

# HARD FEELINGS

## The Role of Empathy in Engaging Armed Groups



Insights from an expert roundtable convened in London in March 2017 by  
Conciliation Resources and the Center for Empathy in International Affairs

## Introduction

Constructive dialogue with non-state armed groups is hugely important – to prevent, mitigate or resolve violent conflict. But it is equally challenging and variable in terms of the context, actors involved, purpose of such dialogue, and the means by which it is achieved. On 15 March 2017, Conciliation Resources and the Center for Empathy in International Affairs hosted a roundtable discussion involving 21 mediators, peacebuilders, experts and officials to consider the role that empathy can play in helping to establish and sustain dialogue with non-state armed groups.

Roundtable participants included individuals from or affiliated with a range of institutions, including Conciliation Resources, the Center for Empathy in International Affairs (CEIA), Chatham House, Concordis International, the Rift Valley Institute, Saferworld, the University of Kent, the University of Edinburgh, and the U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

This note, drafted by CEIA Director Matt Waldman, summarises the key points made during the course of the discussion. As the roundtable was held on the basis of the Chatham House rule, insights and observations are not attributed to specific speakers. There was no collective view on the role of empathy in engaging armed groups. Rather, participants made various points which have been grouped together in the following areas:

- The Concept of Empathy
- Empathy in Policy-making
- The Utility of Empathy
- Modalities of Empathy
- Limits and Constraints of Empathy
- Risks of Empathy

Finally, the author sets out some recommendations for governments and organisations involved in conflict resolution, based on the discussion.

**Publication:** This paper was finalised, with input from participants, and published in May 2017.

**Cover photo:** UN Photo/Marco Dormino. The photo shows Major General Jean Bosco Kazura (left), Force Commander of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), meeting with representatives of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA), in Kidal, north-eastern Mali, 14 November 2013.

## The Concept of Empathy

Clarity about the definition of empathy is essential. There is no single 'right' definition of empathy; different people use the term differently. Yet, according to academic literature,<sup>1</sup> there are two main meanings:

- Cognitive empathy: the mental effort to grasp, imagine or infer what is going on inside others' heads – what they think, feel and perceive; and
- Affective empathy: some level of cognitive empathy combined with the sharing of feelings.

There are divergent views about the degree to which it is possible to distinguish, in practice, between these two types of empathy and some analysts believe they are interdependent.

Part of empathy is identifying with another person's thoughts and feelings, which can be achieved by imagining what it must be like to be in their situation. This requires a degree of self-knowledge and knowledge of the person with whom you are seeking to empathize. It is difficult to empathize with people you know little about or have never met. Without engaging with others, including with armed groups, it is unrealistic to expect empathy to develop and humanisation to take place.

Empathy's unique quality is that it requires us to step outside of ourselves and to draw on our imagination. This in itself can generate insights because the lens through which we look at someone or a group of people has a major impact on how we perceive, understand and respond to them. Furthermore, empathy is not linear but dynamic as individuals seek to comprehend one another, and, through interaction, influence each other's thinking and understanding.

## Empathy in Policy-making

A serious problem in contemporary foreign policy-making is the misunderstanding or misjudgement of armed groups by outsiders, which can result in flawed policies and missed opportunities. Policy-makers and politicians are inclined to over-simplify complex problems, which leads to flawed or ineffective policy decisions.

This is partly explained by the West's preoccupation with data about armed groups (for instance information about their structure, size, capabilities and activities) rather than who they really are – what is driving them and why they fight. Thus, official assessments sometimes represent a comparatively superficial or incomplete understanding of an armed group. Reinforcing this, enemies tend to be dehumanised. Labels are also applied to such groups, such as 'extremists' or 'terrorists', which can oversimplify and generate emotive responses. This terminology also sustains policies to contain and defeat such groups rather than engage with them through political responses.

Strong institutional narratives about any given group are hard to penetrate – and tend to be resistant to counter narratives. Indeed, narratives often become more resistant to change over time, as a party's attitudes towards an enemy harden and the scope for alternative interpretations, and approaches, diminishes. Consideration should be given as to how a range of perspectives can be taken into account towards an adversary, without such views being seen as too provocative or threatening. Powerful stories can sometimes help to penetrate institutional narratives.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Jean Decety and Philip Jackson, 'The Functional Architecture of Human Empathy', *Behavioural and Cognitive Neuroscience Reviews*, 2004, 3(2), pp. 71-100.

Empathy can potentially help policy-makers overcome their own biases relating to armed groups and better understand the root causes and drivers of conflict. The best diplomats and policymakers empathize but this is generally not acknowledged. Recognising the practice of empathy would help to bring greater attention to psychology and emotions in international affairs, which matter because they affect human behaviour.

However, while there is an interest within governments in achieving a better understanding of armed groups, those who attempt to do this are sometimes treated as being sympathetic towards such groups, or even approving of them. For example, during most of the recent war in Afghanistan the Taliban was oversimplified and misunderstood, with insufficient scope for alternative interpretations of the group. This is partly explained by the fact that policy institutions implicitly discourage empathy. Such institutions tend to recruit people who reinforce rather than challenge institutional thinking, and, on the whole, there are minimal incentives for nuanced, alternative or self-critical approaches.

## **The Utility of Empathy**

Empathizing – imagining or inferring what it is like to be in someone else’s shoes – is considered by some to be a tool, and by others as an approach and mind-set. In either case, empathy provides a window of understanding into others and is useful as a means of acquiring knowledge about them, especially their priorities and concerns. It is particularly useful in creating space for us to understand the nuances, multidimensionality, and variability over time in and among armed actors and their social relationships with allies and adversaries.

Through helping to provide a deeper understanding of the parties, empathy has the potential to enable mediators to be more strategic in terms of when and how to address difficult issues. Empathy, in terms of building rapport, can also potentially help to sustain dialogue during periods when talks break down.

If we empathize with others, we need to be conscious about why and how we are empathizing and what purpose it serves. Empathy is clearly not a panacea. It is an additional approach that can help to enhance understanding, and may help parties to reflect on their own behaviour and how they are perceived by their adversary. It is one of a range of strategies and approaches.

Policy discussions around dealing with armed groups tend to focus on hard security issues: a pragmatic, coercive, solution-driven approach. However, this seems at odds with emotional investments. In many cases a successful outcome will depend on having established a strong relationship with members of the group, which takes time and requires mutual understanding. Empathy has a role in this critical relational component of mediation.

Peacebuilding is about influencing processes of social change, which only happens through human relationships. Investing in and enhancing relationships allows practitioners to contribute to social change and conflict resolution – and there is a powerful link between building relationships and the practice of empathy.

## **Modalities of Empathy**

It is helpful to differentiate between empathy in interpersonal dynamics, which can shape relationships with and between individuals and groups, and empathy that is practiced, for instance by a government, in order to achieve a deeper understanding of other actors. Yet, there are similarities between these two forms of empathy and the former may contribute to the latter.

A critical issue is at what points, in any given conflict, can empathy be encouraged or promoted in order to make a difference – and who needs to empathize? The answers are undoubtedly contingent on a range of factors that differ in each and every conflict. The amount of time devoted to empathizing is also important. The more time spent with others, especially members of armed groups, the more we learn and yet the more conscious we become of how difficult it is to empathize with them fully.

In many cases, it is important for mediators to have a degree of empathy for the groups they work with. That is different from expecting warring parties to have such empathy for each other, which is often lacking, especially in conflicts between a state and an armed group. There are questions about whether and how empathy helps civil society groups and communities engage with armed groups. There are also questions about whether we expect armed group members to have a degree of empathy for community members or even the mediator.

### **Limits and Constraints of Empathy**

In trying to empathize with others, practitioners often face the practical problem of language barriers. Key points and nuances can be lost in translation and undermine a sense of connection. Given the complexity of conflict situations, including the heterogeneity and variability of the parties, it is clear that a full and complete sense of empathy can never be achieved. Of course that does not mean it is pointless to try to empathize but that it should be practiced with an awareness of the challenges involved.

There are structural constraints to empathy. Even if negotiators have empathy and understanding for one another, and manage to reach agreement, they may face challenges in bringing about a more constructive way of thinking on the part of their respective leaderships.

In some settings there is a degree of reluctance to use the word empathy, as it is seen as being inconsistent with what is considered to be professional practice. This is perhaps because empathy challenges our own biases. Empathy is barely discussed in the literature on peacebuilding because it is seen as feminised. There is the un-nuanced notion that being professional precludes being emotional. Yet, it is also true that a mediator's level of emotional engagement needs to be kept in check. In interacting with those who have experienced trauma, an emotional, empathetic response might not always be appropriate.

As noted above, empathy as practiced by diplomats can expose them to criticism from colleagues. Current systems appear to impede those who are genuinely curious about others, which is the natural starting point for the development of an empathic approach. Individuals may want to hear the other side's point of view but face countervailing institutional pressures as they seek to go about it. There is a question of how far can you drive empathy in institutions, at what point the resistance is too great – and how this can be managed and overcome.

More broadly, as noted above, empathy is one of many approaches to mediation and is no substitute for any other given technique or approach. The key for any mediator is to build trust between the parties, which usually requires knowledge of the parties and the conflict, active listening, engagement, support and guidance.

In terms of policy-making, there are many explanations for flawed policies, that initiate or perpetuate violent conflict – and lack of empathy may or may not be a factor. Similarly, opportunities for reducing hostilities depend on many factors, not only empathy. There is no substitute for a rigorous and comprehensive analytical approach to any given conflict.

## Risks of Empathizing

It should be acknowledged that empathy can involve opening oneself to the pathology of others, which can be harmful. Consideration should be given to what steps should be taken to protect against this – and individuals should be encouraged to empathize with a degree of objectivity.

There is a risk that empathy causes us to feel a degree of certainty about the views of others, and their dispositions, which is not necessarily justified. However, many other forms of information gathering, such as intelligence work, can generate overconfidence in the findings, which reinforces the need to avoid relying on any single method of acquiring knowledge.

There is also the risk that in empathizing we reduce the degree to which we are willing to challenge certain kinds of behaviour or questionable assertions of armed groups. Do we become apologists and could empathy potentially attenuate or dilute legitimate criticism? This is a valid concern and yet it is often offset by the overwhelming lack of empathy in policy-making spheres – and the tendency of warring parties to demonize and dehumanize their enemies, especially if they are non-state armed groups.

Is there a risk that power differentials mean that empathy contributes to a form of paternalism? Confident parties are sometimes more inclined to empathize as they have the security and self-assurance to do so. Conversely, research suggests that weaker parties tend to be more adept at empathizing because they are forced to do so in order to protect their interests.

Promoting empathy between certain armed groups can actually diminish the appetite for engagement, such as cases in which one of the parties realises how much it is hated by the other. Nevertheless, it would be going too far to say that ignorance is preferable.

Finally, we should be aware that empathy can be instrumentalized. Military commanders empathize in order to gain an understanding of what the other side will do on the battlefield. The same consideration applies to any tool or social skill, which can be used by diverse actors for a range of purposes.

## Recommendations

The challenges involved in engaging non-state armed groups are immense and require multiple techniques and approaches. Empathy is a complex concept and is certainly no panacea, but has an important role in this endeavour.

Looking ahead, it is recommended that governments:

- **Broaden conflict analysis:** Take steps to ensure that a range of perspectives on violence, conflict and armed groups are incorporated into conflict analysis, including perspectives which challenge established narratives.
- **Promote alternative thinking:** Encourage diversity in personnel and incentivise open thinking especially in foreign ministries and associated institutions.
- **Institutionalise empathy:** Incorporate empathy into policy-making and decision-making processes, including through frank and open discussions between NGOs, communities and governments.
- **Engage other actors:** Where feasible, engage directly with armed groups.
- **Reduce legal constraints:** Minimize legal limitations for independent actors engaging with armed groups: lack of access impedes understanding, which is essential for effective policy-making.

It is recommended that organisations involved in conflict resolution:

- **Acknowledge empathy:** More explicitly acknowledge the critical role of empathy in the practice of peacebuilding and mediation, especially its role in expanding understanding, as well as contributing to and shaping relationships.
- **Incorporate empathy into pedagogy:** Introduce empathy into standard mediation and peacebuilding pedagogy.
- **Offer training:** Ensure peacebuilding professionals and mediators have the opportunity to participate in workshops or trainings that seek to enhance their capacity to empathize.
- **Encourage self-awareness:** Promote greater consciousness among practitioners of how, when and with whom they empathize, as well as the limits and risks of empathizing.
- **Expand selection criteria:** Include empathy skills in criteria for the selection of practitioners.

Finally, governments, foundations and educational institutions should support further scientific research, study and discussion among experts, practitioners and policy-makers, on the role of empathy in conflict resolution, which could help to throw more light on this complex and important issue.