policy influence that attendees wield (including technical expertise and institutional credibility)
- the groups they represent (including considerations of seniority, prior experience of formal government discussions and continuity)
- their potential for confidence-building or disruption
- logistical concerns (such as availability, security and travel arrangements)

Weighing the relative merits of each of these factors is a lengthy process, undertaken on a case-by-case basis by partners. Throughout the process, careful stakeholder consultation and relationship-building are used as strategies to ensure conflict sensitivity. Partners can connect with potential participants through events in each country, in one-on-one-meetings, and through mutual links with other dialogue participants. This helps ensure that new participants can join in the dialogue without negatively impacting the process.

The range of factors considered when identifying participants highlights the complexity of the environment in which programme partners make decisions. These factors also demonstrate how organisers use their specific access and contextual knowledge to tap into individuals' personal networks, relationships and influence, in ways that external organisations may not be able to do. However, this knowledge may be applied with varying degrees of effectiveness in different strands of the dialogue. There is a risk that this approach to participant selection can create an echo chamber of elite participants. The process of relationship-building

can result in the profile of individuals represented at the dialogue being replicated – in terms of background, connections and attitudes. Without structures for self-reflection, a personalised approach that relies on relationship-building runs the risk of resulting in a dialogue process that is dominated by one group's personal networks. At the same time, a preoccupation with tangible policy changes may reinforce this tendency towards echo chambers. Prioritising policy change can lead to a focus on seniority and leadership, rather than investing in ways to break out of cycles of self-replication.

Despite the trade-offs and risks, the experience of this programme has shown that thoughtful participant selection is key to conflict-sensitive Track II dialogues; the personal relationships that are built between participants can act as genuine entry points and magnifiers for mutual understanding, respect and constructive dialogue.

Policy recommendations

Two main factors are taken into account to ensure conflict sensitivity when deciding on what policy recommendations should emerge from dialogues: contextual appropriateness and participant consensus.

When considering what recommendations are appropriate at a particular point in time, partners and dialogue participants consider what sort of proposals would be most likely to be taken on board by policymakers in the prevailing political climate. This is an important consideration, as Track II is often used as a space for participants to test others' receptivity to new ideas and suggestions, and feed reactions back to their own policymaking communities. At the same time, organisers and participants consistently consider the implications or potential repercussions for dialogue processes and the individuals participating within them – and rework recommendations accordingly.

Beyond Boundaries dialogue: Afghan refugees in Pakistan

Over **1.4 million Afghan refugees**[11] were residing in Pakistan in 2018, as well as many more who were not registered. Under the Beyond Boundaries process, constructive engagement on Pakistan's approach to Afghans with refugee status in Pakistan – particularly those born and raised in Pakistan – has been a consistent recommendation, with the issue raised 16 times in separate Track II events prior to September 2018. These dialogues have offered space for participants from both sides to suggest alternative approaches to repatriation, including granting citizenship to Afghans born in Pakistan, and to reassess stances based on feedback emerging from these discussions. Some of these new ideas and suggestions have come close to finding their way into official policy; on 17 September 2018, Pakistan's prime minister announced an **initial plan**[12] to grant Pakistan-born Afghans citizenship. This was subsequently retracted in the face of wider opposition, but demonstrates the ways in which ideas from Track II dialogues can emerge in official decision-making.

The second major strategy is participant consensus. Recommendations are only compiled when participants agree on what is being put forward. This is because no group wants to be associated with a set of recommendations that would exacerbate negative dynamics or which would discredit the individuals involved in proposing them. By relying on participant consensus as a yardstick of whether recommendations should be released publicly or not, organisers ensure that the participants – who are most closely associated with the recommendations – decide how these should be disseminated further.

Throughout, partners consider 'transfer'[13] – the process of translating recommendations into policy or behavioural change – to be an important part of their work, but have a diverse view of who these recommendations should be transferred to. In practice, the transfer of recommendations depends on the ownership felt by dialogue participants. Influential attendees only take forward recommendations that appear genuinely useful to them and that they feel should be put into action, rather than a fixed set of priorities that might be imposed by organisers. Dialogue participants – as the individuals most closely tied to the policymaking community in each country – are better able to identify and capitalise on emerging opportunities during a time of political flux. This creates an adaptable model of policy influence, rather than focusing on a predetermined set of target issues, actors or institutions, regardless of changes in political stances and interests.

The risk remains, however, that the recommendations that do move ahead favour the preferences and interests of a particular group, especially those with greater access to and influence over policymakers. If there is no mechanism in place to assess whether the recommendations emerging from the dialogue are inclusive and sensitive to the needs of various conflict-affected groups, problematic dynamics may be inadvertently exacerbated. Fresh strategies are required to mitigate this risk.

Results management

Recording results poses a new set of conflict sensitivity challenges in Track II work. This is a particularly under-explored area, as guidance on conflict sensitivity tends to focus on design and implementation of programmes and less on monitoring, evaluating and learning.

In almost all cases analysed in this review, traditional structures of monitoring, evaluation and reporting faced major limitations. Track II dialogue processes do not lend themselves to quantitative measurement tools, nor do results emerge in a timely, linear fashion. Sharing results openly can jeopardise sensitive processes, but equally, the inability to share results creates challenges for comprehensive donor reporting – especially given the pressure on programmes to produce visible results that can be shared widely across funding institutions.

In this context, flexible monitoring tools – such as outcome harvesting – are particularly helpful.[14] Saferworld's experience of using this methodology shows that adopting specific types of monitoring, evaluation and data management structures can mitigate risks around results management. This offers a useful model for future programmes of this nature.

Learning areas

The application of a conflict sensitivity lens to Track II dialogues offers a new area of learning for national partners, international organisations and foreign donors looking to support peace processes that are designed and nationally led. These lessons apply in particular to national partners with unique access and privileged positions in national-level decision-making.

The learning areas below are divided into three separate areas: 1) opportunities for national partners; 2) risks faced and mitigation strategies employed by national partners; 3) potential roles for international organisations and foreign donors.

Chao Track process: Emerging Leaders Forum

In September 2018, a delegation of **young leaders and mid-career professionals from India and Pakistan** met in Bangkok, as part of an Emerging Leaders Forum under the Chao Track process. The two delegations discussed a range of topics, from nationalism and identity politics to livelihoods and other shared challenges across South Asia. At the end of this Track II engagement, participants agreed to support more interaction – particularly between journalists – to ensure fact-checking and prevent misinformation from spreading between both countries.

1. Opportunities that are best identified and capitalised on by national partners, rather than international organisations

National partners can ensure that Track II dialogues address contextually relevant themes, in ways that enhance the legitimacy and ownership of the dialogue:

- National partners have unique access to up-to-date contextual knowledge, particularly from hard-to-reach organisations in the security and government sectors as well as non-state actors and informal powerholders.

- Themes, discussion points and agendas can be tailored to the priorities of national decision makers rather than external parties; state representatives are more likely to provide input on messages and ideas.

- National partners can serve a critical function as 'shock absorbers'. They can anticipate and manage any accusations that may be levelled in these spaces, by working with decision-making communities in each country.

- When agendas reflect the priorities of national decision makers, both dialogue participants and organisers feel an increased sense of ownership of the process.

- This national-level ownership enhances the credibility and legitimacy of the dialogue in the eyes of local stakeholders.

Partners can develop resilient relationships with national decision makers over time, building on a strong understanding of national dynamics and affiliations:

- National partners have enough 'on-the-ground' knowledge to appreciate the complex and multi-faceted factors that need to be considered when including people in Track II dialogues. This knowledge can be used to effectively adapt the objectives and format of each dialogue.

- Nationally based partners can seize opportunities for steady relationship-building with participants. At times of crisis, these relationships can translate into a parallel platform for informal communication, even without a planned Track II engagement.

- Strong networks in each country allow partners to identify and engage with a new generation of emerging decision makers. Partners can build on insider knowledge of which voices are likely to be influential in the future and offer these individuals opportunities to interact directly with senior influencers.

Participants attend the Chaophraya Emerging Leaders Forum in Bangkok, September 2018.

© Chaophraya Dialogue

A focus group discussion between Pakistani and Afghan business leaders, civil society and government representatives, December 2020.
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Track II processes convened by national organisations are ideally positioned to identify and support policy changes:

- Building on their access and influence in each country, partners have opportunities to share Track II recommendations with policymakers.

- Contextual knowledge also allows partners to highlight recommendations that will resonate with participants and generate policy traction.

- Long-term relationship-building helps create a community of individuals in each country who will add weight and legitimacy to dialogue recommendations, increasing the likelihood that these recommendations will be translated into action.

2. Conflict sensitivity risks and mitigation strategies for national partners

Nationally led Track II processes are vulnerable to risks of self-replication, as well as the potential for co-optation by influential actors:

- Organisers may be constrained by existing personal or institutional networks when approaching potential dialogue participants. This can lead to the risk of self-replication or a lack of representation of traditionally under-represented groups in each country. These groups include women, young people, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities who are affected by conflict.

- National-level delegations often present state interests as an undifferentiated whole – when in fact different policies may impact different groups in separate ways (such as shifts in trade policy).

- Individual participants may push forward recommendations that resonate closely with them. This means there is a risk that recommendations favour the preferences and interests of a particular group over the voices of others. This includes people who may not be included in the dialogue proceedings or who cannot access the same mechanisms for transforming recommendations into policy or behavioural change.

- In a context where it is difficult to get people to meet across conflict divides, there is a risk of prioritising practicalities ('what can be done'/'what participants you can get') over a long-term vision of transformation of relationships and behaviour.

- Despite the variety of factors considered when deciding on dialogue participation, specific risks remain:

  - Assessing whether participation in a Track II process will have reputational or other consequences for participants is primarily left to the discretion of participants themselves.

  - With increased visibility and effectiveness, there is the possibility of co-optation by state institutions or powerful actors within the different countries.

To mitigate these risks, national partners can pursue strategies to expand participation without compromising participants' safety and integrity:

- National partners can establish mechanisms to expand stakeholder engagement to ensure that under-represented issues and voices are included in the dialogue process.

- Different activities (such as policy roundtables or youth-focused dialogue platforms) can bring forward more diverse participants and content. These participants and topics might not be the right fit for strategic dialogues led by people with more traditional profiles.

- Organisers can make a conscious decision to prioritise recommendations that reflect the concerns of a wider group of people.

- National partners can also identify and support recommendations that can strategically address obstacles in each bilateral relationship, which will in turn support improved bilateral relations.

- To share results, partners should use strategies that prioritise the safety and integrity of dialogue organisers and participants, even if this limits how widely information can be disseminated.

Participants at the Chaophraya Emerging Leaders Forum in Bangkok, September 2018.
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3. Potential roles for international organisations and foreign donors in supporting conflict-sensitive practices

International organisations can support Track II dialogues by playing the role of a 'critical friend' or broker in dialogue processes:

■ International organisations and foreign donors can support the creation of an environment where ideas and challenges can be shared, by developing consortiums that bring together organisations with similar ambitions and capacities to engage in peaceful and constructive dialogue on complex and sensitive issues. This is a rare opportunity in countries with strong and highly structured bureaucracies, where space to develop novel ideas can be limited.

■ Rather than trying to adapt the process without nuanced information on power dynamics within a particular country, international organisations can be most useful in introducing instruments and spaces for reflection. These spaces offer opportunities to ensure that organisers are always aiming to be transformative rather than maintaining the status quo.

■ International or third-party organisations can usefully challenge the perpetuation of prevailing norms of exclusion around gender, age or identity. Any intervention on this front should be substantive and meaningful, as the perception of tokenism can undermine the credibility of the dialogue in the eyes of more traditional decision makers in each country.

Foreign donors have an important role to play in providing sustained and conflict-sensitive funding and exchange opportunities:

■ Foreign donors can ensure local ownership of a Track II process without making national organisations beholden to funding from specific groups in each country. This is only possible when funding mechanisms are conflict sensitive, and not intended or perceived as foreign interference in national policies.

■ International organisations and foreign donors can ensure that national organisations have the space and funding to continue this work, even when there is limited domestic appetite for communication. This can help cultivate a network of likeminded individuals who can jump into action when necessary.

International organisations and foreign donors can agree on and establish flexible mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation and reporting:

■ National partners are aware of the risks and challenges inherent in the environment in which they operate. Foreign or international partners can offer added technical expertise or provide frameworks for monitoring, evaluation, learning and reporting that can help navigate this environment.

■ Donors can underpin this agenda by being more flexible in terms of reporting requirements and evaluation frameworks. This is especially important for programmes in rapidly changing, highly sensitive contexts.

International organisations and foreign donors can coordinate between parallel processes and support more holistic programming:

- International organisations and foreign donors can coordinate between different funders and institutions investing in this kind of work. This prevents dialogues from operating at cross-purposes with one another. Where conflict escalation is a possibility, this coordination role ensures that risks are collectively shared and managed.

- Where appropriate, external organisations can support international advocacy and communications, especially with international institutions such as the UN or the EU that national partners may not have regular access to.

- Many of the conflict sensitivity challenges of inclusion and elite capture are not inherent to the dialogue process itself; they are symptomatic of an overall elite-led governance structure in South Asia. Wider donor programming on governance can provide important entry points for more inclusive and responsive structures, which in the long run can help address some of the challenges in regional dialogue work as well.

To perform these roles effectively, international organisations need to build their own knowledge of the context, flexible monitoring and evaluation techniques, and information management:

- Contextual knowledge is critical. International organisations should not duplicate the roles that national partners play, but rather make sure they have enough information to comprehensively engage with the processes of creating an agenda, selecting participants and developing policies. This contextual knowledge will then help widen the scope of the issues discussed and the people involved.

- International organisations also need to develop appropriate technical expertise, particularly around mechanisms of monitoring, evaluation, learning and reporting. This is a space where Saferworld has been able to play a strong role, providing additional expertise through new methods such as outcome harvesting.

- National partners have to face the challenge of working collaboratively across tense borders. International organisations should be able to convene regular meetings in neutral locations. These meetings primarily serve as reflection spaces, but also offer opportunities to strengthen trust and relationships across different organisations.

- Any international organisation that operates in partnership with national organisations needs to maintain political impartiality and be able to operate beyond divides within each country.

- When basing operations in-country, international organisations need to develop systems and procedures that insulate staff from the same risks that national partners manage on a regular basis. This requires an improvement in various systems, including information management and data privacy, operations and security, and legal compliance.

Key takeaways

National organisations have some unique advantages available to them when it comes to Track II dialogues:

- National partners have the necessary contextual knowledge to ensure that Track II dialogues address locally relevant themes.
- A focus on these themes enhances the legitimacy and ownership of the dialogue.
- Partners have a strong understanding of shifting national dynamics and affiliations.
- They are able to use this knowledge to develop resilient relationships with national policymakers over time.
- Track II processes convened by national partners are well positioned to identify and support policy changes.

At the same time, Track II dialogues led by national partners face specific risks that require mitigation:

- Nationally led dialogue processes can be vulnerable to risks of self-replication, as well as the potential for co-optation by influential actors.
- To mitigate these risks, national partners can pursue strategies to expand participation without compromising participants' safety and integrity.

International organisations and foreign donors can support this area of work in different ways:

- International organisations can use reflection spaces to play the role of a 'critical friend' or broker.
- International organisations and donors can agree on and put in place flexible mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation and reporting.
- External actors can coordinate between parallel dialogue processes and support more holistic programming.

Conclusion

This briefing offers some important lessons for organisations aiming to integrate a conflict-sensitive approach into regional-level Track II dialogue processes, as well as institutions that hope to fund this kind of work. The experience of working in consortium with national partners and international organisations offers specific opportunities to develop programming that is more attuned to domestic trends and adaptable to changing contexts than dialogues that rely exclusively on third-party facilitation. At the same time, this model opens up programmes to a variety of risks, both in terms of the personal safety and security of national partners as well as the risk of elite capture of the process as a whole. This briefing has provided a range of recommendations for how these risks can be anticipated and managed, drawing on the experience of our consortium.

From a conflict sensitivity perspective, it is important to respect the independence, knowledge and decision-making of national partners. Partners have the opportunity to build strong mechanisms to analyse the context in which they operate, alongside significant relationships with hard-to-reach decision makers in each country. Both donors and international organisations involved in these programmes therefore need to play a role that supports national partners in capitalising on these opportunities, while navigating some of the pitfalls of being influential actors in their own contexts.

Programming of this nature also needs to encourage the effective management of risks. There is a need to strike a balance between micro-managing risks – such as potential repercussions from dialogues that may reflect badly on both donors and partners – and pushing for transformative changes beyond targeted policy shifts. This leads to a wider need for international organisations to support the establishment of equitable partnerships between donors and national organisations. Donors in this space have shown an increasing willingness to reflect on their priorities as key actors in the region, as well as to understand the impact that their input and suggestions can have on a wider process of change, particularly where these suggestions reflect a preoccupation with a donor's national interest. Reflection spaces for all parties – national partners, international organisations and foreign donors – are therefore a critical part of ensuring that the entire process is as conflict sensitive as possible.

There is also a need for funders and organisers of Track II programming to move away from an exclusive focus on policy change, if transformative change in bilateral and regional relationships is to take place. Focusing on a particular type of result can lead to decision-making that short-changes conflict sensitivity in favour of other factors. Organisations then start thinking primarily about access to and influence over individuals in leadership and senior positions, rather than widening the scope of people and agenda topics included in Track II dialogues.

Finally, working with a combination of well-positioned national and international partners offers funders a cost-effective means of supporting constructive bilateral engagement through Track II dialogues. Rather than investing in a financially costly and time-consuming process of developing new networks that can offer access, trust and legitimacy, this kind of model allows national organisations to leverage an existing network of influence to push for meaningful change. Strengthening such ways of working is an opportunity to both ensure value for money while making programming more conflict sensitive in the long term.

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This area of programming has already showcased important strategies used to anticipate and manage conflict sensitivity risks. Building on some of the learning areas outlined here, this kind of work – both in South Asia and elsewhere – can continue to be made more inclusive, impactful and reflective in the future.

Notes

1 The Beyond Boundaries process is a Track II dialogue, run by CRSS and OESP, that brings together current and former government officials, parliamentarians, civil society activists, journalists and academics from Pakistan and Afghanistan – all acting in a private capacity. These dialogue events are held alternately in Kabul and Islamabad a few times a year.

2 The Chao Track process is another Track II dialogue, run by the Jinnah Institute and CSDR, that brings together a similar group of individuals in a private capacity across India and Pakistan. The Chao Track dialogues are usually held twice a year in Bangkok.

3 The definition of 'conflict sensitivity' used in this review is available in the next section.

4 Saferworld (2004), 'Conflict-sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding', January (https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/148-conflict)

5 Sida (2017), 'Conflict sensitivity in programme management', Peace and Conflict Toolbox, January (https://sidase-wp-files-prod.s3.eu-north-1.amazonaws.com/app/uploads/2020/12/01125256/s209461_tool_conflict_sensitivity_in_programme_management_c3.pdf)

6 Stabilisation Unit (2016), 'Conflict Sensitivity: Tools and Guidance', June (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/conflict-sensitivity-tools-and-guidance)

7 A detailed discussion of the variety of definitions applied to Track II dialogue processes is available in Peter Jones's recent work. A full recap of the conceptual debates surrounding this process is beyond the scope of this review; however, the current set of dialogues fit the key characteristics of Track II dialogues identified by Jones. Jones P (2015), *Track Two Diplomacy in Theory and Practice* (Stanford University Press), p 25.

8 One of the World Bank's definitions for elite capture refers to 'situations where elites shape development processes according to their own priorities'. While elite capture can also refer to misappropriating development funds, in this case the term is used to describe the potential dominance of elite groups over a wider process. World Bank (2008), 'CDD and Elite Capture: Reframing the Conversation', Social Development How To Series Vol. 3 (http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/zh/397181468137726436/pdf/430830BRI001NO1ingotheoConversation.pdf)

9 Cuhadar E, Paffenholz T (2019), 'Transfer 2.0: Applying the Concept of Transfer from Track-Two Workshops to Inclusive Peace Negotiations', *International Studies Review* 22 (3).

10 Jones P, op. cit.; Staats et al. (2019), 'A Primer on Multi-Track Diplomacy: How Does it Work?', United States Institute of Peace (https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/07/primer-multi-track-diplomacy-how-does-it-work)

11 See UNHCR's work on Pakistan: https://www.unhcr.org/uk/pakistan.html#:~:text=Pakistan%20hosts%20more%20than%201.4,forced%20to%20flee%20their%20homes

12 Foreign Policy (2019), 'For Afghan Refugees, Pakistan Is a Nightmare – but Also Home', 9 May (https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/09/for-afghan-refugees-pakistan-is-a-nightmare-but-also-home/)

13 Cuhadar E, Paffenholz T, op. cit.

14 Outcome harvesting is an approach that involves collecting evidence of what has been achieved, and which works backwards to determine whether and how a programme or project contributed to this change. More details on Saferworld's use of this approach can be found at: Church M (2016), 'Doing things differently: Rethinking monitoring and evaluation to understand change', Saferworld, January (https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1027-doing-things-differently-rethinking-monitoring-and-evaluation-to-understand-change)

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Cover photo – A general view of the border post in Torkham, Pakistan, 3 December 2019.
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