Public support for peacebuilding

Attitudes towards peacebuilding and dialogue with armed groups in the UK, US and Germany

September 2017





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Methodology

This reports presents the findings of national surveys conducted in the United Kingdom, United States and Germany in June and July 2017. For the UK, Populus interviewed a random sample of 2,214 adults aged 18+ from an online panel between 23 and 25 June 2017. Within the UK sample a slightly higher number of adults were interviewed in Northern Ireland (205) in relation to other geographic areas. In the US Populus interviewed a random sample of 1,052 adults aged 18+ between 7 and 16 July. For Germany, Populus interviewed a random sample of 1,041 adults aged 18+ between 19 and 21 July. Surveys were conducted across the country and the results have been weighted to the profile of all adults. Populus is a founder member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. Further information on the methodology at www.populus.co.uk.

Acknowledgements and disclaimers

Conciliation Resources is grateful to the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Social Change Initiative for their financial support for the UK survey and this publication. Alliance for Peacebuilding would like to acknowledge Dr. Charles Hauss for his financial and intellectual support of the US survey and report, and the Compton Foundation and the John M. Kohler Foundation for their support of Alliance for Peacebuilding's advocacy programmes.

The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of Conciliation Resources and the Alliance for Peacebuilding.

This report was written by Conciliation Resources and the Alliance for Peacebuilding. We would like to give thanks to the following for their work on the survey and report: Teresa Dumasy, Sarah Bradford, Veronika Tesarova and Felix Colchester at Conciliation Resources, Melanie Greenberg and Charles Hauss at the Alliance for Peacebuilding and Will Tucker at Will Tucker Consulting Ltd.

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Design and layout: www.revangeldesigns.co.uk

Introduction

In June and July 2017, Conciliation Resources and the Alliance for Peacebuilding conducted the first ever national surveys of public attitudes in the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US) and Germany towards peacebuilding and dialogue with armed groups.

Asking the same questions across the three countries – all major players in international peace and security, and in the case of US and UK with complex policies in key areas of peacebuilding and armed groups – the survey offered the opportunity to compare and contrast public views at a time of shifting geopolitics, as well as multiple and acute security challenges. Not least among these challenges are the rising numbers of conflicts, increasing concerns about international terrorism and a more bellicose US administration.

The results show a striking level of consensus, with widespread understanding of and support for peacebuilding in each country, and strong support for dialogue with groups who use armed violence, in order to further peace.

In the UK 71 per cent of respondents agreed that peacebuilding plays a vital role in ending violent conflicts and 60 per cent stated that the UK should be investing more in it.

For UK policymakers reconfiguring the country's international role and relationships as the UK moves towards Brexit, the survey provides important data. The UK Government has made significant investments in peacebuilding, mediation and conflict prevention over the years. The UK is home to substantial research expertise and respected non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that are working actively in conflict contexts.

Peacebuilding and conflict prevention are thus an area of foreign policy for the UK to champion, support and develop going forward. The survey findings are of political value – offering policymakers reassurance of the levels of public support for this approach to tackling conflict, as well as data to help design communication strategies and peace support efforts. The results offer food for thought and impetus to review existing policies and strategies for engagement with armed groups.

As peacebuilding practitioners in the NGO sector, our motivation for the survey was to find out how much people know about peacebuilding, and what they think about the types of work we and other peacebuilding organisations and networks do, and which the UK Government is involved with or supporting. The results help us to understand how to communicate to a range of audiences about peacebuilding and about the roles different stakeholders play in building peace, in order to boost public and policy support.

Key findings

- 1. There is strong public support for greater investment in peacebuilding.
- 2. The public know what peacebuilding is.
- 3. There is strong support for international organisations like the UN (and US, UK and German governments) to engage with armed groups and proscribed terrorist organisations to further peace.
- People feel positive about their respective governments playing a key role in negotiating peace between or with armed groups.

Background

The need for sustained investment by a wide range of people, governments, and international institutions in efforts to end violent conflict and build peace is clear.

Half the world's poor live in countries affected by conflict, fragility and violence. The majority of the reported 20 million refugees worldwide are fleeing conflict. Conflicts drive 80 per cent of humanitarian needs and reduce gross domestic product by on average two percentage points per year. Today's famines in Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia and north-eastern Nigeria, affecting millions of people, are a result of violent conflict fuelled by a complex system of factors.

What has been less obvious is the degree to which the public in our own societies understand and support peacebuilding as an approach to address conflict, and particularly when it comes to one of the essential, but most sensitive, activities involved: dialogue with armed groups who use violence to pursue their objectives.

Why understanding public attitudes matters

Finding out what the public thinks is important, firstly, for governments, international institutions and NGOs working for peace. Peacebuilding tends to be an invisible sub-sector of international development, which is already struggling for resources against other priorities and media and public scepticism. With a deeper understanding of the public's existing knowledge and opinions on these issues, governments, international institutions, and NGOs can build support for peacebuilding initiatives.

Secondly, protracted conflicts are known to be fertile ground for groups pursuing radical political, ideological or religious interests. To deal with their complex political, social and economic causes and drivers, protracted conflicts require long-term efforts from grassroots to the international level. Yet, too often, such efforts are overtaken or undermined by the need to respond to crises, when security, counter-terrorism and military measures are often a first resort. Knowing what the public understand peacebuilding to be, and how strongly they feel about it, is essential information to feed into efforts to shift the emphasis from military solutions to long-term work to tackle the root causes of conflict and to prevent it happening.

Thirdly, public opinion has a bearing on the scope for one of the most sensitive areas of peacebuilding: activity aimed at encouraging armed groups to abandon violence and engage in a peace process. National governments and international institutions are understandably nervous about how a decision to engage with an armed group, if publicly known, will be perceived by their own populations. Will it be interpreted as legitimising violence, as giving credibility to unreasonable or non-negotiable demands, or as a sign of weakness? When the armed group is officially cited by governments as a terrorist organisation, anxiety levels increase. While engagement involves risks, it can often be a necessary strategy to achieve a positive and sustainable outcome, and the survey shows public understanding of this.

But this nervousness at official level translates as risk aversion in the eyes of peacebuilders in international NGOs and on the ground, who navigate a complex web of rules and regulations in this area, or are obliged to second-guess the degree of political appetite for contact. It also leaves diplomacy and official peacemaking under-resourced, and official policy overly reliant on security and military solutions. Getting a sense of the level of public support for this work, and of who people feel should engage with armed groups and why, is crucial for understanding the room for manoeuvre for this essential component of peacebuilding.

The survey

This report presents and analyses the findings of an online public opinion survey, which was commissioned by Conciliation Resources in the UK and Germany and by the Alliance for Peacebuilding in the US in June and July 2017. Questions were developed by Conciliation Resources with external advice and in consultation with Populus. In the UK 2,214 adults aged 18+ were interviewed; 1,052 in the US; and 1,041 in Germany. An equal number of men and women were interviewed. Within the UK, a slightly higher proportion of adults were interviewed in Northern Ireland in relation to other geographic areas in order to test the views of those with direct experience of violent conflict. Further information on methodology can be found at the start of this report.

Findings in detail

1. There is strong public support for greater investment in peacebuilding.

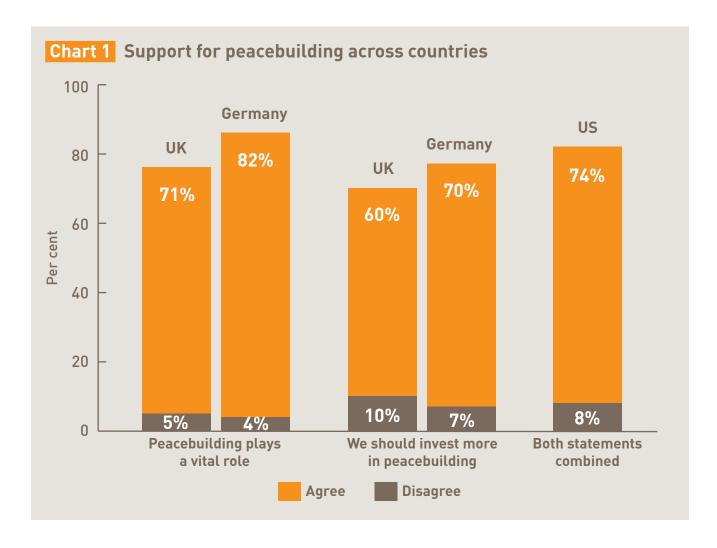
Respondents in each country were asked if they agreed with the following statements in relation to their national government:

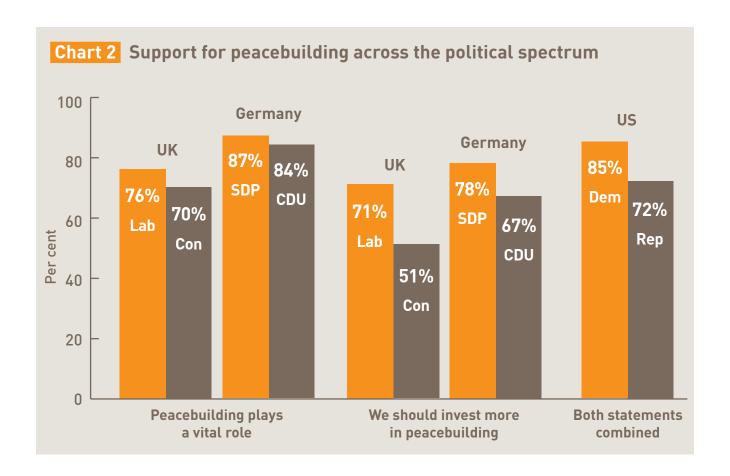
Peacebuilding plays a vital role in ending violent conflicts around the world. In the [United States/United Kingdom/Germany] we should be investing more resources in this.

Support across countries

The results suggest an issue of largely universal appeal; UK, US and German governments, international institutions, and NGOs have a strong public mandate to maintain and increase investment in peacebuilding.

In the UK 71 per cent of respondents believed that peacebuilding plays a vital role in ending violent conflicts (only 5 per cent disagreed), and 60 per cent stated that the UK should be investing more in peacebuilding (10 per cent disagreed). The responses were even higher in Germany with 82 per cent supporting the vital role of peacebuilding (only 4 per cent disagreeing) and 70 per cent believing Germany should allocate more financial resources to it. In the US the public were asked to respond to both statements together: 74 per cent of the public agreed that peacebuilding plays a vital role in ending conflicts and supported greater investment in it. Only 8 per cent disagreed. This is a significant finding at a time when the US budget for peacebuilding is under threat.





Support across the political spectrum

The results revealed much greater parity of views than expected from across the political spectrum. The findings challenge common assumptions that 'peacebuilding' is too nuanced a term for people to support, and that it has significantly greater appeal to those on the political left. In the US in particular, there were high levels of support from both Democrats and Republicans (85 per cent to 72 per cent respectively).

In the UK, where the two statements were tested separately, the results revealed greater difference between Labour and Conservative supporters on the second statement: 76 per cent of Labour supporters agreed that peacebuilding plays a vital role in ending violent conflicts, and 71 per cent supported greater investment of resources in it; the results for Conservative supporters were 70 and 51 per cent respectively. Similarly in Germany, of those who identify with the centre-left Social Democratic Party, 87 per cent agreed with the vital role of peacebuilding, and 78 per cent supported greater investment in it; the results for the centre-right Christian Democratic Union were 84 per cent and 67 per cent respectively. There was strong support for peacebuilding across different age and gender groups.

Justifications for support

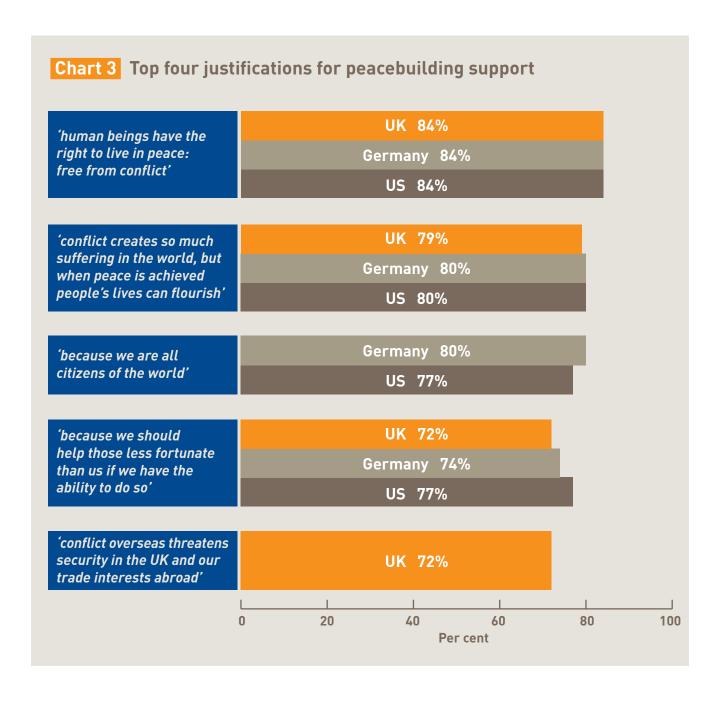
We asked people for their views on the main justifications for their respective countries' involvement in peacebuilding. Respondents were presented with a range of arguments and asked the extent to which they personally agreed or disagreed with each.

The majority of respondents selected moral reasons, and in particular human rights as the main justifications. Across all three countries 84 per cent of people believed that the primary justification for peacebuilding is that 'human beings have the right to live in peace: free from conflict'. In the US this statement was supported by 81 per cent of those who identify with the Republican Party and by 92 per cent of those who support the Democratic Party.

The second most popular reason selected was that 'conflict creates so much suffering in the world, but when peace is achieved people's lives can flourish' – the response was 80 per cent in the US and Germany, and 79 per cent in the UK (for German respondents this answer tied in popularity with 'because we are all citizens of the world').

The joint third most popular justifications for peacebuilding in the US were: 'because we are all citizens of the world' and 'because we should help those less fortunate than us if we have the ability to do so' (77 per cent). The latter justification was also the third most popular selection for German respondents (74 per cent).

In the UK, the third most selected reason was 'because we should help those less fortunate than us if we have the ability to do so' (72 per cent). This tied in popularity with the argument that 'conflict overseas threatens security in the UK and our trade interests abroad'. There were few variations between political affiliations or across age and gender groups.



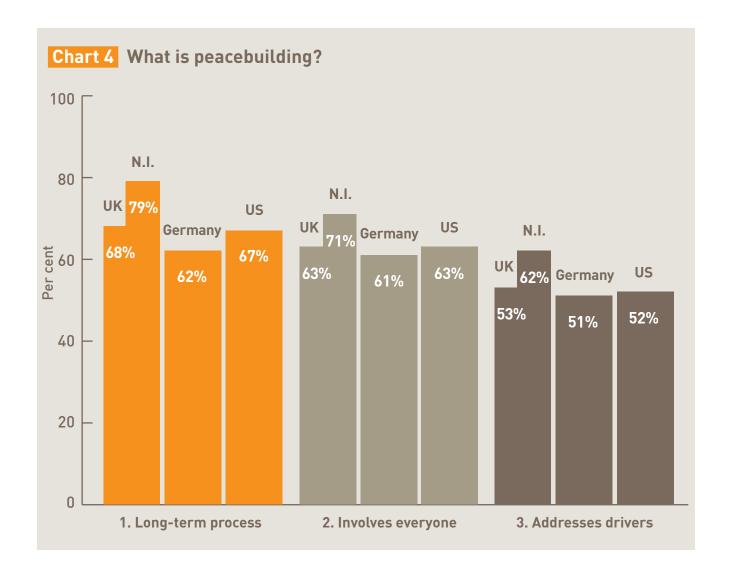
2. People know what peacebuilding is.

To test levels of understanding of what peacebuilding is and involves, the survey asked half the respondents to select up to three statements that best describe 'peacebuilding'. To test whether perceptions change in response to different terms used, or whether one term is better understood than another, the other half of the respondents were asked to select up to three statements from the same list that best describes 'conflict resolution' (see alternative statements in Box A). The survey also tested the public's level of confidence in their responses.

For both peacebuilding and conflict resolution, in the US, UK and Germany the three descriptions mentioned by a majority of respondents reflected what practitioners would consider to be key principles and core values of peacebuilding. Respondents displayed high levels of confidence in stating that peacebuilding:

- 1. Is the long-term process of rebuilding relationships, changing attitudes and establishing fairer institutions (UK: 68 per cent; US: 67 per cent; Germany: 62 per cent);
- 2. Involves everyone from communities to governments working to end fighting and prevent the recurrence of violence (UK: 63 per cent; US: 63 per cent; Germany: 61 per cent);
- 3. Involves understanding and addressing the underlying drivers of conflict, not its symptoms (UK: 53 per cent; US: 52 per cent; Germany: 51 per cent).

Interestingly, across the three countries those over 65 years old were much more likely to select these three statements than respondents



in younger age brackets. In the US, women were much more likely than men to select the first two statements about long-term relationship building and the inclusive nature of peacebuilding (73 per cent of women compared to 60 per cent of men for the first statement; 71 per cent of women compared to 55 per cent of men for the second).

The results also revealed that framing the activity as 'conflict resolution' made marginal difference to the responses: in the US this resulted in a slightly higher number of people seeing conflict resolution as a process involving everyone (65 per cent) than those who prioritised the description of it as a long-term process (64 per cent). In the UK, the descriptions altered the selection by up to 3 per cent, but not the

order of preference in respondents' selection. There were marginal variations across political lines. Women were slightly more likely than men to select the above statements, which were also more popular amongst older generations.

The results suggest that the high levels of support expressed for peacebuilding represents support for investment in long-term and holistic approaches, which address the drivers and causes of conflict. Rather than considering short-term, reactive and predominantly high-level activities, the majority of people have a realistic sense of the time-scales and the types of effort involved in peacebuilding, and are supportive of it. This information is valuable in formulating more confident public communication strategies about peacebuilding work and its results.

BOX A: Respondents were asked to indicate which of the following descriptions best reflect 'peacebuilding' or 'conflict resolution':

- 1. ... involves understanding and addressing the underlying drivers of conflict, not its symptoms.
- 2. ... is the process of reconstruction after a war has ended.
- 3. ... involves everyone from communities to governments working to end fighting and prevent the recurrence of violence.
- 4. ... involves the military intervening to stop the different sides of a conflict from fighting.
- 5. ... involves providing aid to people who have been displaced or harmed by violent conflict.
- **6.** ... is the long-term process of rebuilding relationships, changing attitudes and establishing fairer institutions.
- 7. ... involves diplomats brokering deals to end violent conflict.
- 8. ... is about ensuring justice for abuses committed during violent conflict and ensuring human rights.

3. There is strong support for international organisations like the UN, and the US, UK and German governments, to engage with armed groups to further peace.

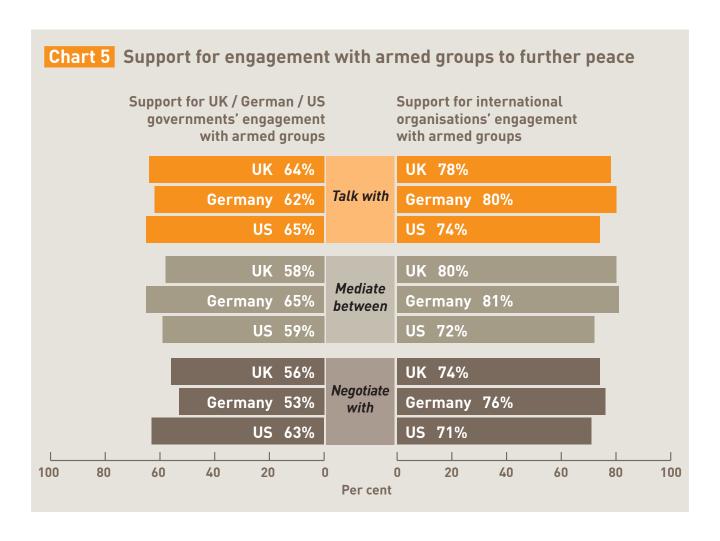
The survey asked people whether their governments, international organisations, like the UN, and other informal institutions ('charities' and 'local communities') should engage in different ways with armed groups 'in order to seek the end to violent conflicts'. The different forms of engagement tested were: to 'talk with', 'mediate between', and 'negotiate with'.

International organisations

The results in the US, UK and Germany revealed striking levels of support for international organisations, such as the UN, in engaging with armed groups to further peace. People were particularly receptive to a message suggesting that the role of international organisations, like the UN, should be to 'mediate between' armed

groups (80 per cent in the UK; 81 per cent in Germany and 72 per cent in the US). However, there was also a high level of support for other forms of engagement: 'talking with' (UK: 78 per cent; Germany: 80 per cent; US: 74 per cent); and 'negotiating with' (UK: 74 per cent; Germany: 76 per cent; US: 71 per cent).

There were variations among age and gender groups across the findings: in the UK, for example, younger age groups were generally less supportive of international organisations mediating between armed groups than older respondents, and less supportive of negotiations with armed groups (87 per cent for over 65 year olds and 64 per cent for 18-24 year olds). In the US, 81 per cent of men and only 62 per cent of women supported international organisations negotiating with armed groups.



Governments

In terms of government's role, the results indicated more support for governments using their influence in more informal ways: the option of 'talking with' armed groups receiving higher scores (65 per cent in the US, 64 per cent in the UK and 62 per cent in Germany). Views were similar across political affiliations, with self-identified Democrats in the US and Labour supporters in the UK demonstrating slightly stronger support for their national governments (and the UN) 'talking with' armed groups, compared to Republicans and Conservatives respectively.

Charities

The results showed the public were more neutral about 'charities' talking with armed groups (UK: 48 per cent; US: 55 per cent; Germany: 48 per cent), and the results showed lower support for their involvement in 'mediating between' and 'negotiating with' armed groups. These results are perhaps to be expected given the type of activity the public typically associate with 'charities' (or 'non-profit organisations'), such as the provision of local services and local associations. While most NGOs have charitable status, and are as such charities, they are primarily organisations operating independently of government and often with a national or international remit. Some peacebuilding NGOs are involved in supporting sensitive mediation work with armed groups. 1 The findings suggest that we need a better understanding of the public's knowledge of and attitudes to the work of charities/NGOs in this domain, if we wish to demonstrate the nature of and need for it.

Local communities

The survey also explored support for local communities' engagement with armed groups to further peace, given the crucial roles they can play in pioneering peace talks. Levels of support were generally higher for local communities than for charities; respondents in Germany expressed particularly high support for local communities: 'talking' received 77 per cent support and 'mediating between' received 73 per cent (in the UK this was 56 and 52 per cent respectively and in the US 56 per cent for both).

The 'T' word

Given the emotive power of the 'terrorism' and 'terrorist' labels, and their liberal use by the media and political actors, we tested whether and how the public respond to the idea of engagement when an armed group is officially listed by governments as a terrorist organisation, giving recent examples of when this had happened. The responses were surprisingly supportive.

Respondents in each country were asked whether their governments, international organisations, like the UN, and other institutions should be able to engage in different ways with proscribed terrorist organisations in order to seek an end to violent conflicts. Once again, the different forms of engagement tested were to 'talk with', 'mediate between', and 'negotiate with'.

Respondents were presented with the following context statement:

Peacebuilders play a role in reducing deaths and ending violence in communities affected by conflict, by helping to mediate with and between groups involved in violence. For example, helping loyalist and republican groups to put down arms and reach peace in Northern Ireland, and supporting conversations leading to a peace agreement between querrillas and the Government in Colombia.

The UN, the EU and national governments, including the [UK/German/US Governments], officially identify some armed groups as 'proscribed terrorist organisations' because they are proven to have a connection to terrorist activity. Armed groups in Northern Ireland and Colombia were 'proscribed', for example. Proscribing an armed group can affect interaction with the group, including peacebuilding activities.

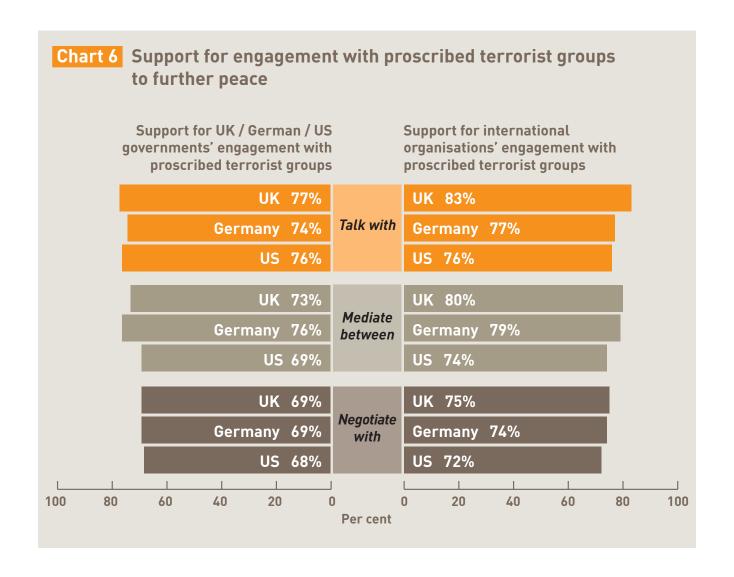
^{1.} For the purposes of the survey, the term 'charity' was tested in the UK and US as it was viewed as a term more familiar to the public than 'NGO'. In Germany, the term 'Wohltätigkeitsorganisationen' was used.

The findings showed that a significant majority of the UK public believe that international organisations, like the UN, and governments have a role in engaging with proscribed terrorist groups in the pursuit of peace. In the UK, a significant majority (83 per cent) thought that international organisations like the UN should 'talk with' proscribed terrorist organisations, while 77 per cent felt that governments should do so. This was closely matched by support for the UN in 'mediating between' proscribed groups (80 per cent) and for governments to do so (73 per cent). Furthermore, 75 per cent of UK respondents believed the UN should 'negotiate with' proscribed groups (69 per cent for governments).

Similarly high levels of support were revealed in the US and Germany surveys. In the US survey 76 per cent of respondents thought that the UN and the US Government should talk with

proscribed terrorist groups. 74 per cent favoured the UN and 69 per cent favoured governments like the US mediating between terrorist groups. In Germany, 79 per cent of people think the UN should mediate between terrorist groups (against 76 per cent for the German government) and slightly fewer people (77 per cent) think the UN should talk with proscribed terrorist groups (74 per cent for the government).

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the higher stakes involved, the least popular form of engagement was negotiation with both armed groups and proscribed terrorist organisations. Notwithstanding, the results indicate a greater level of public appetite for non-military forms of engagement with proscribed groups than expected, particularly when presented as a strategy to further peace.



Public attitudes in Northern Ireland

The conflict in Northern Ireland killed around 3,600 people over more than 30 years. The conflict arose from opposing views of the area's status, but has its roots in centuries of political and religious differences. People in Northern Ireland thus understand first hand the long, difficult and on-going process of building peace. Their responses to the questions were therefore of particular interest.

The survey indicated the following about public views in Northern Ireland:

- 1. People better understand the long-term nature of peacebuilding and conflict resolution.
 - 79 per cent of respondents in Northern Ireland understand peacebuilding as a 'long-term process of rebuilding relationships, changing attitudes, and establishing fairer institutions' (compared to 68 per cent across the UK as a whole).
- 2. People do not see religious belief as the primary motive for individuals to join armed groups.
 - Despite the sectarian nature of the conflict, only 28 per cent of respondents in Northern Ireland viewed religious beliefs as a motive to join armed groups (compared to 33 per cent in the UK, 41 per cent in Germany and 25 per cent in the US).
 - The three top motives selected were i) ideological beliefs (43 per cent), ii) violent oppression by own government (35 per cent), and iii) real or perceived discrimination against their group (34 per cent).
- 3. People agree that, in order to end violent conflict, peace processes should engage with armed, querrilla or terrorist groups.
 - 74 per cent of respondents believe that a peace process that engages with armed groups can help to end violent conflict - 70 per cent agreed this was also true for engagement with proscribed terrorist organisations. This was somewhat higher than the UK as a whole (64 per cent and 53 per cent respectively).
 - 61 per cent of respondents in Northern Ireland agreed that local communities should 'talk with' armed groups and 63 per cent that they should 'mediate between'. This is higher than the UK-wide results (56 and 52 per cent respectively).

4. People feel positive about their respective governments playing a key role in negotiating peace between or with armed groups.

We asked how people would feel knowing that their national governments had played a key role in negotiating peace between or with armed groups elsewhere in the world – giving them a list of eight emotions from which to choose.

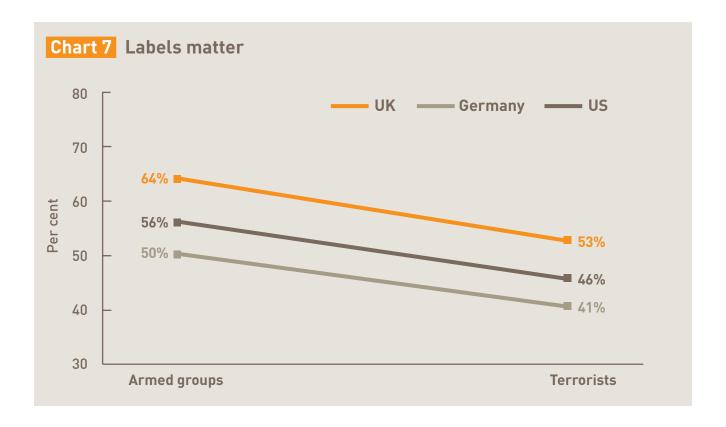
Positive emotions significantly outranked the negative in all three countries. In the US and UK the three most commonly cited feelings, in order of selection were: 'hopeful' (US: 49 per cent, UK: 43 per cent); 'proud' (US: 31 per cent, UK: 29 per cent); and 'happy' (US: 30 per cent, UK: 22 per cent). In Germany, 45 per cent of respondents said they would feel 'hopeful' if they knew of their government's role in negotiating peace, 42 per cent would feel 'confident' and 23 per cent 'proud'. Strongly negative feelings ('afraid', 'angry' and 'disgusted') scored very low in all the selections (under 6 per cent).

Labels matter

We also tested whether people agree that 'peace processes that engage with armed groups can

help to end violent conflict'. To see how the use of different terms affects public support, the survey sample was split into three to test the following labels: 'armed groups', 'guerrilla groups', and 'terrorists'.

The results show that the labelling of armed groups matters when it comes to perceptions of the prospects for peace. When the question is asked in relation to 'armed groups' the public is more likely to agree with the statement (64 per cent in the UK, 56 per cent in the US). When asked in relation to 'terrorists', the figure dropped (to 53 per cent in the UK and 46 per cent in the US). German respondents appeared more agnostic – 50 per cent for armed groups and 41 per cent for terrorists - with the remainder split fairly evenly between those who neither agree nor disagree, and those that disagree. The UK and US results in particular indicate that over-use of the label 'terrorist' for armed groups in the media and public statements may undermine the significant public support for peacebuilding highlighted by the survey.



Conclusions

Knowing the high level of public understanding of and sympathy for peacebuilding and engaging with armed groups should encourage those working in peacebuilding and conflict prevention efforts in the UK, US and Germany to better articulate what it is, why it matters to a broader public, and to show it works. The results can be used to encourage more active public support for peacebuilding and more confident support for it from governments.

Understanding how the public justifies its support for peacebuilding – primarily arguments of rights and fairness – is valuable information for strategies to build up this public support. The fact that the public in the UK, US and Germany understand that quick wins and high-level deals cannot rebuild societies and relationships broken by conflict, and that efforts need to be long-term to help transform attitudes, relationships and institutions, is vital insight for that effort.

The survey results should also prompt further and more nuanced thinking about the policies and regulations that regulate and determine the types and nature of engagement with armed groups. The list of armed groups prohibited through international blacklists has grown, and yet so have conflicts and insecurity. That the public should express predominantly positive and hopeful feelings about the prospect of contacts and dialogue with armed groups to further peace is a helpful impetus for more strategic thinking in this area.

Finally, the public view of peacebuilding as an inclusive endeavour, 'involving everyone from communities to governments working to end fighting and prevent the recurrence of violence', is an encouraging sign of unity at a time of heightened polarisation and internal tension in our own societies. It is a prompt to shift the emphasis away from top-down solutions to building peace through collective effort.

Conciliation Resources is an independent international organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence, resolve conflicts and promote peaceful societies. We take what we learn to government decision-makers and others working to end conflict, to improve policies and peacebuilding practice worldwide.

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The Alliance for Peacebuilding is a US-based organisation and the institutional home for the peacebuilding community - a network of over 100 organisations working to resolve conflict and create sustainable peace in 153 countries.

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