

Robert Ricigliano

Choosing to Engage : Armed Groups and Peace Processes
(London: Conciliation Resources, 2005, 104pp.)

In two recent Conciliation Resources publications “Owning the Process: Public Participation in Peacemaking” and in “Choosing to Engage: Armed Groups and Peace Processes” rather than the analysis of a single armed conflict, there has been a shift to the study of a particular aspect of peace negotiations, drawing on the experiences of a number of conflicts. In this case under review, the issue is set out clearly by the editor Robert Ricigliano “For people living in the Darfur region of western Sudan, the jungles of Colombia, the eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and for the millions of others around the world, the presence of non-state armed groups and the conflicts that often surround them are all too familiar. Over the last two decades, whether in the context of a peace process or a humanitarian initiative, armed groups have come to be seen as key actors in efforts to ease suffering and rebuild conflict-torn societies.” Armed groups are now widely recognized to be of paramount political importance; thus the views of armed groups are necessary parts of the process of developing more effective peacebuilding systems.

Some of the problems are the same for both non-governmental organization (NGO) mediators and for third-party government mediators such as Norway in the Sri Lanka Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam(LTTE)- Government conflict. However the emphasis in this series of reviews is on what role NGOs can play. Thus, I will stress the advice and considerations for NGO mediators who do not have the same financial resources, communication equipment, and access to intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations or the European Union as governments.

The advantage of NGOs in armed conflict mediation involving non-state groups is that NGOs have no possibility to grant legal status and what moral credit an NGO may have from past efforts, they cannot transfer it to others. Governments always start by seeing armed groups who oppose them as ‘terrorists’ and ‘criminals’ with whom one does not negotiate. Of course, there are terrorist organizations and organized criminal organizations which often join in armed conflicts motivated by their own interests or ideologies.

Thus, the first step in a ‘pre-mediation’ phase is to know as well as possible who are the actors in the conflict. While there are factions in any government – those more willing and those less willing to negotiate – a government has a formal structure — a president, a foreign minister, a chief of the military etc. Armed insurgencies are usually diverse, often with local leaders who may or may not take advice from a central source even when armed insurgencies pretend to be one — the United Liberation Front of xyz. What is the socio-economic power base of each faction? What groups are left out of the current patterns of power? What category of people might benefit directly from an end to the conflict and how are such groups organized? It is often difficult for an outsider to know and evaluate the degree of support that factions have and one needs a number of trusted local informants who know the situation well and who are able to give advice.

Once one has as good information as possible as to who are the actors of the drama, the next stage is to see what outside forces are involved both in support of one or another faction or as mediators. Armed conflicts which last in time drag in other players. We have seen this well during the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan which became a training field for insurgents. Iraq today also draws in new players whom we will find elsewhere in a couple of

years. The analysis of outside players is difficult as terrorist groups, criminal organizations and the CIA do not advertise their addresses. One must neither overestimate nor underestimate the impact of outside groups, but one needs to know that they are there, and they are pulling strings. One also needs to know what other NGOs and governments are concerned with possible mediation or conflict resolution and what has already been done. It is not necessary to re-invent the wheel, and if good NGOs are already active, it is better to leave the field open to them.

If one decides to engage (a term I dislike but is used throughout this study meaning activities “to explore, enable, instigate or sustain opportunities for contact(and possibly other conflict resolution processes with or between the parties”), then one needs to develop lines of communication to the government and armed groups and to as many groups of the local population as possible. One needs to say to all parties —“ if there comes a point at which you want to sit down and talk, we are willing to help.”

In making these contacts, one needs to develop sensitivity to the personalities and issues involved. As Terry Waite, an international affairs advisor to the Archbishop of Canterbury who became known for his efforts to negotiate the release of hostages in the Middle East, says “what really counts is your ability on the ground to have a degree of sensitivity to people in situations, to be able to get yourself onto the wavelengths of the people with whom you’re working or discussing...Sensitivity is a misused term, but, sensitivity and intuition, coupled with a certain degree of hard-headedness are some of the qualities that are necessary in that situation.”

Sue Williams whose book “Being in the Middle by Being at the Edge” is reviewed in this same section writes “Much of an intermediary’s success comes down to interpersonal and contextual factors, which will be different in each conflict setting and even each interaction. Above all, it is crucial to remember that armed groups are dynamic organizations whose strategies change in response to evolving circumstances. Different elements in the group will enjoy prominence at different historical moments, in response to internal tensions or external influences. Intermediaries need to remember that their assessment of a group and its attitude to political engagement is not definitive; at a different moment, possibly with a different interlocutor, an intermediary with a different approach may find openings that were previously undiscovered.”

Yet a mediator must analyse the structures that have led to the conflict and not overestimate the verbal willingness to negotiate. As Nicholas Hayson, long-time legal advisor to Nelson Mandela writes “Mediators should be cautious where it seems one or both of the parties to a conflict wish to engage in talks without any intention of reaching agreement. This phenomenon is common in a world where there is increasing international or regional pressure on parties in armed conflict to engage in negotiations.” He goes on to add “The mediator should always be alive to the need for the parties to have ownership and even management of the process...In this regard the mediator is increasingly required to adopt a background role...Throughout the engagement process, mediators must remember that the process must belong to the parties and that they are assisting the parties with their process, not the other way around.”

This is a useful series of essays for both policy-makers and mediators.

Rene Wadlow