

Multi-stakeholder processes in social conflict contexts bring together representatives of communities, groups, and institutions whose relationships are often defined by historical grievance, power imbalance, and deep mistrust. These processes are among the most demanding in conflict work — and among the most consequential when they succeed.

HOW SOCIAL CONFLICT PROCESSES DIFFER FROM ORGANIZATIONAL ONES

In organizational multi-stakeholder meetings, participants share an institutional context — they work within the same system and have some baseline of shared norms. In social conflict processes, none of this can be assumed. Participants may come from communities that have experienced violence at each other's hands, carrying the weight of collective trauma and deep identity-based mistrust.

The process itself — how it is designed, who is included, where it takes place, what language is used — carries as much meaning as the content of the dialogue. Getting the process wrong communicates disrespect or bad faith before a single word has been exchanged.

BEFORE THE PROCESS — DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Map the conflict ecosystem, not just the parties

Who are the primary parties? Who are the secondary actors whose buy-in will determine whether agreements hold? What spoilers might undermine the process and why?

Consult before you convene

Meet with community leaders, elders, women's groups, youth, and other stakeholders before designing anything. The process should reflect the community's understanding of the problem, not the practitioner's.

Address the representation question explicitly

Who legitimately speaks for a community? How are representatives selected — and by whom? Participants who lack legitimacy cannot make agreements that communities will honor.

Choose the venue with care

Neutral ground matters enormously. A venue that favors one party sends a message before the dialogue begins. Where possible, involve communities in choosing the location.

Sequence carefully

Build trust and process familiarity through lower-stakes engagements before moving to the most contentious issues. Sequencing is a strategic decision, not an administrative one.

Design for safety

Physical and psychological safety are prerequisites for honest dialogue — attention to seating, language access, confidentiality agreements, and explicit discussion of how sensitive information will be handled.

DURING THE PROCESS — FACILITATION PRACTICES

Open with relationship before content

Open sessions with activities that build human connection before moving to substantive issues. People negotiate differently with those they have come to see as human.

Work with narrative before interests

Communities need to tell their stories first — to be witnessed and acknowledged — before they can engage with interests and solutions. Rushing past narrative produces resistance.

Hold the historical dimension

Attempts to bracket the past are usually experienced as denial or dismissal. Create space for historical grievance without allowing the process to be consumed by it.

Manage the in-group dynamic

Participants may take harder positions than they personally hold because they are performing for their constituency. Create opportunities for more honest conversation alongside the formal process.

Address power imbalances actively

When one party has significantly more power, the facilitator must actively compensate — ensuring less powerful voices are heard and the process does not ratify existing power arrangements.

Name what cannot be named

Create conditions in which undiscussables can be surfaced — through anonymous input, small group conversations, or direct naming by the facilitator.

AFTER THE PROCESS — SUSTAINABILITY

Agreements in social conflict processes are only as durable as the relationships and structures that sustain them. The end of a formal process is not the end of the work.

- Build community ownership of agreements from the start — parties who co-design agreements are more likely to implement them
- Create local monitoring mechanisms that do not depend on external practitioners
- Plan explicitly for the spoiler scenario — who might undermine the agreement and how will the parties respond
- Follow up at agreed intervals — agreements that are not revisited tend to erode quietly
- Document the process and outcomes in a form communities can access and use

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

FACTOR	WHY IT MATTERS
Process legitimacy	Participants and communities must believe the process is fair, inclusive, and genuine — not a performance of consultation.
Practitioner credibility	The practitioner's perceived impartiality, cultural competence, and track record matter enormously. Trust in the process is often mediated through trust in the facilitator.
Political will	Multi-stakeholder processes require political support from key institutional actors. Processes that lack this support produce agreements that cannot be implemented.
Time	Durable social conflict processes take time. Processes designed for quick agreements rarely produce durable ones.

For multi-stakeholder process design in social conflict contexts, contact diazprinz@conflictmanagementspace.com