

News

## Engaging armed groups to achieve peace: can empathy do any good?



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- ### The Role of Empathy in Engaging Armed Groups



First page of the ceia and Conciliation Resources report.



Conciliation Resources Logo.

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ceia Empathy in conflict resolution logo.

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Empathy has its own risks.

Conciliation Resources and ceia have collaborated to produce a guide on the role of empathy while dealing with armed groups and conflict solving.

- **Concept of empathy**

Empathy makes us think of kindness, well-being and solidarity. But there isn't much need for empathy when the person in front of you is perfectly kind. That's why the report begins by distinguishing cognitive empathy from affective empathy: with armed groups you need cognitive and objective empathy.

Step out of ourselves and draw on imagination to figure out how someone else feels. Empathy is not linear but dynamic, and it implies two sides communicating and influencing each other: this, of course, has some risks.

- **Empathy policy making**

Outsiders see armed groups in a way that can lead to missed political opportunities. Problems are complex, and so are the reasons why people are part of any armed group. Without an empathy policy making, armed conflicts can become permanent.

Institutional narratives can be counter-productive because they focus so much on data that they dehumanize the most important narrative of the armed adversaries: what goal is driving them, why do they fight and what do they stand for.

A better understanding of armed groups is crucial, and to achieve it diplomats need empathy without exposing themselves to being called traitors or collaborationists within their own government. Quite often, conflict is instrumentalized by political parties.

- **Utility of empathy**

Putting yourself in someone else's shoes means getting to know the **priorities and concerns of the others**; in this case, "the others" are the activists of an armed group. To do all of this you first need contact, human relationship.

There is no peacebuilding without empathy, and empathy happens only through human contact and relation. Even if the 'not talking with the murderer/not dealing with terrorists' argumentation may appeal to some outraged voters, the more political parties insist in political confrontation the harder peacebuilding gets.

- **Modalities of empathy**

The question about who should empathize in the first place and the amount of time devoted to empathy are important factors in peacebuilding. Relationships are build with contact, but it is hard to empathize with someone who practices violence, and the more time one spends trying to do so the harder it gets to assume total empathy.

- **Limits constraints of empathy**

The first rule to empathize is to know there are structural constraints to it, and even if two sides have developed a good communication and mutual respect, it can be difficult to find a constructive path. Acknowledging this is a realistic approach to conflict resolution.

- **Risks of empathy in armed conflicts**

Reducing hostilities is not only about empathy: empathy is just a very useful tool to achieve trust and to stimulate engagement in the long run. As useful as empathy is, though, the risk of it is that you're exposed to the other's 'pathology'.

Empathizing with a degree of objectivity could be the solution to that Stockholm syndrome consequence of empathy, because it is no mystery that empathy can be instrumentalized by the members of the armed group.

If you want to know more about the subejct and receive some good recommendations for your peacebuilding organization [read here](#).

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