Conflict dynamics and agonistic dialogue on historical violence: A case from Indonesia

Abstract

This article contends that the type of high-level political consensus needed to reach a peace agreement is often insufficient for rebuilding and transforming wider social relations.

Consensus-focused processes tend to suppress divergent views and experiences of conflict, particularly among grassroots conflict actors, and risk deepening social divides by homogenizing diverse memories of past violence, with potentially dangerous consequences.

In response to these concerns this article advances an understanding of agonistic dialogue and explores an example of such dialogue in communal conflict in Indonesia. Building on an understanding of effective dialogue as sustained, intensive and relational, this article also underscores the need for effective dialogue to have politico-institutional support and to be locally driven and owned by actors who are legitimate and trusted in the eyes of conflict protagonists.

Key words: conflict; violence; communal violence; Indonesia; conflict transformation; peacebuilding; dialogue; agonism

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Introduction

Liberal peacebuilding models based on elite-level political consensus have been subject to critique by scholars of conflict.¹ Debates continue on both the immediate success of liberal peacebuilding in ending large-scale violence,² and on the long-term efficacy of post-agreement peacebuilding programs that are technocratic and apolitical.³ The democratization and marketization processes that are typical of the liberal peace agenda tend not to take adequate account of the deep relational divides underlying prior conflict dynamics⁴, and risk re-escalating or triggering new tensions. Further, such elite-level agreements tend to favour more powerful conflict actors who have a seat at the negotiating table – at the international, national, and even subnational levels. This may be to the exclusion of other, less powerful parties, particularly minorities, risking further tensions and potentially violence.⁵

There has been significant scholarly work on how well post-agreement peacebuilding programs deal with transitions at the grassroots or community level, noting the significant challenges to reintegrating and improving relations among ex-combatants and the wider society⁶, particularly where deep identity politics are in play and the lines between victims and perpetrators are blurred. Similarly, the literature on transitional justice mechanisms has identified the challenges for improving societal relations between conflict actors, when efforts are focussed on accountability as to who should be held responsible for the violence.⁷ Many post-conflict peacebuilding efforts focus on conflicting parties reaching agreement on ‘what happened in the conflict’, with the aim of holding parties accountable for past actions. Examples include many of the instruments from the transitional justice ‘toolkit’, including

peace agreements, truth commissions, trials, and other efforts that pursue a degree of consensus among parties on both the causes of conflict, and the most appropriate forms of redress for its consequences. Yet it is evident that in many ‘post’-conflict contexts—that is, societies where there has been a general ceasefire from war or major episodes of violence, but where tensions and/or small incidents of violence continue—achieving political consensus in order to elicit a ceasefire or reconstitute political institutions is insufficient for rebuilding and transforming wider social relations.

Thus, in this article, we challenge the pursuit of consensus in conflict transformation efforts. In our view, even when peace agreements are able to halt violence and reconstitute power-sharing arrangements among political elites, consensus-seeking peacebuilding programs alone remain insufficient to rebuild communities and may in fact be counter-productive for longer-term sustainable peace in some cases. This, we contend, is primarily because they sideline the relational aspects of conflict that ultimately shape the understanding of the ‘other’ among conflict actors. Societies with histories of mass violence and deep inter-group divisions, steeped in memories and experiences of violence that vary among conflict actors, can perpetuate mistrust and sometimes-dangerous perceptions of the ‘other’.

By marginalising discussion of the past, consensus-focused processes can also deepen divides by suppressing the diverse, sometimes traumatic memories of past violence that may manifest in new forms of discontent and even violence in contemporary politics.⁸ Programs that suppress dissent effectively exclude plural views about the varied experiences and memories of violence among actors engaged in or affected by the conflict. In sum, we suggest that peacebuilding programs that do not engage contentious social relations between conflict actors, which are shaped by, and are historically, culturally, ideologically and

politically embedded in, the history of violence in a particular context, are unlikely to be effective.

This article focuses instead on an emerging approach in the field of historical justice, namely the practice of agonistic forms of dialogue designed to more effectively accommodate plural views and incorporate the relational aspects of past violence in conflict transformation efforts. As a critique of deliberative democracy⁹, agonism—such as the work of Chantal Mouffe¹⁰—has been subject to much debate. Nevertheless, we contend that agonistic principles have considerable merit in providing alternative pathways for peacebuilding efforts that involve relational engagement. Indeed, there is growing research on the ways in which agonistic, bottom-up peacebuilding processes have contributed to conflict transformation.¹¹ In societies divided by civil war, or those transitioning from authoritarianism to democracy or colonialism to postcolonialism, agonistic dialogue seeks to bridge the gap between individual and collective experience, providing opportunities for divided groups to explore attitudes about the experiences of episodes of past violence that continue to polarize them.¹²

Rather than rendering peacebuilding as apolitical, dialogue projects are primarily concerned with improving the quality of political discourse, creating what Harold Saunders has described as a ‘public peace process’. Through such processes, groups of citizens can design and participate in programmes for ‘changing conflictual relationships in ways that create the capacities to build the practices, processes and structures of peace’¹³ and, through ‘engaging in incessant discourse about the world that lies between former enemies,’ these groups may create the capacity for shared understandings of the possibilities for a non-violent future.¹⁴

In this article we first explore the limits of consensus-seeking peacebuilding models, the importance of drawing on conflict dynamics research to inform conflict transformation efforts, and the importance of a meaningful focus on the relational aspects of conflict in peacebuilding. We then explore a case of how dialogue work shaped a particular peacebuilding effort in regional Indonesia, examining how this process emerged and the ways in which it sought to engage the relational aspects of conflict. The Indonesian case draws on repeat fieldwork visits to Poso over 13 years.¹⁵ In particular we have sought to identify the nature and forms of dialogue emerging prior to, alongside, or as a part of higher-level peacebuilding mechanisms in the Poso case. While civil society actors did not label these efforts as ‘agonistic’, they did intentionally seek to build cross-group understanding through grassroots dialogue following protracted communal violence. In the face of efforts by spoilers to re-ignite the conflict and amidst growing dissatisfaction with the predominantly top-down, government-led peacebuilding projects, civil society actors sought alternative forms of cross-group engagement. Their intention was to re-humanise the ‘other’ and facilitate a better understanding of shared and divergent experiences to create a more sustainable peace.

Drawing on the case material, we seek to advance the conceptual framing of agonistic dialogue developed by Maddison¹⁶ in her work across a number of countries. Maddison has elsewhere argued for the need for dialogue to be *agonistic* in its orientation—that is, focused on engaging rather than resolving conflict—and for it to be *sustained* over time rather than a one off event, in order to encourage relationship building between conflict actors. She also contends that the dialogue should be *intensive*, facilitating deeper connections between participants. Maddison argues that such engagement holds open ‘the political space in which people in divided and post-violent conflict societies can engage across difference with a view to transforming their relationships.’¹⁷

Extending Maddison's approach, we suggest that effective agonistic dialogue also requires the presence of wider *politico-institutional support* within the conflict context. Politico-institutional support signals that such processes are imbued with a degree of legitimacy, and are unlikely to be significantly curtailed by violent spoilers—either state actors whose interests are threatened by the peace (and who have the capacity to mobilise the resources and institutions of the state) or non-state actors (who can mobilise violent actors through their patronage networks). The research of Aggestam et al. on agonism in bottom-up peacebuilding efforts in the Middle East Peace process has identified both the role of agonistic dialogue processes in building Israeli-Palestinian relations, and the ways in which the efficacy of these processes has more recently been constrained by the wider politico-institutional environment.¹⁸ We also argue that such processes must also be *locally owned* – that is, they should be driven and shaped by actors with knowledge of the relevant socio-cultural and historical context relevant to the conflict and have the legitimacy and trust of conflict actors. While we do not intend to reify 'the local' we observe that the absence of local ownership, and perceptions that such efforts are either 'top down', externally imposed, or controlled by the state, are likely to render dialogue efforts less effective.

While we acknowledge that further comparative work is needed to follow emerging historical dialogue processes over time and across many different types of violence, the case material explored below suggests that for dialogue processes to contribute to conflict transformation, they must engage rather than avoid past conflict dynamics and episodes of violence. This includes engaging the political aspects of conflict and providing space for varied individual and collective experiences of conflict to be explored in order to 'rehumanise' the other. In sum, this article demonstrates the potentially transformative effects that dialogue can have in transitional and 'post'-conflict contexts through enhancing

the quality of peace and reducing the likelihood that persistent relational divides will re-ignite tensions in contemporary politics.

The puzzle of consensus and the promise of agonism

The question of how to reckon with violence, and the legacy of anger and loss that remains in its aftermath, remains far from settled. In many ‘post’-conflict contexts, efforts at reconciliation and conflict transformation often strive for consensus between protagonists on the perceived causes of violent conflict. These efforts tend to focus on the future rather than the past, with a view to establishing new social and institutional arrangements.

We agree that such processes may be an important component of peacebuilding efforts aimed at developing new institutional designs and broad policies concerned with conflict management. Consensus-focused processes may also help to address the political economy of power-divides that underpinned mass violence. However, we contend that the consensus-focussed institutional turn in responding to conflict may be problematic in addressing the relational aspects of conflict—such as dehumanised views of the ‘other’; poor understanding of the experience and motivations of the ‘other’ for participating in violence; and continued inter-group divisions that sustain tensions and risk further violence in contemporary politics, discussed further below—for four key reasons.

1. The limits of consensus-seeking

First, the goal of discerning or constructing a singular, consensual ‘truth’ about the past remains central to many conflict transformation efforts. Crocker contends that without ‘some agreement about what happened and why’, former enemies are unlikely to be reconciled.¹⁹ The reality in many divided societies, however, is that such a consensus may

never be possible. This is particularly problematic in peacebuilding efforts that focus on nation building which, in ‘post’-conflict contexts, seeks to replace social divisions with a shared sense of nationhood. Such initiatives—dominated by the desire to ‘move on’ from the past and look to the future—often subsume or conceal the multiple and contested narratives of past violence, particularly those of the poor and marginalised. Elite-driven ‘consensus’ narratives of historical violence can create dangerous relational tensions that are likely to re-emerge at a future point. In the worst cases, an insistence that deep intractable disagreement must be ‘resolved’ into a single narrative of historical violence may in fact re-escalate the conflict and send parties back to the battlefields.²⁰ These approaches misread the way in which political conflicts are (re)produced in public narratives, as Little suggests, ‘the reality ... is that singular narratives of complex conflicts are never universally consensual and lead us towards an unnecessarily limited range of potential political strategies for managing conflict situations’.²¹ This is particularly likely to be the case if the stakes are high in terms of how power and resources are to be (re)distributed among conflicting parties in future ‘post’-conflict institutional arrangements.

2. The significance of conflict dynamics

Second, the wide and varied research on the onset of violent conflict and on conflict causes and dynamics illustrate the plural narratives of the experience of violence and the understandings of particular conflicts. It is well established that in communal conflicts, riots, and even civil war, violence does not occur everywhere and at all times, and that motivation and participation are not uniform over space and time²², even though actions may be aligned under metaframes of identity allegiance.²³ Recruitment patterns and strategies of rebel and other organisations change;²⁴ narratives and explanations of conflict evolve²⁵ and can also be reinterpreted ‘post’-conflict,²⁶ and the distinction between victims and perpetrators is

diluted over the life of the conflict as it escalates, particularly in protracted civil wars and in repeated episodes of violence.²⁷

As Woodward²⁸ argues, root causes of conflict become less and less significant in terms of understanding the conflict, as dynamics today may be causes tomorrow. Thus, the goal of achieving consensus among conflict actors on what happened and why in peacebuilding projects may be unattainable or even trigger further conflict.²⁹ Violent mobilisation may also *produce* group differentiation as incidents of collective action are categorised or explained in ethnic or other group terms.³⁰ How actions and narratives are framed using identity categories during and after incidents of violent conflict can create feedback loops that shape subsequent experience.

While the causes of conflict may not be bracketed from conflict dynamics altogether, we agree with Woodward³¹ who argues that debates assessing the success or failure of ‘peacemaking’ interventions in internal conflicts, particularly external interventions, tend to be overly preoccupied with addressing such causes. Everyday intercommunal relationships sustain a diverse set of views about the history of particular conflicts, often for generations after the violence has ended.³² What research on the dynamics of conflicts makes clear is that the diversity of *views about* the history of a conflict arises from a diversity of *experiences and memories of* that conflict. Seeking to achieve consensus on a single cause or about accountability potentially disguises multiple sometimes-contradictory memories, narratives, and experiences of conflict.³³

3. Attributing accountability

Third, understanding this diversity of conflict experience underscores the argument that seeking consensus about ‘what happened’ and ‘why’, and who is accountable, may in fact prohibit engagement in peace processes. For example, the punishment of acts ascribed

to particular groups or individuals may be understood as a political choice rather than a factual determination, meaning that many survivors will find it difficult to embrace the project of peace rather than a return to conflict.³⁴ Further, attributing accountability may discourage parties to the conflict from coming to the table at the outset, particularly if there is a concern among some conflict protagonists that the view of more powerful political actors will dominate the discourse.

As the discussion on conflict dynamics illustrates, attributing accountability can be at odds with the fact that the distinction between victims and perpetrators in many conflicts is fluid, particularly as conflicts widen and escalate. In many cases the majority of the population may be thought of as ‘bystanders’, a group seen to have helped abusive governments to retain power through passive inaction rather than active collaboration, which poses further problems for accountability. Yet it is often the case that just as processes such as truth commissions create particular types of victims, they also draw attention away from a sense of wider social accountability for the structures and institutions that supported past wrongs.³⁵ In the wider society, however, memories of violence remain highly contested, and informed by the salient aspects of group and individual identities that have emerged from complex socio-political, cultural, and historical contexts, and from the conflict itself.

4. Absent relational dimensions

Fourth, peacebuilding efforts that focus on the construction of consensus-seeking transitional institutions may be less likely to focus on transforming the *relational* aspects of conflict. Tropp³⁶ and Maddison³⁷ among others, highlight the importance for contemporary conflict transformation of focusing on the underlying psychological and sociological needs that animate conflictual relations. These relational aspects of conflict in themselves embody dimensions of power and antagonism that can inform contemporary collective identities³⁸

and link historical violence and tensions to contemporary social relations and politics. The relational dimensions of conflict are often historically embedded - prior experiences of social relations among actors, including antagonism, repression or violence, shape the memories that may result in contestation or reprisals for triggering actions that invoke this historical memory of violence and trauma.

In contrast to these shortcomings in consensus-focused processes, agonistic processes provide spaces in which participants are able to focus on expanding understanding by ‘surfacing fundamental assumptions and gaining insight into why they arise,’³⁹ even though deep disagreements may persist. Agonistic dialogue focuses not just on issues or topics of disagreement, but is concerned with the dynamics of the relationships underlying those issues. Finding ways for conflict actors to live together, without subsuming their multiple and varied experiences of past episodes of violence within a single narrative, is about transforming the understanding of the relational aspects of prior violent conflict and understanding the experience and attitudes of the ‘other’.

Key to this form of dialogue is proactively foregrounding the historical memory of violence, and allowing for the varied and multiple narratives and experiences of both individuals and groups (as well as the varied experiences of individuals within groups) to be expressed. When spaces open up for opportunities to safely engage in dialogue, even in conjunction with other more formal mechanisms such as truth commissions, parties agree to come to the table to discuss an event, not to necessarily agree on a version of an event. Their motivations for participating in dialogue may be varied: from seeking an end to violence or preventing its re-escalation through a better understanding of the other, ensuring their version of events may be heard and interests represented, or an attraction to the ‘therapeutic

turn' in micro-interactions that seek to promote healing and understanding of one's experiences.

While dialogue may result in partially shared understandings and consensus on conflict narratives, this is not the objective. Agonistic dialogue *engages* conflict dynamics rather than repressing such dynamics and their relational aspects. In this sense, we argue that agonistic dialogue processes provide important opportunities for divided groups to explore attitudes about the historical experiences that continue to polarize them, with potentially transformative effects.

The use of historical dialogue in Poso, Indonesia

Diverse forms of dialogue displaying the tenets of agonism are emerging through processes established by citizens' groups and civil society organisations across Asia. Broadly speaking, these processes are designed to improve communication and relational understanding between conflict actors, particularly in the wake of large-scale violence. The example from Indonesia discussed here provides just one illustration of the kinds of processes that are also taking place elsewhere in the region.⁴⁰

In the period following the end of the 32-year rule of the authoritarian Suharto administration in May 1998, waves of violence in the form of communal clashes between ethno-religious groups occurred in a number of provinces across Indonesia. As processes of democratic reform and decentralisation of political authority began to take hold in the years that followed, communal clashes and other insurgent violence occurred in disparate parts of the archipelago. In the Poso district in Central Sulawesi province, the first outbreak of violence occurred in December 1998, some months after Suharto resigned, with several phases of intergroup fighting occurring between 1998 and 2001.⁴¹ It is important to note that while we provide a brief narrative for the conflict here for the benefit of the reader, as our

argument would suggest, hundreds of hours of interviews reveal that there is in fact much debate among protagonists as to how and why the violence arose, as well as how different actors experienced the violence and their motivations for participation, be it as bystanders, combatants, in leadership, or in seeking to broker peace.

For example one ex-combatant spoke in an interview (July 2006) of feeling ‘very scared’ but that it was his ‘duty’ to defend his home and his religion. Compounding this sense of duty was the fact that he had no food or water, was only 17 years old, and had been left alone when his family had fled to the city. His vulnerability meant that his early participation in violence, which was restricted to the throwing of stones whenever people he did not know passed his home, quickly escalated when groups started to ‘consolidate’ in the region and taught young men like this ‘how to defend ourselves’ and gave them ‘access to weapons.’ Another community member in Poso, however, perceived the work of higher level actors as making ‘preparations to ripen the situation for conflict’ by specifically targeting vulnerable young people such as the ex-combatant discussed above—young people who were ‘uneducated’ and needed money. This respondent suggests that it now suits these political elites to deny their involvement, compounding precisely the kinds of conflict dynamics that concern us in this paper.

During this three year period, which included repeated episodes of collective violence, conflict in Poso escalated along religious identity lines to involve fighters from different religious groups. Others joined, including hardline Mujahidin and other Muslim and Christian fighters both from inside and outside the district, province, island and the country. While violence was usually triggered by youth clashes, many accounts of the underlying dynamics of the conflict pertained to contestation over economic and political inequalities, political access, and representation following the decentralisation of significant

political and economic authority to the district level.⁴² For example, one local leader argued that ‘competition is the root of the problem, in the bureaucracy, in staff recruitment and in other realms’ (Interview, Poso 2006).

In the most intense periods of fighting, people were killed in armed intergroup clashes with combatants wearing symbols signifying one religion or other. Churches and mosques were destroyed and entire villages or neighbourhoods were razed to the ground. The ‘repertoires of violence’⁴³ drawn on by both sides sought to deepen religious identity divides by using religious slurs, public speeches, and the reification of leaders from religious identity groups. As the conflict escalated, religious communities became divided along geographical lines as they took refuge from further attacks. Accounts from ex-combatants revealed that violence fueled further motivations for participation as loss of family members, uncertainty and fear gripped residents. In some cases those who had been victims of violence initially joined combatant groups for a variety of reasons: for self protection and the support provided through training, financing and the provision of arms; to guard villages; to reap the political gains from shifting district politics; and for ideological reasons as the discourse of religious difference deepened divides.

Some claimed to have merely been ‘bystanders’ rather than actual participants in the violence even though they had provided food and transport for sons and brothers travelling to the battlefields. Indeed, heated public debate emerged in the ‘post’-conflict peacebuilding discourse around who should be defined as victims or perpetrators and the potential for amnesty from prosecution for acts of violence, including whether state actors should be prosecuted. Such experiences are typical, and underscore the need for agonistic dialogue that allows for expression of messy, contested, varied, relational aspects of conflict.

Alongside military action in Poso to halt the violence, the Malino peace agreement was established in late 2001. The agreement was brokered by members of the central government administration, including Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (later the President of Indonesia, 2004-2014) and Jusuf Kalla (currently the Vice President of Indonesia), and supported by the National Human Rights Commission. It was signed by national and local political and religious elites, with civil society organisations and others generally supporting the initiative. Certain Poso-based leaders within the networks of the national and provincial-level brokers were involved in establishing the agreement, while others were excluded. To establish the agreement, a series of meetings between the aforementioned actors were held that could be considered a form of dialogue. However, the dialogue was not of the agonistic kind: it did not involve sustained, intensive engagement or create the space for a plurality of views and understandings of past violence to emerge, nor did the meetings facilitate relational engagement. Thus, while this short-term process may have brought about a temporary halt to violence, the agreement and the dialogue underpinning it were not enough to provide the foundations for a more sustainable peace.

The ten points of the agreement included requesting the state to take firm and impartial measures against violators; repatriating internally displaced persons; rehabilitating, together with the government, the economic assets and infrastructures of the area; and respecting the respective religious practices of different groups as stipulated by the Constitution. Restoring law and order was key and this role was given to the military. Working groups were created to monitor and help implement various aspects of the agreement. However, according to interviewees, villagers still considered these groups to be top down, elite-driven, deeply corrupt (in misusing funds for rehabilitation) and in some cases ineffective. Agreed work commenced slowly and did not sufficiently involve

grassroots members of the community, often focusing on one-off events that did not provide space to build trust and improve relations among former warring parties.

Despite these shortcomings, the peace agreement, subsequent security operations, and the working group efforts themselves all signalled a degree of politico-institutional support for efforts at conflict transformation in the region, and a greater ripeness for relational engagement. Together these processes signalled a shift towards greater willingness to engage in seeking alternative, non-violent pathways in conflict management, and that it was likely safer to do so, compared with previous periods of inter-communal warfare. Without such signals, the opportunity for spoilers of relational engagement may have remained among those with vested interests in continuing violence or halting public discourse on experiences of violence.

Indeed, in earlier phases of the conflict, inaction by military forces and the perception that prosecutions of alleged perpetrators of violence were one-sided, had indicated that there were wider interests in maintaining, if not fuelling, the conflict.⁴⁴ Under the prior authoritarian regime, the military exercised significant political authority through which they used, incited, and controlled violence. However, in the post-authoritarian transition, the military lost its quota of seats in the executive and legislative arms of government from the national to the district levels, and the authority for domestic security was given to the police. Thus, with its budget and authority curtailed, inaction by the military in the face of collective violence was not uncommon – both for strategic and budgetary reasons to demonstrate its continued relevance and the failings of the police.⁴⁵ With the peace agreement, however, authority for maintaining security in the Poso was given back to the military, special commands were established and resources flowed for the security operations. Thus, although prior efforts at reaching agreement had failed, this time the backing of key national

actors, the changing political economy, and the fact that both sides had engaged in more institutionalised negotiated peace-building efforts, provided indications of broad support for an end to the communal violence.

However, these state-sponsored efforts alone were insufficient for dealing with the relational aspects of conflict. There was ongoing dissatisfaction with the progress made by the state-sponsored working groups along with grass roots suspicion that the military and others who had benefitted from the conflict were behind sporadic incidents of bombs and sniper attacks.⁴⁶ These concerns led to efforts by a number of local actors to create a space for relational dialogue among combatants to reduce the risk of their re-engagement in warfare.

Civil society actors spearheaded the efforts to improve relational engagement, along with religious organisations that were familiar with group dynamics on both sides of the conflict. Former combatants who were both tired of violence or who had been privy to the political interests behind the conflict were also involved. Journalists who had monitored and reported on the violence, many of whom had been embedded among conflict actors, contributed to bringing combatants together. Thus, over several years, many CSOs worked with others in the community to build peace from the bottom up.⁴⁷ The following view expressed by a local observer (July 2006) is typical of the views espoused in the interviews:

Government efforts were not particularly successful as they were too top down...The Malino Declaration in December 2001 was too elitist. It didn't truly reach down into the community...The Accord did put a dampener on violence, but because so many properties and lives were lost, violence didn't completely stop... Many efforts were undertaken by CSOs in the field, in

the form of inter-community discussions and inter-religious group discussions. These peace-building efforts truly involved the community.

Although never explicitly framed as such, much of this effort displayed the tenets of agonsim, using dialogue to try and shift relational understanding of the ‘other’ from that of enemies (to be faced in violent combat) to that of adversaries (who have different but respected views). Slowly, these actors brought together small numbers of ex-combatants to meet and share their experiences of the conflict, usually over several days in structured workshops with facilitators from the CSOs, and away from the general view of the public. These sessions included both combatant leaders still present in the region, many of whom had political connections, as well as combatant group members who were more likely to follow youth leaders. Initially, however, they did not involve the political masterminds of warfare—those elites who by design, or by default had orchestrated violence or organised responses to threats. In many cases these elites were political actors in the region with security and national political links that had been accommodated in the more formal, state-sponsored peace negotiations.

Participants in these dialogues did not come to the table without reservations, and in some cases it took convincing from trusted CSO members who argued that an alternative to violence included the sharing of grievances and experiences. Had the dialogues been framed as seeking a shared or consensus-based understanding of the past it is unlikely that such reservations would have been overcome given the distrust among groups. The signals of politico-institutional support for peacebuilding mentioned above were also important indicators that it was relatively safe to engage with ‘the enemy’ in these spaces. CSOs facilitated many different kinds of inter-religious forums, discussions and activities, joint

anti-corruption campaigns, and oversaw the return of small numbers of internally displaced persons to their former homes.

There were also significant meetings between Christian and Muslim leaders, particularly prior to the district head elections in 2005, with candidates establishing Muslim-Christian pairings to contest the elections as a conflict prevention measure.⁴⁸ Visits between both communities enabled the sharing of stories, and joint Muslim-Christian working groups (backed by state funding through the working groups in some instances) helped to rebuild religious houses of worship and other property, while also rebuilding trust. As one journalist, interviewed in 2005 observed, the meetings organised between communities and in forms of neighbourhood discussion saw ‘trust between groups begin to be established.’ People who were ‘tired’ and who has ‘lost their trust in the security forces’ began to rebuild their trust in each other as they grew to understand ‘the politics behind the conflict’ through their conversations with one another. Again, the development of trust was only possible in spaces where there was no pressure to develop a shared understanding of the past.

Over time, CSOs also facilitated repeated meetings between opposing ex-combatants, which were then extended to the broader community as trust was gained between actors. Interviews with ex-combatants on both sides highlighted the ways in which peacebuilding and human rights organisations in the region were increasingly able to incorporate ex-combatants into their activities.⁴⁹ In turn, these ex-combatants worked to discourage other combatants from taking up arms, particularly in response to the incidents of targeted violence aimed at re-escalating tensions. Interviews with actors in these CSOs revealed the difficult but productive dialogue between warring parties that took place during these years. These meetings were heavily facilitated, often involving equal numbers of

participants from the conflict groups. Equal space was given to participants to tell their varied stories and experiences and they also participated in joint reconstruction activities.

In relating their experiences, participants on both sides recalled the mutual recognition of loss, fear, and hardship, which created what Lederach would identify as points of intersection among divided groups.⁵⁰ Actors on both sides explained their varied reasons for joining the conflict to seek protection and training, or after family members were killed, or for payment, status or popularity through their participation in the conflict. Some participants in the dialogues were able to identify shared moments when, in the midst of intergroup clashes when they had their gun aimed at the other, they had each chosen not to pull the trigger. Gradually, through dialogue that supported multiple narratives of the conflict, and in which combatants and bystanders could reflect on the past in terms of both their individual and group experiences, new understandings emerged. In contrast, while a consensus-focused approach to dialogue may have addressed similar content, the pressure to come to an agreement on historical ‘facts’ would likely have shut down the space in which multiple narratives could emerge and be recognised by other groups.

Politics was not ignored in these discussions, but rather it was slowly engaged through dialogue. Combatants on both sides, civil society dialogue facilitators, and others all conveyed their sense of the ways the process of dialogue had enabled both sides to identify some of the political aspects of mobilisation processes. This included linking payments for participation in violence with key moments when collective violence exploded; debates over key political and bureaucratic appointments in the district; the distribution of these positions among religious groups; and the inaction of the military in light of its changing role in national politics. While within and among groups there were different views on who had greater right to political representation, the recognition that there were also larger

forces at play built a better understanding of the ‘other’ and their motivations for participation in violence.

Many participants in the dialogues described how these insights helped groups suffering from conflict fatigue to resist reengaging in violence in the midst of new conflict triggering actions. Such alternative views of the other may not have emerged without agonistic historical dialogue. As one Christian ex-combatant explained in July 2006 when ‘triggering’ incidents continued to occur:

It’s really difficult to not re-engage in the conflict, and I am under a lot of pressure from some members of the community to facilitate some kind of reprisal action. Tensions rise each time the execution date [of the three Christians charged with instigating violence] gets closer, and then they [the authorities] delay it again. We wonder if this is a part of efforts to keep tensions simmering, as some would benefit from more violence... The ex-combatants, NGOs, and Christian leaders have all been undertaking daily efforts to try and calm down the anger and prevent the situation from escalating.

Indeed, by late 2007 (following the police special forces operation in Poso to weed out most of the last remaining Mujahidin hardliners in the region) relations in the district had reached a relatively peaceful state. Even the return of a small number of hardliners who were once involved in the violence in the region, and who had publically expressed sympathies for establishing an ‘Islamic State’ (which prompted large-scale joint military-police operations in the Poso highlands from 2015 to mid 2017, which were ongoing at the time of writing) is yet to trigger new rounds of inter-group violence. This outcome suggests that the local efforts towards relational engagement have had longer-term effects.

The agonistic orientation to dialogue in Poso highlights the transformative effects of processes that are sustained; focus on the relational aspects of conflict; are intensive; and which create space for multiple narratives of violence to emerge, culminating in points of intersection, divergence, and convergence among enemies. The Poso processes were heavily facilitated and structured and were also grounded in the local socio-economic, cultural and political context and lived experiences of conflict actors who could easily access and participate in initiatives. These are the aspects of ‘local ownership’ that we suggest are important for peacebuilding efforts to have greater efficacy, particularly in terms of the relational dimension of peacebuilding. They were appropriately timed, as they were preceded by a formal peace agreement and military action that signalled a shift in the willingness of political actors to find non-violent forms of contestation: they did not occur in isolation.

The dialogue work in Poso also had politico-institutional support from a combination of CSOs and, indirectly, from the state (through its initiation of other formal processes), which legitimated the processes. Key state actors signalled institutional support for conflict transformation (rather than favouring one or another group) through direct involvement in formal parallel initiatives conducted together with traditional, religious, and other elites. District state actors also sought to change the way government resources were distributed to ensure a greater balance of political and economic access among groups.⁵¹ Grassroots efforts focussed on the relational aspects of conflict, while other more elite initiatives focussed on power and interests. In sum the suite of conflict transformation efforts in Poso was complementary and mutually reinforcing.

Developing the model of agonistic dialogue

The case outlined here helps us to develop Maddison's definition of agonistic dialogue as involving 'sustained, intensive relational work' that creates and holds open 'the political space in which people in divided and post-violent conflict societies can engage across difference with a view to transforming their relationships.'⁵² The case of Poso certainly reflects the principles outlined by Maddison and indicates the core tenets of agonistic processes. Dialogue was *sustained* over a number of years through repeated interactions, and joint activities. It was initially *intensive* through structured, facilitated and repeated workshops between former combatants and later the broader community. It sought to improve *relational* understanding between groups and within groups on their distinctive and shared experiences of violence and motivations for participation, as well as a shared understanding that emerged as to the political underpinnings of the 'conflict project' that took place during the early years of reform. Many recounted how these dialogue forums prevented former combatants from returning to the battlefields in the face of sniper attacks and bombs, and was key to de-escalating the conflict. An important contextual fact to consider is that the conflict in Poso was predominantly communal, which may have provided more fertile ground for agonistic dialogue than would other forms of violence such as insurgencies, or state-perpetrated violence, where there are greater degrees of asymmetrical power relations.

However, the Poso case also suggests that we can build on Maddison's conceptualisation of agonistic dialogue to consider the importance of *politico-institutional support* for agonistic historical dialogue processes (as opposed to or in addition to the creation of transitional justice institutions). Underlying institutional support for dialogue can help to create or enable the space for open, structured, facilitated discussion that does not privilege a particular view, seek to shut down particular discourse, or threaten the safety of participants. Institutional support on the part of the state can be signalled through the

participation of state actors in the forum (while not privileging their view), or through other supporting efforts that promote the importance of dialogue and conflict transformation more widely through parallel initiatives, such as those observed in Poso. Although there are undoubted challenges for fostering political-institutional support, particularly where the legitimacy of the structures that may provide such support is fragile, where legitimate support can be developed it may signal that the process of facilitating a plurality of views to emerge is legitimate and accepted.

Potentially far more important than institutional support, however, is the need for culturally sensitive, relevant, and appropriate institutions that are *grounded in local experiences* and practices of engagement rather than the imposition of Western institutional norms in the mode of the liberal peace. While we do not intend to fetishize ‘the local’, we acknowledge that for dialogue participants to engage in and trust processes that focus on traumatic experiences of the past, it is vital that these processes are informed by local contexts, and are spearheaded by trusted actors who hold local knowledge. Indeed, the most effective forms of agonistic dialogue have emerged when local communities and organisations have been able to act together to create and sustain these processes.

A further consideration that we intend to explore in future research pertains to the importance of the temporal aspects of any dialogue processes. Considering the timing, staging, and duration of dialogical engagement in ‘post’-conflicts is essential, and we suggest that dialogue processes will be most appropriate when the major parties of the conflict are willing to seek alternative arrangements to manage their differences. A willingness to engage at the grassroots level may emerge when tensions have begun to deescalate, when groups are experiencing conflict fatigue, or when there are signs of wider social and institutional support for conflict transformation. This means that the timing of

dialogue processes is contingent on a shift in the conflict discourse among warring parties towards the intention of seeking alternative, non-violent pathways. Other indications of ripeness potentially include the spaces opened by formal negotiations for peace, investigations into atrocities, hearings, and the commencement of other mechanisms that seek a (re)negotiation of the distribution of power and resources. Such mechanisms signal that there is a space for grassroots initiatives to safely emerge, although the judgment in each case will be deeply context specific, taking account of the nature of the conflict, its history and contemporary discourse.

Conclusion

Dialogue processes in divided or post-authoritarian societies that create spaces for agonistic engagement and allow for a focus on the relational dimensions of conflict make an important contribution to reconciliation and conflict transformation efforts. Agonistic dialogue can help a range of conflict actors to better understand how and why individuals and groups engaged in conflict at particular times in particular ways. The transformative potential of dialogue is derived specifically from the creation of political space, which in turn creates capacity for conflict actors to engage their differences through the active foregrounding of their multiple narratives and experiences of violence. These efforts also provide a means for deescalating the underlying relational tensions in conflict, which are susceptible to being remobilised in violence when triggering actions invite reprisals. Key to this form of dialogue is the proactive foregrounding of the historical memories of violence. Through such processes, history is democratized, and narratives that reflect the experience of multiple actors can emerge.

In this article we have foregrounded the importance of agonistic dialogue, and have drawn on a case of regional conflict in Indonesia to explore the challenges involved in

developing such processes. Both the research on conflict dynamics and the Indonesian case study suggest that there are varied experiences of individual and group participation in conflict, which change over time and are embedded in local and national socio-political and historical frames. We have argued that, rather than seeking an artificial consensus, whether it is developed as an intentional approach or not, agonistic dialogue can allow for a rich engagement with underlying conflict dynamics, allowing the heterogeneous experiences of groups and individuals in conflict to emerge. The Poso case demonstrates that, while a shared understandings on some aspects of the past may emerge through dialogue processes, developing such consensus views should not be the goal. It may be easier to develop shared understandings about the future—in Poso, for example, dialogue participants forged a shared understanding that in future they would not be manipulated by political and economic interests. Nevertheless, what proved most beneficial in this case was the deeper understanding of *different* perspectives and experiences that emerged through the dialogue work.

If the stakes can be lowered even a little for conflict actors to hear and understand each other through more agonistic dialogue about past violence, it may be possible for partly shared or new understandings to emerge and for further violence will be avoided. The aim of agonistic dialogue is to turn enemies into adversaries through non-violent forms of contestation. While on the one hand there are legitimate fears that in revisiting past issues new violent conflicts will be triggered, on the other hand the drive to reach an agreement on causes may lead to greater polarisation between deeply divided groups, which may in turn prove more risky for future conflict. As has been evident time and again, the antecedents of contemporary political violence are buried in past episodes of violence that have insufficiently dealt with the relational aspects of prior conflicts.

Dialogue processes seem most likely to be effective when they are locally owned but operate in a space where there are indications of wider institutional support for conflict transformation. Civil society groups can provide this space, which ideally are supported, but not controlled by the state. Perceptions that such efforts are either ‘top down’ or externally imposed or controlled by the state, or efforts that ignore history, are less effective at dealing with past trauma and the relational aspects of conflict. This conclusion drives us to continue this empirical research in order to further explore and test this model in practice, suggesting as it does a fruitful strategy for mobilising narratives of violence in the pursuit of peace.

Notes

1. For example, Newman et al., *New Perspectives on Liberal Peacebuilding*.
2. Selby, *The Myth of Liberal Peacebuilding*; Cooper, *On the Crisis of the Liberal Peace*.
3. Peterson, *Liberal Obstructions and the Potential of Agonism*; Aggestam et al. *Towards Agonistic Peacebuilding*.
4. See note 2.
5. Richmond, *Beyond Local Ownership*.
6. Humphreys and Weinstein, *Disentangling the Determinants*.
7. See for example Palmer, et al., *Critical perspectives in transitional justice*.
8. Maddison, *When deliberation remains out of reach*.
9. For example, Dryzak, *Deliberative Democracy in Divided Societies*.
10. Mouffe, *Democracy as Agonistic Pluralism*.
11. Maddison, *Relational Transformation and Agonistic Dialogue*. Aggestam et al., *Towards Agonistic Peacebuilding*; Björkdahl and Selimovic, *Agency and Agonism in Peace Building*; and Jones, *Ensuring a Political Space for Conflict*.
12. Maddison, *Relational Transformation and Agonistic Dialogue*.
13. Saunders, *A Public Peace Process*, 6, 9.
14. Schaap, *Political Reconciliation*, 84.
15. This includes more than 400 hours of indepth interviews with ex-combatants, state representatives, journalists, the police, the military, customary and religious leaders, observers and grassroots community members in Poso. Fieldwork interviews (and other data collection) were conducted in Poso by Diprose in 2005, 2006, 2008 and 2009 – research assistants were also present for some of these interviews. Further follow-up interviews were conducted by phone and skype in the interceding and subsequent years alongside desk reviews by Diprose, with follow up interviews again conducted in Poso cwith the assistance of a research partner in 2016. However, the bulk of the analysis in this paper relies on Diprose’s own fieldwork. The broader research also draws on Maddison’s research in multiple countries, including South Africa, Guatemala, Australia and elsewhere.
16. Maddison, *Relational Transformation and Agonistic Dialogue*.
17. Ibid., 1014.
18. Aggestam et al., *Towards Agonistic Peacebuilding*.
19. Crocker, *Truth Commissions, Transitional Justice, and Civil Society*, 101.
20. See Woodward, *Root Causes*; and Little, *Enduring Conflict*.
21. Little, *Enduring Conflict*, 12-3.
22. Kalyvas, *Logic of Violence in Civil War*; Tajima, *Institutional Origins of Communal Violence*; and Diprose, *Comparison of Communal Conflict Dynamics*.
23. Kalyvas, *Logic of Violence in Civil War*.
24. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*.
25. Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds*.
26. Brass, *Theft of an Idol*.
27. Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*; and Cohen et al., *Wartime Sexual Violence*.
28. Woodward, *Root Causes*, 143-170.
29. Aggestam et al. *Towards Agonistic Peacebuilding*, 1737 have also identified this focus on consensus-making in contemporary peacebuilding practices reflects a lacuna in the understanding of conflict dynamics.
30. Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups*.
31. Ibid.
32. Maddison, *Relational Transformation and Agonistic Dialogue*.
33. For an overview of research on the multiple narratives and memories of violence see for example Das, *Violence and Subjectivity*; Zurbuchen, *The Past in Indonesia’s Present* and McGregor, *Memory Studies and Human Rights in Indonesia*.
34. Pankhurst, *Justice and Reconciliation in Complex Emergencies*.
35. Miller, *Effects of Invisibility*, 285.
36. Tropp, *Understanding and Responding to Intergroup Conflict*, 4.
37. Maddison, *Relational Transformation and Agonistic Dialogue*, 1014-1030.
38. See Mouffe, *Democracy as Agonistic Pluralism*.
39. Isaacs, *Dialogue*, 26-7.
40. See for example Dosch, *Civil Society in Cambodia’s Peace-building* and Wigglesworth, *The Growth of Civil Society in Timor-Leste*.

41. For an overview of the conflict phases during the height and deescalation phases of the conflict see Brown and Diprose, *Bare Chested Politics in Central Sulawesi*.
42. Ibid.; Diprose, *Comparison of Communal Conflict Dynamics*.
43. See Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds*.
44. Diprose, *Comparison of Communal Conflict Dynamics*.
45. Sangaji, *Militer, Laskar, dan Kekerasan*, 3.
46. Ibid.
47. Interviews with staff from six human rights, peace-building, access to justice and conflict resolution NGOs (July 2006), Jakarta Post journalist (May 2005); Metro TV journalist (July 2006); and the ex-combatant interviewees (see the previous footnote).
48. Brown and Diprose, *Bare Chested Politics in Central Sulawesi*.
49. Christian ex-combatants (three different interviews in July 2006); Muslim ex-combatants (two different interviews in July 2006).
50. Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*.
51. Diprose, *Comparison of Communal Conflict Dynamics*.
52. Maddison, *Relational Transformation and Agonistic Dialogue*, 1014.

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