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Engaging Criminal Armed Groups

Insights for Peacemakers.

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Centre for
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Mediation for peace

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Executive summary

Criminal armed groups (CAGs) drive instability and violence, fill governance vacuums, and can both undermine and be integral to peace processes. Yet many peacemakers remain hesitant to engage with them, constrained by stigma, legal risks, and the perceived binary between so-called “political” and “criminal” armed actors. This can lead to missed peace-making opportunities.

This publication challenges that binary by exploring how established peacemaking practices can be adapted to address organised criminal violence. It draws on HD’s operational experience, established case studies, and interviews with practitioners, including former members of CAGs. It provides practical insights on whether, when, and how to engage, and shows that engagement can – under the right circumstances – complement security and justice approaches. In doing so, it broadens the peacemaker’s toolkit for addressing today’s conflicts, where the lines between war, politics, and organised crime are frequently blurred.

Engaging CAGs is not about legitimising crime. It is about recognising the political or social roles that these actors can play, such as offering protection, enforcing local order, mediating disputes, and controlling parts of local economies, whilst also acknowledging the serious harm they can cause. It offers a complementary path to security-led strategies that, on their own, have rarely achieved lasting reductions in violence. Engaging with CAGs can:

- Reduce violence and open humanitarian access through truces and de-escalation efforts
- Establish local arrangements that stabilise daily life and reduce harm to civilians
- Create credible pathways for exit and reintegration, helping individuals step away from violence
- Support efforts to transform illicit economies
- Help shape state reforms to address conditions enabling the emergence of CAGs

Engaging with CAGs carries undeniable ethical, legal, and political risks. Yet avoiding these actors altogether risks prolonging violence, undermining peace efforts, and closing off opportunities to improve the lives of civilians. By widening the scope of peacemaking to include criminal groups, practitioners can open new routes to harm reduction and peace. At the same time, peacemaking with CAGs can strengthen conventional mediation by offering useful lessons on issues such as confronting illicit economies and other structural drivers of conflict.

This publication is not intended as a blueprint. Rather, it points to potential entry points, highlights recurring challenges, and stresses the importance of context-sensitive and risk-aware approaches. Some areas, notably long-term CAG transformation, state reform, and the complex relationship between violence reduction and illicit economies, require more specialised guidance. While the peacemaking sector has long acknowledged the illicit political-economic realities of modern conflict, it is now time to take action to address them.

Key insights for peacemakers

Look beyond labels

Binary distinctions between “political” and “criminal” flatten complexity. Most CAGs combine illicit economic agendas with political or social roles. Practitioners who move past the stereotype of greed when working with CAGs often uncover motivations such as identity, protection, community leadership, and survival strategies.

Navigate legal challenges and public sentiment

Engagement often unfolds in charged contexts where legal frameworks, public attitudes, and political pressures define what is possible. Peacemakers who continually reassess risks, prepare communication strategies, and strengthen community engagement are better able to protect both their credibility and the legitimacy of the process.

Use flexible, trust-based engagement models

Patience, informal channels, and credible intermediaries (such as community leaders, religious figures, or former CAG members) can be critical for engaging with CAGs. Prisons and community-level initiatives can offer valuable entry points. Trust is usually built gradually, rather than assumed at the outset.

Explore pathways to transformational agreements

Although most engagements with CAGs have centred on short-term truces and harm reduction, dialogue can pave the way for political or transformational settlements that permanently alter group behaviour, identity, and purpose.

Support structural transformation where possible

Lasting change rarely comes from deals with armed groups alone. Systemic governance failures, social exclusion, and the political economies of crime typically need to be addressed if progress is to endure. While third-party peacemakers may not drive such reforms directly, they can help states and societies recognise and explore the deeper changes required.

Engaging Criminal Armed Groups

Insights for Peacemakers.

1 Introduction

1.1 Why engage?

Historically, the international community, including peacemakers, has categorised armed groups as either “political” or “criminal” based on their *perception* of whether the group is primarily driven by political agendas or by the pursuit of illicit economic rents. Armed groups labelled as “political” have frequently been treated as legitimate interlocutors and have been given consideration under international humanitarian law,¹ whereas those labelled as “criminal” have been viewed as illegitimate and left to the purview of criminal justice responses.²

However, categorising armed actors in this binary way – and using it as a paradigm to dismiss engagement with those perceived as “criminal” – is resulting in missed opportunities for peacemaking.³ A small group of peacemakers has achieved success by negotiating with criminal armed groups (CAGs), mediating between them and a government, or mediating between CAGs themselves. The group has largely comprised religious figures, community leaders, local NGO workers, journalists, and state representatives, in contexts as varied as El Salvador, South Africa, Colombia, Jamaica, Ecuador, Spain, and Timor-Leste. Their experience shows that engagement with these groups can lead to reductions in violence and sometimes even the transformation of groups themselves.

Engagement with CAGs can understandably raise ethical concerns. There is a risk that dialogue could be seen as condoning violence or undermining the rule of law. But sensible engagement with CAGs is grounded in the reality that these actors often hold significant influence in areas affected by violence and instability. Meanwhile, excluding them from dialogue may carry its own ethical and practical cost, such as missing opportunities to prevent further harm and achieve a more sustainable peace. Moreover, the aim of such engagement is not to replace criminal justice systems, but to complement them. Security-led responses often fail to deliver lasting success, and tackling this kind of violence requires a broader strategy.⁴

Engagement with any armed actor, whether designated a CAG, or a political, terrorist, or state-affiliated organisation, involves moral complexity as well as legal, political, reputational, and operational risk.⁵ The starting point for this publication is that these risks should be assessed on the basis of a thorough understanding of the group and its context, without placing undue emphasis on any particular label.

1.2 Definitions and typology

Inevitably, definitions present a challenge. There is no internationally agreed definition of *non-state armed groups* in international law,⁶ nor is there consensus on what constitutes a *criminal group*.⁷ States often label any armed actor that challenges their authority as “criminal”, regardless of the group’s motivations or social base.⁸

For the purposes of this publication, we use the term *criminal armed group* (or CAG) to refer to non-state actors that:

- Use organised violence to pursue their goals
- Participate to a significant degree in illicit economic activities⁹
- Have a degree of hierarchical structure (i.e. are not just a loose-knit network)

- Are widely and persistently *perceived* – particularly by the international community – as criminal actors motivated by the pursuit of illicit rents rather than by ideology, political agendas, or grievance.

Examples of such groups include but are not limited to: gangs, from the urban Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) in El Salvador through to triad-linked syndicates in Southeast Asia; cartel-type organisations such as the paramilitary-linked Clan del Golfo in Colombia or the *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG); pirates, such as those in the Red Sea or the Sundarbans of Bangladesh; militias, such as those engaged in extortion and cross-border smuggling in the Sahel or Myanmar; and mafia-type organisations such as the *'Ndrangheta* in Italy.¹⁰

All armed groups operate at the intersection of political and illicit economic agendas.¹¹ While most CAGs do not articulate a coherent political vision, the majority nonetheless have some level of political and social interests and/or behaviours (which we will refer to as “political agendas”). Some, such as urban gangs in marginalised areas of Latin America, or in southern and western Africa, emerge with social and political functions embedded in their identity and offer protection, enforce local order, or mediate disputes in the absence of effective state governance. Others, such as Mexico’s CJNG, can start as an initially profit-driven trafficking organisation, but increasingly assert political roles as they consolidate power and territory, as the CJNG demonstrated by distributing aid during the COVID-19 pandemic and projecting itself as a stabilising force through propaganda.¹²

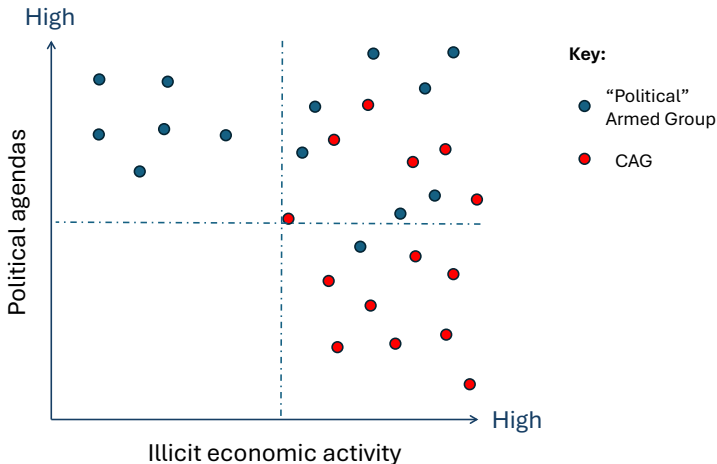
Conversely, many armed groups that initially emerge with political or ideological motivations adopt illicit economic agendas over time, either to fund their operations, consolidate control over territory, or sustain their influence amid waning popular support.¹³ Insurgencies such as the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) in Colombia or the Taliban in Afghanistan began with revolutionary or religious objectives

but progressively embedded themselves in illicit economies as a means of financing long-term campaigns. In Myanmar, ethnic armed organisations have long engaged in cross-border smuggling and informal taxation to sustain autonomy in peripheral regions. Even some state-aligned militias in contexts such as Syria or the Sahel have exploited criminal markets while claiming political legitimacy.

For political groups, or factions within them, these economic activities can become ends in themselves, overshadowing their original ideological aims. Within CAGs, different individuals or factions can prioritise profit or politics to varying degrees. In fact, many observers have argued for some time that drawing a clear line between political and economic motivations and strategies is no longer meaningful in practice; these agendas are fluid, overlapping, and often inseparable.¹⁴

Building on this complexity, Figure 1 hypothetically maps a representative sample of armed groups along two dimensions: the

Figure 1 A hypothetical mapping of armed groups according to political agendas and illicit economic activity



degree of political agendas they have and the extent of their involvement in illicit economies. This produces four broad categories that can help practitioners think about different pathways for engagement. It is, of course, still a simplified representation of highly complex realities, but is nonetheless useful for starting to categorise groups beyond a binary of political versus criminal.

The top-left quadrant includes groups with strong political aims and limited criminal engagement, such as classic ideological or insurgent movements. The early stages of the FARC in Colombia during the 1960s would fit into this quadrant, as would the Maoist insurgency in Nepal in the mid-to-late 1990s. However, such groups have become rarer today, especially in contexts where access to illicit markets is a source of power or survival.¹⁵

Groups in the top-right quadrant are politico-criminal hybrids that combine strong political agendas with high levels of illicit economic activity, often using violence to pursue both. Their political interests and/or behaviours are structured and recurrent, rather than one-offs. This category includes criminal armed groups with political agendas (CPAGs), such as the MS-13 in EL Salvador in the 2010s, as well as political armed groups that have expanded deeply into illicit markets, such as the FARC from the early 1990s to 2016. The consistent difference between these political armed groups and the CPAGs comes down to perceptions. The former have been able to articulate an accepted political vision, whereas the latter have not, and are consequently widely perceived as being driven primarily or exclusively by the pursuit of illicit economic rents.

The bottom-right quadrant captures groups such as traffickers with minimal political ambition that tend to operate as looser, transnational networks (criminal enterprise armed groups or CEAGs). Examples include the Kavač/Škaljari clans in the Balkans, which controlled cocaine routes into Europe during their

2015–2022 feuds, and certain, newer FARC dissident groups on the border with Venezuela and Brazil. For such groups, corruption is transactional and less systematic, and there are no durable governance elements, nor any systematic institutional capture. Such groups tend to avoid visibility and often do not control territory and thus have less need to act politically or socially.¹⁶

Groups in the bottom left quadrant have low political engagement and minimal integration into large-scale illicit economies. These are rare in practice, often short-lived, and may only emerge in very specific localised disputes. An example would be the clan militias that form around localised feuds in the highlands of Papua New Guinea.

This typology is used in later sections to illustrate how certain approaches may play out differently for the different categories. In general, the insights in this publication are most relevant for engagement with CPAGs (the red dots in the top-right quadrant), with whom peacemaking tends to be more fruitful, thanks in part to their political agendas. Nevertheless, some of the insights may also be useful for peacemaking with CEAGs (those in the bottom right-hand quadrant), and for those politico-criminal hybrids that are not CPAGs.

1.3 Why perceptions matter

While binary labels do not capture complexity, they can shape practice: much like the designation “terrorist”, the “criminal” label can foreclose dialogue, delegitimise groups, and limit avenues for peacemakers. While terrorist-labelled groups differ from CAGs in that they are more likely to have articulated clear political goals, both labels tend to be sticky and reductive, flattening complexity and reinforcing a binary of good versus bad actors.

In the case of CAGs, their designation as “criminal” often obscures the social or political roles they may play, delegitimises engagement, and limits the practical and legal avenues

available to peacemakers. It also ignores that, regardless of designation, most armed groups emerge from similar root causes, including economic hardship, social marginalisation, and weak governance, and most rely on similar strategies of violence, territorial control, and alternative governance structures to sustain their operations.¹⁷

Moreover, once applied, binary labels of “political” or “criminal” tend to be remarkably sticky, persisting even when a group’s motivations or behaviours evolve.¹⁸ For both CAGs and terrorist-designated groups, labels become barriers to pragmatism, and opportunities to address violence may be missed as a result.

1.4 Scope

Engaging Criminal Armed Groups: Insights for Peacemakers is primarily intended for international third-party peacemakers, such as international NGOs, diplomats, or representatives of multilateral organisations, and is structured around the practical needs of those considering direct engagement with a CAG (especially a CPAG) or supporting the engagement of others. It draws on HD’s operational experience under its Organised Crime and Peacemaking Initiative, interviews with practitioners (including former CAG members) with direct experience of engagement, and case studies from the USA, Latin America and the Caribbean, Northern Ireland, Bangladesh, the Sahel, South Africa, and Timor-Leste.

The analysis also builds on an emerging body of work that has challenged the strict separation between organised crime and armed conflict in peacemaking and mediation practice. While it is not possible to reference the full range of contributions here, this includes early conceptual insights by James Cockayne on criminal agendas in peace processes; the work of Kemp and Shaw on addressing organised crime in peace operations; Achim Wennmann’s analysis of urban political settlements and negotiated order; applied comparative analysis by the Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT) on negotiations with criminal

groups; and Huma Haider’s synthesis of evidence on organised crime groups and peace processes.¹⁹ This publication seeks to extend this lineage by focusing on and expanding the operational implications for third-party peacemakers.

Underpinning the publication is the argument that peacemaking with CPAGs is much like traditional peacemaking (i.e. with groups categorised as political), but there are some differences, typically linked to the implications that emerge from the widespread perception of being “criminal”. It begins with reflections on how to understand and analyse CAGs, followed by a section on navigating the broader context in which they operate. It then explores how to initiate engagement, covering entry points, the role of the state, and early confidence-building. The final section focuses on what engagement can aim to achieve, offering insights into transformation pathways including dialogue, violence reduction, and reintegration.

Whilst governments that are involved in criminal agendas through organised violence pose a serious challenge for peacemaking, we do not deal with those issues in this publication. Neither do we deal with the broader topic of “crime-proofing peacemaking”, i.e. efforts to mitigate the influence of organised crime on peace, for example by ensuring that transitions are not compromised by illicit activities. Nor do we go deeply into the implications for illicit economies of engaging CAGs. This is because the necessary approaches are different and warrant their own separate studies.

2 Understanding the group

When peacemakers have sought to analyse a CAG – as part of a conflict analysis, for example – the approach is similar to understanding a “political” armed group, but there are important differences – sometimes just differences of emphasis – that many have found helpful. Rather than replicating a full conflict analysis checklist, this section highlights some of the extra

elements practitioners have found useful when an armed actor is framed as criminal.

The typology introduced earlier can help sharpen this analysis. For example, CPAGs and other politico-criminal hybrids may require particular attention to both their political platforms and their illicit economic bases, including how these two dimensions reinforce one another, whereas CEAGs (i.e. those with limited political interests and behaviours) tend to demand deeper analysis of market dynamics, revenue streams, and the economic dependencies of their members. Having an idea of where a group sits on this spectrum can help identify which features of “standard” armed group analysis are most relevant, and where additional focus is needed.

Two recurrent challenges stand out: many CAGs deliberately keep a low profile to avoid criminal-justice reprisals, and their structures can shift quickly, especially during violent flare-ups or negotiations, so regular reassessment is essential. More in-depth guidance on doing a crime-sensitive conflict analysis and relevant tools can be found in HD’s Practice Brief on the topic.²⁰

2.1 Evaluating a CAG for engagement

Practitioners rarely face a straightforward choice when deciding whether to open a channel to a CAG. Experience points to three features that have tended to make groups more amenable to engagement and increase the likelihood of productive dialogue, but none should be treated as a rigid prerequisite.

- **Social constituency (formal or informal) and territorial presence** – Groups embedded in, or identifying with, a recognisable community usually have interests beyond illicit revenue. For CPAGs and politico-criminal hybrids, these ties can shape a bargaining agenda that includes social and political concerns alongside economic ones. Even for CEAGs, the same community that provides recruits, “tax”

revenue, or protection fees can act as a constituency whose needs and loyalties matter. Such ties can create leverage for peacemakers.

- **Limited dependence on transnational illicit networks** – Groups less deeply integrated into transnational criminal economies tend to have more autonomy and greater capacity for local decision-making. For example, highly networked CEAGs may be constrained by actors outside the negotiation space, making agreements harder to reach or enforce.
- **A power balance that strongly favours the state** – When the state holds a clear upper hand, incentives for dialogue are often better aligned: the state can usually offer more, and feels less threatened by the engagement. This pattern has made urban gangs more frequent dialogue partners than large transnational cartels.

While these factors can be useful in weighing up whether to engage, they are not hard-and-fast rules. The Sundarbans pirates in Bangladesh were in many ways a typical CEAG without any real social constituency, yet a surrender process succeeded through targeted incentives and guarantees of protection. Conversely, Colombia's paramilitary federation, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) – which is in some ways an archetypal CPAG – entered talks from a position of considerable strength and the dialogue produced some gains, though many were later reversed.

Recognising where a group sits in the typology can help anticipate how these factors may combine in practice, and where exceptions are more likely. A CPAG with strong community ties but deep transnational connections may need engagement strategies that simultaneously address community interests and external criminal influences. A CEAG with little or no political agenda will likely require different calculations about timing and leverage.

2.2 Identifying internal organisation and decision-making structures

The decision-making structures of CAGs vary widely. As one practitioner notes, “working out who is actually in charge is a constant challenge”.²¹ There can be several reasons for this, including the desire for leaders to remain hidden to avoid reprisals. While some, such as Mexico’s Sinaloa Cartel or Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) in Brazil, maintain strong central leadership, many others such as the Gulf Clan in Colombia are decentralised and fragmented. Some CEAGs are little more than loose-knit networks. Consequently, negotiating with a visible leader does not always guarantee that agreements will be enforced across the group. In the case of smaller, less hierarchical CAGs, how and with whom a powerful actor such as the state chooses to engage can influence authority within that group.²²

Local factions often operate under franchise-like models, meaning that even if a central leadership structure exists, lower-level actors may act independently, not necessarily knowing what is happening in the higher echelons.

Some of the most influential CAG leaders operate from within prison systems, maintaining control over their organisations remotely. In these cases, peacemaking efforts that focus solely on street-level actors may be ineffective. Furthermore, local factions often operate under franchise-like models, meaning that even if a central leadership structure exists, lower-level actors may act independently, not necessarily knowing what is happening in the

higher echelons. Engaging only parts of the system can be ineffective or even engender fragmentation and spoilers.²³

2.3 Mapping relationships with other criminal armed groups

Practitioners generally agree that understanding the relationships between CAGs and where they sit within larger political, social and criminal ecosystems is critical.²⁴ Analysing these dynamics can help peacemakers find entry points, anticipate how engagement with one group might affect others, and help them avoid unintentionally fuelling conflict.²⁵

CAGs rarely operate in isolation; many are embedded in broader networks that span territories, cities, borders, and illicit economies. These relationships can take many forms – alliances, rivalries, transactional arrangements, or fluid combinations of all three – and can shift rapidly in response to pressure, opportunity, or internal change. Some CAGs are autonomous, while others function as subcontractors or affiliates of more powerful organisations.²⁶

Buenaventura, Colombia's main Pacific port, is dominated by two gangs, Los Shottas and Los Espartanos, which collect payments from larger armed and criminal networks to secure illicit shipments moving through the port and into the city. In exchange, these networks provide the gangs with weapons, resources, and protection, enabling them to expand into extortion and other predatory activities. In 2022, the two groups agreed to a truce under the Colombian government's "Total Peace" initiative, which led to a sharp decline in homicides across the city. However, the truce broke down several times. While local factors contributed to the setbacks, it became increasingly apparent that decisions to resume violence were influenced by broader criminal networks and external developments beyond the gangs' control.²⁷

2.4 Examining the relationship with the state

Unlike political armed groups that typically define themselves in opposition to state authority, many CAGs operate in complex and contradictory relationships with the state that shape the risks and opportunities around engagement. They are usually deemed illegal by state authorities, but their operations may be tolerated, enabled or even directly supported by segments of the state apparatus. In some contexts, state actors co-opt CAGs to advance short-term political or security goals.²⁸ If state-linked actors risk losing political or economic advantage through a peace process, they can become spoilers.

Several useful typologies already exist for categorising state-CAG relationships.²⁹ One key distinction hinges on whether the CAG is embedded in the state structure and depends on it, or whether it operates largely outside state structures, forming more adversarial or localised relationships. In areas where state institutions are weak or absent, CPAGs in particular may fill governance gaps, which is an important consideration for peacemakers, since it can shape the group's legitimacy, bargaining behaviour, and the potential impacts of engagement.³⁰

2.5 Understanding illicit economic activities

CAGs typically derive much of their power from participation in illicit economies such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling, extortion, or illegal mining. These economies sustain them not only financially but also socially: they enable armed actors to exert control over territory and populations, and offer goods or services that the state fails to provide. In some contexts, this includes creating livelihoods for marginalised populations, which can generate a broad and durable social base of support.³¹

Understanding a CAG's specific position within an illicit economy is usually critical for analysing its motivations, structure, and leverage points. Although finding in-depth

information can be a challenge, open-source information and careful questioning may help to identify how the group earns revenue, what markets or supply chains it controls, how it enforces economic order, how its business model shapes internal dynamics, and how these activities interact with the licit economy.³²

2.6 Understanding motivations beyond economic gain

Dialogue efforts that focus only on financial incentives, such as promises of economic reintegration, may miss the mark with actors, particularly CPAGs, who value non-financial rewards just as highly.³³ Beyond revenue, common motivations include:

- **Status or identity** – public recognition or removal of stigma that confers legitimacy
- **Protection** – safety from rivals, prosecution, or community backlash
- **Community or legacy goals** – tangible benefits for the community or cause the leaders claim to defend.³⁴

Motivations can also differ across leadership, mid-level commanders and rank-and-file fighters; disaggregating them (see ‘Who to engage with?’, p. 33) helps tailor proposals to each layer of the group.³⁵

Identifying these factors early widens the bargaining agenda beyond money or amnesties. As one practitioner noted, “these groups almost always have social and political agendas – they just struggle to express and develop them”.³⁶ Helping a CAG, particularly a CPAG, articulate that agenda can be a useful part of the peacemaker’s strategy, giving negotiations a framework that reaches beyond immediate material trade-offs.

In Ecuador in 2007, the government of President Rafael Correa engaged in negotiations with urban gangs as part of a broader strategy to address violence and integrate these groups into society. The programme legalised the three largest gangs as social and cultural associations that could register with the government, which in turn allowed them to qualify for grants and benefit from social programming. The policy acknowledged that these groups were driven by complex motivations that went beyond economic gain, including desires for social recognition, identity, and community integration. This led to the most significant drop in violence in the Americas in recent history (68 percent). When armed violence began rising again in 2018, this was largely due to organised crime groups that were not part of the earlier process, as well as changes in cocaine routes, state corruption (especially within the prison system), and rapidly weakening institutions.

3 Understanding and navigating the context

For CAGs, understanding the wider context means looking beyond the usual political and conflict dynamics to factor in, from the outset, the distinct legal constraints, public perceptions, and other operational risks that will shape both opportunities and limits for engagement. These risks are rarely static: shifts in law enforcement posture, electoral incentives, or media scrutiny can rapidly alter the space for dialogue, making regular reassessment valuable. The way an initiative is framed, the visibility of those involved, and the expectations set early on can influence whether an opening remains viable long enough to develop into substantive engagement.

The typology also helps at this stage by orienting analysis toward the operating environments of different kinds of actors.

Politico-criminal hybrids – including CPAGs – often sit in contexts where political stakeholders, governance institutions, and illicit markets are tightly intertwined; electoral cycles, party dynamics, and public sentiment can weigh as heavily as policing policy. By contrast, such contextual factors tend to have less influence on CEAGs.

Mapping these considerations early can help identify where the context itself may need to be navigated before any dialogue can begin. This section highlights key contextual factors that condition the possibilities for engagement.

3.1 Domestic legal frameworks for engagement

Domestic law defines which kinds of contact with CAGs are permitted, restricted, or criminalised. Without clarity, peacemakers run the risk of being accused of collusion, aiding criminality, or legitimising criminal actors. Ideally, there will be domestic legislation that provides both legal cover for peacemakers and offers a pathway to legality for CAGs willing to engage in dialogue. However, such a framework is often absent at the outset of engagement and may instead emerge during the negotiation process.³⁷

The precise legal frameworks that govern engagement with CAGs tend to differ from those regulating dialogue with political armed actors. Many states have laws that criminalise material support, association, or negotiation with “criminal” organisations, making third-party engagement legally complex. While political armed groups may be engaged through official peace processes with legal exemptions or political mandates, criminal actors are often

National anti-gang laws, counter-narcotics statutes, and organised crime legislation can create significant barriers to dialogue by imposing strict penalties on those who interact with designated groups.

pursued primarily through law enforcement frameworks. National anti-gang laws, counter-narcotics statutes, and organised crime legislation can create significant barriers to dialogue by imposing strict penalties on those who interact with designated groups. Groups viewed as criminal are typically less likely to be afforded exceptions in domestic law, as their activities are framed as violations of criminal law rather than as political grievances. This can make it more difficult to secure legal protection or carve out safe spaces for negotiation with actors who are deemed to be criminal.³⁸

This presents a particular challenge for unofficial peacemakers such as “third party” NGOs, who, unlike diplomatic representatives or United Nations (UN) staff, do not benefit from immunity. Such organisations usually therefore attempt to operate under a domestic legal framework that offers them protection. Nevertheless, most of the practitioners consulted for this publication indicated that they began engagement without formal legal cover. While this did not prevent engagement in those cases, it did, of course, increase risks.³⁹

Where peacemakers have decided to engage before clear legal cover is in place, they have typically sought a formal mandate – namely something in writing from the government to secure minimal political and legal cover.⁴⁰ However, even a written agreement does not guarantee immunity. Political shifts or policy changes can abruptly end engagements or even criminalise interactions with armed groups. Some therefore recommend conducting detailed scenario planning before deciding to engage and regularly reassess risks and mitigation strategies throughout engagement.⁴¹ Some of the methods discussed in the chapter on ‘Beginning engagement’ (p.33), such as conducting engagement through prisons and engaging indirectly through other groups, can also help mitigate the domestic and international legal risks.

In **Colombia**, under President Gustavo Petro's "Total Peace" policy, the government implemented legislation to facilitate engagement with various armed and criminal groups through distinct dialogue mechanisms. Law 2272, enacted in November 2022, modified the public order framework, enabling the government to negotiate with both organised armed groups and criminal organisations. It establishes two primary pathways: i) Political Negotiations, designed for organised armed groups that, under responsible command, control territory sufficient to conduct sustained military operations; and ii) Socio-Legal Dialogues, targeted at high-impact criminal structures involved in illicit economies and exerting criminal influence over communities. Despite the legislative framework, the implementation has faced obstacles. For example, the Attorney General highlighted legal ambiguities and the need for additional legislation to clearly define the terms of engagement and benefits applicable to CAGs, indicating that Law 2272 may not sufficiently cover all necessary legal aspects.

3.2 International sanctions

International sanctions, whether unilaterally imposed by states or by multilateral organisations, such as the UN and the European Union (EU), can also place legal restrictions on engaging with designated individuals and groups. Supportive domestic legislation can help manage the risks within the country, but does not necessarily protect peacemakers from sanctions-related consequences in other jurisdictions.⁴²

While terrorist organisations and insurgent movements are typically sanctioned under counterterrorism or conflict-related legal frameworks, criminal actors are more often targeted through anti-money laundering, anti-narcotics, and organised

crime legislation. This legal distinction has real implications for engagement. Armed groups framed as political actors may be included in peace processes, providing clearer – if still contested – avenues for dialogue. By contrast, groups labelled as purely criminal are rarely granted such space, making engagement more legally complex and politically sensitive, with fewer formal protections or precedents.⁴³

The situation has been further complicated by the fact that, in January 2025, the President of the United States issued an executive order designating several international drug cartels and transnational criminal networks as “Foreign Terrorist Organizations”. This shift likely increases the legal risks of engagement and reinforces a securitised framing that can hinder efforts to understand the social and political drivers of criminal violence.

Many practitioners first consult legal counsel to clarify whether a group or individual is subject to political or legal sanctions.⁴⁴ Where sanctions apply, some organisations have reduced their exposure by applying for special permissions or exemptions before proceeding, such as licences from bodies such as the United States Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC).

In Medellín, **Colombia**, the significant decline in homicide rates between 2002 and 2007 is often referred to as the “Medellín Miracle”. Part of this decline can be attributed to Diego Murillo Bejarano, also known as Don Berna, the leader of the Office of Envigado cartel, whose coordination of the city’s criminal networks, together with the implementation of the 2005 “Justice and Peace Law”, helped reduce violence and incentivised demobilisation. Originally designed for paramilitary groups, the law’s amnesty and reintegration provisions were extended to local gangs, with a particular focus on reducing homicide

rates. This process coincided with major urban development initiatives under Mayor Sergio Fajardo. While killings declined, drug trafficking and other illicit activities persisted, and the fragile informal order unraveled after Don Berna – sanctioned by the United States Treasury Department – was extradited to the United States in 2008.

3.3 Popular sentiment

Public perception can shape the political and social space available for engagement with CAGs.⁴⁵ In some contexts, these groups provide livelihoods or community protection, and CPAGs in particular can enjoy a degree of local legitimacy. In others, they are overwhelmingly feared or rejected, making any form of dialogue politically sensitive or only viable through unofficial channels. CAGs often evoke complex reactions, including admiration, fear, resentment, or even dependence, particularly among young people who may see them as symbols of power and status in the absence of other opportunities or role models.⁴⁶

Public attitudes toward dialogue with CAGs vary widely across contexts. In recent years in Haiti, where armed groups have dominated much of Port-au-Prince, many citizens have opposed engagement – especially when it was perceived to grant amnesty.⁴⁷ A similar pattern of scepticism was seen in El Salvador during the 2012 gang truce. However, in several gang-controlled neighbourhoods, local studies and interviews found that residents were more open to dialogue and described gangs as providing a degree of informal local order.⁴⁸

To some extent, perceptions correlate with the group's profile in the typology. CPAGs like MS-13 and Barrio 18 may retain pockets of political legitimacy or community support despite their involvement in illicit economies, while CEAGs tend to be viewed more narrowly through the lens of criminality, which

can reduce tolerance for engagement. However, a CPAG may have political agendas *and* be extremely predatory, rendering it broadly unpopular with communities, as in the case of the G9 in Haiti, with its explicit political ambitions.⁴⁹ Regardless of the kind of CAG, it is therefore useful for peacemakers to try to understand both grassroots sentiment and broader national narratives before starting any form of engagement.⁵⁰

While peacemakers must work within the bounds of public sentiment, they can also help shape it. A strategic communications approach can reduce backlash, manage expectations, and build political space for dialogue. This includes targeted messaging for different audiences – such as government actors, communities, security forces, and the media – and positioning engagement as complementary to law enforcement, not a substitute. Reframing dialogue efforts as part of broader violence prevention, urban security, or inter-community peace-building can help mitigate the moral panic often associated with negotiation.⁵¹

Reintegration efforts are particularly vulnerable to stigma. Peacemakers can work with communities to humanise former group members and highlight the societal benefits of reintegration, recognising the different types of stigma faced by men, women, and children. Communications strategies can include personal transformation stories and success narratives, helping shift the conversation from impunity to healing.⁵²

The question of *who* the public sees as involved can also play a big part in shaping that narrative. International organisations can be important actors in this regard. For example, the Organization of American States' (OAS) engagement in El Salvador's gang truce lent credibility and helped the process advance. Even if international organisations do not wish to participate directly in the dialogue, acting as an observer can lend it important credibility.

Ultimately, managing public sentiment requires more than messaging. Co-developing narratives with trusted local actors, aligning with broader peace and security goals, and communicating tangible benefits of engagement can be essential to securing public support and ensuring the sustainability of dialogue.⁵³

In Mali in 2017, MINUSMA head Mahamat Saleh Annadif facilitated the Anéfis 2 talks, which ended factional fighting that summer. Initial international reluctance to engage stemmed from the 2015 Anéfis 1 process, which was widely perceived as a “commercial deal” between trafficking networks. However, though known traffickers participated in Anéfis 2, the talks were framed as an inter-community peace process, allowing for broader buy-in. The agreement quietly addressed issues left unresolved in the 2015 peace deal, showing how strategic communication can shape legitimacy.

3.4 Gender dynamics

In the context of engagement with CAGs, gender dynamics can be critical in shaping who can access whom, how legitimacy is conferred, and the roles individuals can play in dialogue. A gender-sensitive conflict analysis can not only reveal how gender norms, inequalities, and gender-based violence intersect with the behaviour of CAGs, but also how vulnerabilities linked to gender shape patterns of violence and victimisation, influencing how such groups establish and sustain power. For example, men’s capacity for violence can effectively become a tradeable commodity, linking individual motivations – such as monetary gain or family provision – to broader structural factors such as inequality and land ownership. Recognising these dynamics can uncover entry points for dialogue by identifying the grievances and vulnerabilities that sustain criminal ecosystems.⁵⁴

Gender-sensitive stakeholder mapping can also reveal overlooked actors and relationships that influence CAGs. While male leadership dominates, women and other gender groups often play crucial roles in logistics, finance, and community relations. Understanding these networks can expose new peacemaking entry points and identify local peace drivers, such as women's groups leveraging community ties to negotiate with these actors. A gendered lens also helps tailor interventions to different impacts, preventing unintended consequences such as the displacement of violence into private spheres during demobilisation. Ultimately, addressing both the immediate and structural gendered dimensions of these groups and their activities can foster more sustainable solutions.⁵⁵

Masculinity norms can provide insight into why men engage in CAGs beyond economic incentives. While men are of course not a homogeneous group, their participation is often shaped by social expectations around status, physical prowess, emotional control, and risk-taking. In contexts with limited opportunities, membership in such groups can be one of the few available pathways for young men to gain social recognition and fulfil expected masculine roles. Failing to consider the psychological and social dimensions of surrendering weapons or the loss of status within these networks can undermine attempts to transition members out of these groups.⁵⁶

3.5 Political reversals

Political reversals are a recurrent risk in contexts where CAGs operate. Changes in leadership, policy priorities, or public opinion can quickly alter the viability of engagement, interrupting dialogue or shifting the incentives of key actors. Anticipating such shifts during the initial context analysis allows practitioners to design approaches that can adapt without losing momentum.⁵⁷

In some settings, electoral cycles or changes in government can produce abrupt policy reversals, such as withdrawing from negotiations, hardening security approaches, or abandoning

community-based initiatives. These shifts can stem from political expediency, rival factions within the state, or changing public sentiment.⁵⁸ Building flexibility into engagement strategies, through phased commitments, diversified channels of communication, and strong local partnerships, can help sustain progress when political winds change.⁵⁹

At the same time, early attention to public communication and constituency-building can make reversals costlier for political actors, increasing the likelihood that dialogue survives a change in leadership. Where possible, embedding agreements within broader policy frameworks, legal instruments, or multi-stakeholder coalitions can also help insulate them from abrupt political shifts.⁶⁰

El Salvador provides a striking example of the adverse impact of a political reversal. National mediators played a key role in brokering the 2012 truce between the country's three dominant gangs, which led to an instant homicide reduction. However, the government proved unable to cultivate a longer-term political project to make the gains in violence reduction sustainable. When President Funes publicly distanced himself, the support of an already sceptical Salvadoran public was further undermined. The truce largely held into 2014, before the gangs proceeded to leverage their capacity to regulate violence. By 2015, El Salvador had the highest homicide rate in the world.

Following the collapse of the 2012 gang truce, the government of President Salvador Sánchez Cerén adopted a renewed “mano dura” approach, intensifying arrests and prosecutions related to alleged gang negotiations. Several figures involved in the earlier mediation efforts, including former mediators, prison officials, and police officers, were investigated or detained. The chief mediator, former left-wing guerrilla leader Raúl Mijango, was arrested in 2016,

convicted in 2021 for negotiating with gangs, and died in prison on 28 August 2023. Other prominent actors from the truce, such as Bishop Fabio Colindres and former Security Minister David Munguía Payés, faced scrutiny but were not detained in connection with the same charges. In 2022, under President Nayib Bukele, legislation was passed explicitly criminalising any form of dialogue or negotiation with gang members.

El Salvador underlines the importance of sustained state support for such processes, as well as a broad political consensus to ensure the durability of violence reduction gains beyond the term in office of a particular political leader or government.⁶¹

In **Los Angeles, USA**, gang negotiations highlight the challenge of communicating to the public. While past truces between the Bloods and Crips achieved temporary reductions in violence, they ultimately collapsed in the absence of a broader violence-reduction strategy. The media's role was mixed – while some coverage framed the negotiations as constructive, other media outlets sensationalised the process, reducing it to Hollywood-style storytelling rather than an opportunity for meaningful change. It took years to overcome the moral panic associated with approaches that go beyond simple tough-on-crime narratives, and until the work was consolidated into a larger urban peace infrastructure. This was thanks largely to the Gang Reduction and Youth Development Foundation (GRYD) and other organisations such as the Urban Peace Institute (UPI) that professionalised the mediation element and created sustainable reductions in violence. Organisations working in parallel, such as Homeboy Industries, also helped to normalise attitudes towards gang members among the broader society.

4 Beginning engagement: entry points and initial considerations

Once the political, legal, and social terrain has been mapped, and the main risks anticipated, the next step is to identify and test potential channels for contact. Like most hard-to-reach groups, first attempts at outreach to CAGs are rarely formal. They usually begin through indirect exchanges, discreet intermediaries, or low visibility encounters that can establish communication without raising political, legal, or security alarms.⁶²

4.1 Who to engage with?

While CAGs, especially CEAGs, do not always have a clear hierarchy – and may keep their structures deliberately opaque, as in the case of the PCC in Brazil – a pragmatic tool used by some practitioners is to consider three broad levels of influence. These categories are not rigid, but can help identify where and how to engage:

- **Top leadership** – Typically wealthier, politically connected, and high-risk targets for law enforcement. They may be seeking exits from crime, often motivated by personal or family concerns, but also tend to want to retain their assets and avoid prosecution.⁶³
- **Mid-ranking members** – Often the most difficult to engage.⁶⁴ Younger and more ambitious, they are deeply embedded in criminal structures and more likely to view negotiation as a threat to their power or status.
- **Low-ranking members** – Often expendable foot soldiers who may be more open to disengagement if provided with credible economic alternatives or protection.⁶⁵

Practitioners usually decide early whether to start with senior figures or build from the base; both paths have worked. In El Salvador in 2012, for example, mediators were first given access

to the imprisoned national leaders of MS-13 and Barrio 18. Once a ceasefire was agreed inside the prisons, those leaders ordered their local cliques on the street to comply. Subsequent community meetings and municipal “violence-free zone” projects then drew in mid-level members.⁶⁶ Conversely, in Bangladesh in 2016 a local journalist and police taskforce began by convincing rank-and-file pirates in the Sundarbans to surrender weapons in exchange for land titles, stipends, and protection from rivals. Senior gang leaders soon followed to avoid isolation and to secure the same rehabilitation benefits.

As these two cases suggest, the relative importance of each tier can also shift depending on the group’s profile in the typology. CPAG leaders, for instance, may have stronger incentives to engage in political dialogue or reputation-building measures, whereas CEAG leaders may be more focused on securing economic benefits or protecting revenue streams. Recognising these differences can help practitioners calibrate entry points and tailor incentives more effectively.

Of course, top-down and bottom-up approaches are not mutually exclusive. Multi-tiered strategies – combining leadership engagement (including in prison), informal outreach to mid-ranking actors, and community-level initiatives – have generally proven more effective than approaches that focus on a single layer of the group.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, there can be value in engaging the most influential actors first. In the case of CPAGs this typically means the leadership, while in CEAG contexts influence may lie more with mid-level commanders tied to specific revenue streams. However, in many cases the practitioner’s decision for who to engage with will be shaped by the simple reality of who they can gain access to.

Shifts within group dynamics can also create openings.⁶⁸ Ageing leaders may grow weary of conflict and seek more stable futures for themselves or their families. Some may wish to leave behind a different legacy for their children, who

may not even know the full extent of their involvement. At the same time, generational turnover can lead to more volatile and violent leadership struggles, as younger actors seek influence through escalation. These internal pressures may increase both the urgency and opportunity for dialogue, particularly when combined with external stressors or credible outreach from trusted intermediaries.⁶⁹

In some cases, engaging the leadership may be unwise, particularly when leaders act as proxies for political or economic elites. In such contexts, engagement with lower or mid-ranking members, or with influential community interlocutors, may offer more sustainable entry points. Conversely, where groups are tied to political actors – as is common with hybrid paramilitary-criminal organisations – initial engagement may need to start with those external power brokers.⁷⁰

When faced with a multitude of CAGs, practitioners often prioritise engagement with the most influential actors, hoping that hegemonic groups can help bring others into a dialogue. However, this carries the risk of unintentionally strengthening the power and coherence of dominant groups, giving them greater leverage vis-à-vis the state.⁷¹

In Haiti, the National Disarmament, Dismantlement and Reinsertion Commission (CNDDR) allegedly suggested that various gangs should coalesce to make negotiations easier. This may have facilitated the creation, in June 2020, of the ‘G9 an Fanmi e Alye’, the largest gang alliance in the capital Port-au-Prince.⁷² The G9 is headed by Jimmy Chérizier, alias ‘Barbecue’, a former police officer who decided to create his own gang after being accused of human rights violations and sacked from the police following an operation in the La Saline quarter of Port-au-Prince in November 2018. The G9 gang coalition is also

suspected of having been created by the then-presidential party Le Parti haïtien Tèt Kale (PHTK) as a strategic move ahead of future elections.

Trinidad and Tobago used to have two main gangs: Rasta City and The Muslims. However, after the leaders of both groups were killed, the number of criminal gangs in Trinidad and Tobago has expanded dramatically. In 2023, 186 gangs were reported with approximately 1,700 suspected gang members countrywide, down from a 2019 peak of 211 gangs and 2,450 suspected gang members. This renders the prospect of negotiations much more difficult.⁷³

4.2 Leveraging prisons as entry points for engagement

In many contexts, prisons function as both power centres and a natural point of entry for engaging CAGs, as many of their leaders remain incarcerated while continuing to exert control over their networks, and many CAGs originate in prison environments.⁷⁴ Unlike in the open environment, where legal and security risks are higher, prison settings typically offer safer conditions for peacemakers to engage. In some cases, incarcerated members' lawyers can provide useful advice and introductions. Ideally, engagement with a group in prison should not entirely replace engagement with the group outside; for sustainable engagement, both levels must be addressed. Leaders in prison often shape overarching agreements, while those outside determine their enforcement and longevity.

However, practitioners emphasise that engagement within prisons requires careful consideration. While some leaders may be more willing to talk in prison than they would be outside, peacemakers must account for internal prison dynamics, including rivalries between factions, interactions with corrections

officials, and the circulation of influence between prison populations and street-level operations. Post-prison reintegration is often neglected in peace processes, leading to high recidivism rates, continued recruitment, or even violent retaliation against released individuals.⁷⁵ Successful prison-based negotiations should therefore anticipate post-release challenges and factor in reintegration strategies early in the process.⁷⁶

Practitioners also emphasise that members of gangs in prisons should not be confused with prison gangs, i.e. gangs that form in prison and that tend to be very close-knit and dangerous.⁷⁷

In Colombia, as part of its “Total Peace” policy, the Petro government established a “socio-legal dialogue” table at Itagüí prison in June 2023 with leaders of urban criminal groups from Medellín and the Aburrá Valley. Some media reports suggest that transfers of key gang figures to Itagüí were made to facilitate their participation in the dialogue process.

4.3 Overcoming barriers to access

While there are cases where external third-party peacemakers have been able to establish trust with CAGs and play a role, they often face significant barriers, including:

- Initial distrust, as groups often assume outsiders are acting on behalf of law enforcement or intelligence agencies
- Testing and intimidation tactics, where peacemakers may be subjected to psychological pressure or threats as a way for the group to assess their intentions
- The expectation of financial incentives, as some group members expect paid relationships with external actors. To prevent misunderstandings, many peacemakers clarify upfront that no financial compensation is involved.⁷⁸

As with many hard-to-reach armed groups, gaining access often requires trusted intermediaries, as CAGs tend to be deeply suspicious of outsiders.⁷⁹ Many negotiations are therefore first facilitated by insider mediators, which in the case of CAGs are often former members of these groups (called “formers” or “veterans”) who retain credibility and personal connections within the group. Religious leaders, community influencers, or even the families of group members have proven to be useful in facilitating initial contact. Initiating dialogue through unofficial channels – such as NGOs, religious institutions, or community leaders – can also have the advantage of avoiding raising expectations and unduly legitimising the group while allowing for discreet trust-building.

Churches and faith-based organisations have played a pivotal role in engaging CAGs across a range of contexts, often serving as trusted intermediaries in environments where international actors lack access or legitimacy. Religious figures, particularly those embedded in affected communities, can open doors to dialogue by drawing on long-standing relationships, moral authority, and a reputation for impartiality. In some cases, clergy are perceived by CAGs as non-threatening and politically neutral, making them one of the few external actors who can initiate conversations without triggering suspicion.⁸⁰

In 2013, the Catholic Church played a pivotal role in mediating a truce between MS-13 and Barrio 18, the two largest gangs in **Honduras**. The Church’s efforts were led by Bishop Rómulo Emiliani, the Auxiliary Bishop of San Pedro Sula, who engaged directly with gang leaders to broker the agreement. The truce aimed to reduce the homicide rate and create opportunities for dialogue between the gangs and the government, with gang leaders expressing remorse for their violent actions and a willingness to reintegrate into society. However, despite initial optimism,

the truce faced significant challenges, including public scepticism and limited government support, ultimately leading to its collapse.

While these intermediaries play a crucial role in initial outreach and trust-building, particularly when external actors would otherwise struggle to gain access, insider mediators are rarely neutral, and their motivations, alliances, and influence must be carefully assessed to ensure they do not distort the dialogue process. Some “gatekeepers”, including local political figures, business elites, or community leaders, may claim to have influence over CAGs, but instead use their position to control access, delay progress, or serve their own interests.⁸¹ Practitioners warn against over-reliance on a single intermediary, emphasising the need to diversify entry points and cross-check information.⁸²

Women are often overlooked in dialogue efforts, yet they play critical roles within these ecosystems. While frequently victimised or marginalised, they also serve as supporters, enablers, or intermediaries. Wives, mothers, and other female relatives of group members, along with women community leaders and other influential women, may have direct access to key decision-makers. Once dialogue is underway, they can assert influence in ways that male interlocutors cannot, and can help de-escalate tensions, facilitate trust-building, or communicate proposals that male interlocutors might otherwise reject.⁸³

In **Venezuela**, while many shanty towns in Caracas have been deeply affected by gang violence and police-military raids, the neighbourhood of Carache has been much less affected. This is in part due to arrangements between police and gangs, but also thanks to the neighbourhood’s strong network of women activists – which helped to secure a 2007 ceasefire agreement between the women

of Carache and gangs from surrounding neighbourhoods. The deal was initiated by a mother who lost her second son to gang violence and brought together other local women who had also lost their sons. Women continue to maintain leverage over younger gang members and discourage violence using social influence, moral authority, and strategic communication.⁸⁴

Community-based engagement strategies, such as public security assessments, town hall meetings, or victim-centred initiatives, can also serve as soft entry points. These engagements allow actors with criminal agendas to observe discussions from a distance, gauge the intentions of peacemakers, and gradually enter into dialogue.⁸⁵

In **New York City, USA**, a priest invited families of victims of gang violence to share their stories during mass, while secretly inviting members of the Latin Kings gang to attend – exposing them to firsthand accounts of the consequences of their actions without forcing direct engagement.

In some cases, law enforcement can shape access to CAGs, particularly by controlling key territories or sources of intelligence. Engaging with parts of the police can provide useful context on local dynamics, and supportive police units can play a central role in “protecting” the dialogue space by ensuring that group members who take part in the dialogues are not arrested. CAGs are themselves often aware of the need to manage interactions with law enforcement and so can display a level of tolerance to peacemakers doing the same. However, practitioners pointed out that peacemakers should approach such issues with caution, carefully balancing transparency with discretion, to avoid undermining trust with the groups or appearing as an extension of state policy.⁸⁶

4.4 Building trust

Across cases, practitioners highlight how meeting in informal settings where actors feel comfortable and in control, such as neighbourhood spaces, territory they influence, prisons, or places of worship, can help to build trust. Some emphasise the importance of showing up consistently and letting the group observe and “test” them over time as more effective than making substantial or sensitive requests at the outset. Early conversations that seek to learn *from* individuals, rather than *about* them, and simple steps such as avoiding notetaking at the outset have sometimes reduced suspicion that engagement will be used for intelligence-gathering. Small, non-controversial forms of support (e.g. food or improvements to basic prison conditions) have, in some contexts, helped signal good faith without overpromising.⁸⁷

Practitioners also highlight several recurring sensitivities. Many groups draw a line between “telling” (disclosing aspects of the general context) and “snitching” (revealing names or locations); clarity about boundaries from the start – including that practitioners cannot receive information about imminent crimes – has reduced later friction. Some actors “test” outsiders with intimidation; steady, transparent conduct and clear independence from law enforcement can help de-escalate those moments. Where prison-based leaders retain influence, engagement inside custody has provided an entry point. However, for it to sustain, following up with members not in prison is also usually needed. Finally, in places where groups must manage day-to-day contact with police, practitioners have noted a degree of tolerance for carefully balanced liaison, as long as it does not blur roles or compromise trust.⁸⁸

In **Bangladesh**, the engagement process with the Sundarbans pirates started when journalist-turned-mediator Mohsin UI Hakim first began reaching out as an unofficial go-between in 2009. Hakim had been drawn into this work

through his reporting, beginning in 2000, on the hardships faced by remote fishing communities in Bangladesh's southwestern districts. In 2009, he began approaching pirate leaders for interviews. Through these conversations, he discovered that many pirates were deeply dissatisfied with their lives, and some were willing to consider surrender if amnesty could be offered.

Initially, he faced enormous difficulties in convincing both the pirate leaders to engage and the government to consider allowing them to surrender alongside the ongoing security operations, which were failing to significantly reduce violence.

For seven years, Hakim built trust with both sides, largely through his impartial journalism covering marginalised communities. His consistent engagement eventually persuaded an important pirate leader to surrender without conditions in May 2016. Although this leader was initially imprisoned, he received bail after serving only two months and – seeing that surrender did not necessarily mean prolonged incarceration – an additional 32 pirate leaders, who in turn were in charge of 328 individuals, surrendered over the following two years. Subsequently, the government dropped most criminal cases against those who surrendered, except in cases of murder or rape.

4.5 Seizing opportunities and building state buy-in

One of the most significant challenges for third parties is persuading the state to consider engagement with CAGs. Governments are often deeply reluctant, fearing that dialogue legitimises illicit actors, undermines state authority, or signals weakness. Their default position is often repressive, such as militarised policing or mass incarceration. Peacemakers can anticipate this hesitation and frame dialogue as a complementary measure, not a replacement for criminal justice. Even when

direct state involvement is politically unfeasible, authorities may nevertheless permit discreet engagement by third-party actors – such as NGOs, religious leaders, or community figures – as a means of reducing violence.⁸⁹

In many cases, governments have only considered engagement under specific conditions. These include external shocks that create windows of opportunity: for example, deteriorating security conditions, the failure of hardline crackdowns, high-profile killings provoking community outrage, or increased public pressure to reduce violence. At other times, states reconsider their stance when the groups themselves demonstrate sufficient leadership and internal cohesion and signal a willingness to negotiate. These moments of transition can provide critical openings, particularly if third-party peacemakers have already established informal communication channels with key stakeholders.⁹⁰

The cycle of electoral politics also shapes possibilities for dialogue. For example, politicians may engage CAGs to gain temporary legitimacy, boost their electoral appeal, or bargain for political favours. This is particularly true in Latin America, where several cases have involved offering protection or leniency in exchange for support. Some governments have even used gangs to repress opposition protests. While political expediency may create openings for engagement, it tends to produce transactional, short-lived outcomes rather than sustained peace efforts.⁹¹

In **South Africa** in 2011, President Jacob Zuma, while in office, reportedly invited Western Cape crime bosses to his official residence, allegedly as part of an ANC political party scheme to mobilise support to take the region away from the rival Democratic Alliance party.⁹²

Coercive pressure can also shift incentives. Some of the literature suggests that confrontation between security forces and CAGs can counter-intuitively contribute to processes of accommodation by forcing parties to the negotiating tables and serving as bargaining leverage for the state.⁹³ When state law enforcement is not effective, the “stick” can also involve powerful external actors with the means to constrain criminal actors through military means, law enforcement, or other measures such as sanctions. In 2018, the UN Security Council started using sanctions to target criminal actors and traffickers in Mali and Libya.⁹⁴ However, when security forces are (or are perceived to be) effective, this often acts as a disincentive for the state to consider alternative dialogue-based approaches. In most contexts, a coordinated blend of pressure and engagement proves more effective than either approach in isolation.

The experience of other states and CAGs can serve as a catalyst for engagement and negotiations that would otherwise not have been considered. This is what Huma Haider calls the demonstration effect.⁹⁵ Third parties can play an important role in exposing conflict actors – governments and CAGs alike – to lessons and even participants from past negotiation experiences, facilitating peer learning. Conversely, past failures or perceived failures can discourage actors from attempting negotiations with CAGs.

Even when encouraging factors are present, persuading the state to engage remains difficult given the political risks involved. Multilateral organisations, such as the OAS, the UN, or the African Union, may have greater leverage over state authorities, but often hesitate to be seen as encouraging dialogue with “criminals”. While these organisations have played important guarantor roles, they can lack the political will, flexibility and local presence required for sustained peacemaking, making NGOs or community-based actors better positioned to facilitate engagement.⁹⁶

In El Salvador, the OAS served as a guarantor of the 2012 gang truce between MS-13 and Barrio 18. The OAS helped monitor the emerging agreement and provided political legitimacy by publicly supporting dialogue as a means to reduce violence. Senior OAS officials, including Secretary-General José Miguel Insulza, visited imprisoned gang leaders and signalled the organisation's readiness to follow the process closely. Although the government publicly distanced itself from the negotiations, it tacitly enabled the process by authorising prison transfers and other measures that made dialogue possible. The OAS's involvement offered an external actor capable of assuming part of the political risk.

Whoever leads the engagement shapes its possibilities. State-led dialogue can offer legitimacy and access to structural change, but may provoke backlash or distrust among communities and CAGs which view the state as a source of harm. In contexts where trust is particularly low, the state may need to engage indirectly at first. Over time, the role of the state may evolve from observer to guarantor and ultimately to negotiating party, particularly where the reintegration of territory, governance, or security is at stake.⁹⁷ Third-party peacemakers, particularly those with strong local legitimacy, can create safe spaces for early dialogue, allowing state actors to gradually enter the process as confidence builds.⁹⁸

When they do enter into dialogue with CAGs, representatives of the state tend to see themselves – or at least present themselves – as mediating between rival groups or as neutral arbiters trying to restore the rule of law, rather than as negotiating parties to a conflict. However, many CAGs have the perception of being in conflict with the state. So, while the state may view itself as an arbiter, the groups do not. Third parties can help bridge this gap in perceptions by advising

state representatives to understand how they are seen and how this impacts their role in talks.⁹⁹

In Colombia in 2022, President Gustavo Petro launched an ambitious “Total Peace” policy to address armed violence, which continued despite the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC. The policy included negotiation with criminal actors, known as socio-legal dialogue to differentiate such processes from continued political negotiations with other armed groups such as the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and FARC dissidents. In November 2023, HD organised a workshop on strengthening peacemaking to deal with criminal agendas, which exposed Colombian actors responsible for implementing the “Total Peace” policy and leading the dialogue with gangs to practitioners and researchers who had been involved in similar negotiations with gangs in other countries.

In some cases, third parties are explicitly asked to mediate, often by state actors seeking to prevent imminent violence. For instance, one interviewed practitioner recalled how the New York City Police Department approached a community leader trusted by various gangs for help in preventing an impending conflict. Similarly, prison authorities have sought mediation assistance to de-escalate tensions between rival gangs inside correctional facilities.¹⁰⁰ However, accepting such requests can carry reputational risks for peacemakers, as working too closely with law enforcement can erode trust with CAGs or create the perception of being an extension of state security policy.¹⁰¹

Many effective peace efforts have involved a gradual transition from third-party facilitation to state-led negotiation. What may begin with the state remaining on the sidelines can progress to state actors playing a light mediation role brokering

truces between groups, to possibly becoming party to a negotiation, often initially in ceasefire talks between the state and groups and eventually agreeing to negotiate with a view to transforming the group in question. A third party will have to adapt its own role as a consequence, playing a more direct role (with insider mediators) in the early phases, and progressively moving to an advisory and supporting role in the latter phases.¹⁰²

5 Establishing objectives for dialogue

Objectives can be understood as a spectrum, from short-term violence reduction and conflict management through to long-term transformation.¹⁰³ Where any given dialogue falls on this spectrum will depend on factors such as the nature of the group, the broader conflict and governance context, and, critically, the political will and capacity of the state and other actors to support more ambitious change.

Some literature calls for time-bound engagement strategies with clearly defined objectives and an “end-state”.¹⁰⁴ However, many practitioners argue that rigid frameworks are rarely feasible when engaging with CAGs. Early engagement before a full strategy is in place can help lower violence and build trust. Incremental progress, pragmatic sequencing, and adaptive approaches tend to be more effective than maximalist aims like complete group transformation, which are rarely achievable in the short term.¹⁰⁵

Linked to this, setting realistic expectations is critical. Unlike political armed groups, CAGs lack established pathways for transformation – there is no standard model for how they evolve or exit. This makes it harder to communicate what dialogue might realistically achieve. Being upfront about constraints and uncertainties from the outset can help manage expectations and prevent misunderstandings that could later escalate tensions.¹⁰⁶

It is usually misleading to view CAGs, and CPAGs in particular, as motivated purely by money or to assume that negotiations will turn only on replacing illicit income with legal alternatives. In some cases, senior figures have prioritised formal amnesty or safeguarding assets, while younger or lower-ranking members have looked mainly for a safe exit. Recognising diversity of motivations has, in many contexts, helped peacemakers explore a wider range of possible agreements.¹⁰⁷

5.1 Short-term violence reduction and conflict management

These engagements aim to reduce violence in the short-to-medium term and prevent escalation, often without addressing deeper structural issues. Most existing agreements, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean, fall under this category.¹⁰⁸ Such limited objectives reflect the power dynamic: the state may be unable to dismantle criminal networks, but it may still wish to negotiate a reduction in violence without entering into complex or unpopular transformation processes.

Short-term violence reduction measures may incorporate:

- Temporary ceasefires (between government security forces and CAGs)
- Truces (between CAGs and with the state sometimes playing a mediation role)
- Safe passage agreements for humanitarian aid, law enforcement, or rival groups
- Safe passage through rival territories
- Suspension of arrests or prisoner releases
- Suspension of targeted law enforcement actions (e.g. reduced police raids or mass arrests in exchange for a reduction in violence)

- Prisoner transfers to de-escalate tensions in specific areas or within prisons
- Community-based agreements ensuring non-interference in certain zones, such as agreements to keep schools or religious sites free from violence
- De-escalation agreements between different CAGs and/or between CAGs and the state to prevent retaliation or conflict spirals.

Some of these elements can also serve as confidence-building measures (CBMs), since they may not require the groups or the state to give up anything significant.¹⁰⁹

a. Truces and ceasefires

Truces or *gang truces* are arguably the most common form of arrangement involving CAGs.¹¹⁰ In the world of international conflict resolution, truces are part of the family of ceasefires and are short-term, typically informal and local arrangements to temporarily pause hostilities.¹¹¹ A *gang truce* is a specific term emerging from urban peace practice in the Americas. Like their international conflict resolution counterparts, truces tend to be informal, relying on verbal agreements or basic pacts rather than detailed documents. Where the agreement is written down, it rarely includes much detail.¹¹² Where monitoring and verification mechanisms exist, they are usually light and ad hoc, such as the truces put in place in urban contexts in Colombia under the “Total Peace” policy.¹¹³

Gang truces, truces, and other ceasefire arrangements involving CAGs tend to be *between* CAGs¹¹⁴ or groups rather than between the group and the state.¹¹⁵ Such truces can be attained through direct talks between two CAGs or mediated by a state actor or third party, and generally focus on putting a halt to the violence. Where the state fosters or mediates the truce, the latter can serve as a way for the state to spatially contain,

regulate, or otherwise exert some level of control over these groups within specific geographic areas.

Like ceasefires in international conflict resolution, ceasefire-type arrangements involving CAGs tend to be less successful if they are viewed as an end in of themselves. Critics point to the fact that, too often, states fail to build on a gang truce because it reduces the homicide rate, which can be politically expedient during election campaigns.¹¹⁶ Such agreements have therefore rarely led to major changes in government policies. One challenge associated with the repeated use of truces is that repeated collapses can devalue them and reduce their effectiveness as tools for opening space.¹¹⁷ Another is that the stability they engender can also boost criminal, alongside legitimate, business.¹¹⁸

In **Ecuador**, the police chief of Guayaquil mediated a successful gang truce in 2005. This was critical in creating the space to expand the process to the national level, bringing in other gangs and expanding its aims beyond homicide reduction. This took place in parallel with a broader government approach of social engagement.

Peacemakers working to establish ceasefire-type arrangements between CAGs, or between CAGs and the government, can draw lessons from the world of international conflict resolution about what works and what does not,¹¹⁹ for example by ensuring clarity and detail around:

- The objective of the truce (why)
- How long it is valid for
- The territory covered
- The different parties and their respective roles

- What activities are prohibited under the truce
- What activities are envisioned under the truce, who needs to perform them, and when they should be performed.

Lessons can also be drawn from developments in ceasefires around how to achieve some monitoring and verification without the need for large and expensive structures.¹²⁰ One compelling example of civilian monitoring drawn from the world of gang truces is the women’s network in Caracas, Venezuela, that is outlined in the section on ‘Overcoming barriers to access’ above (p. 39).

It can be beneficial to specify certain illegal economic activities as violations under truces and ceasefire agreements.¹²¹ While the long-term aim should usually be for the CAG to give up *all* illicit economic activities, this is usually unrealistic at an early stage, since a broader range of agreements providing alternative means of income (and addressing other factors such as status) would likely be required. For ceasefire-type agreements, a sensible approach can therefore be for peace-makers to focus on their more *harmful* criminal activities. Where the activity brings them relatively little income, this can be presented as a confidence-building gesture. Otherwise, the state or another actor can consider the provision of alternative income or goods or services in reciprocity.¹²² If part of a longer transformational process, this can be a useful step towards moving the group progressively away from the illicit economy.

b. Intervention models and violence interruption

Urban violence intervention systems offer a model that can bridge short-term and long-term impact when establishing objectives for dialogue with CAGs. These models have emerged in North America as an important tool for reducing violence in cities affected by organised criminal activity. They typically rely on a combination of early detection and resolution of conflict

(known as “violence interruption”), community engagement, and service provision to prevent violence from breaking out or escalating, and to provide longer-term alternatives for gang members. Among the most well-known approaches are the Group Violence Intervention (GVI) model pioneered by the National Network for Safe Communities (NNSC) and Cure Violence (originally developed in Chicago). Both examples rely on credible intermediaries, such as former gang members or community leaders, who mediate conflicts, ideally before they escalate into violence. They also provide alternative pathways out of crime by connecting individuals to employment, education, and social services.¹²³

In **Baltimore, USA**, the NGO Cure Violence developed an approach to stop the spread of violence in communities by using the methods and strategies associated with disease control. These consist in treating violence as a contagious disease: detecting and interrupting conflicts, identifying the highest risk individuals, and changing established social norms through a health perspective approach. It is a model of perpetual mediation and negotiation.

These intervention models have demonstrated measurable success. The GVI model led to substantial decreases in homicide rates – Boston’s “Operation Ceasefire” saw a 63 percent drop in youth homicides when the strategy was implemented.¹²⁴ Cure Violence has been associated with reductions of 30–50 percent of shootings in multiple US cities and has been replicated in Latin America, including in Honduras, Colombia, and Mexico,¹²⁵ though some accuse it of sidestepping the racial and structural dimensions of violence.¹²⁶ What makes these approaches effective is their ability to disrupt cycles of retaliatory violence by addressing immediate conflicts while simultaneously working to change the social norms that sustain violence.

For peacemakers, these models show how CAGs can be engaged directly without legitimising their criminal activities. They can be a pragmatic means of reducing harm and can act as a platform for exploring longer-term group transformation. In practice, these approaches blend elements of insider mediation and peace infrastructures – formal and informal mechanisms that sustain dialogue, mediate disputes, and prevent violence – with aspects more similar to those found in Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) programming, such as disengagement pathways, reintegration support, and long-term follow-up. Much like local peace committees in fragile states, urban intervention models institutionalise community-based structures for non-violent conflict resolution and can provide a space for dialogue between communities, group members, and law enforcement.¹²⁷ They can also be adapted for both CPAGs and CEAGs, though the nature of the actors and incentives may change accordingly.

One advantage of these models is that they can be framed as security or law enforcement initiatives, helping to navigate the political and legal sensitivities surrounding engagement with CAGs. In many countries, while formal dialogue with “criminal”

groups is politically contentious or legally restricted, violence reduction strategies that involve community leaders, social workers, and even law enforcement in indirect engagement with “criminal” actors often face fewer obstacles.¹²⁸ Framing these approaches as public safety initiatives rather than political dialogue can make them more palatable to governments, creating space for engagement without necessarily requiring formal recognition of the groups involved.

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While rooted in urban gang contexts, elements of these models have been adapted for other types of CAGs and for contexts with political armed groups with high levels of illicit economic activity (such as those in the top right quadrant of the typology in Figure 1, p. 11). For example, Cure Violence methodologies have been applied in Basra and Sadr City in Iraq to mediate sectarian conflict, and in the West Bank and Somalia to support community-based violence prevention and, in some cases, the disengagement of former combatants.¹²⁹ Key elements of violence-intervention approaches such as focusing on reducing immediate violence without requiring political recognition, working through intermediaries who are credible in the eyes of the group, and offering tangible incentives that can compete with the benefits of illicit activity (e.g., protection, status, or livelihoods), can thus be adapted and potentially applied to other criminal armed actors.

In Choloma, **Honduras**, one of the country's most violent cities, the Recuperando Mi Comunidad initiative, supported by UNICEF, the EU, and Cure Violence Global, trained local Violence Interrupters (VIs) to mediate tensions and prevent violence. Over two years, 18 VIs – many of them women – intervened in more than 1,770 incidents, saving hundreds of lives and significantly reducing rates of homicide and gender-based violence. They also helped relocate women and children at risk of trafficking or domestic violence, demonstrating the critical role of trusted community actors in fragile environments. Beyond direct mediation, the initiative sought to transform the social norms underpinning violence, particularly targeting macho attitudes through mentoring and youth engagement. Despite challenges from COVID-19 and natural disasters, the programme built strong local trust and showed how empowering communities can disrupt cycles of violence even in contexts of organised crime.¹³⁰

In Los Angeles, USA, beginning in the late 2000s and formalised under Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, the city developed a coordinated Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD) strategy to mediate and prevent gang violence. Through the Mayor's Office, trained intervention workers – many former gang members – were deployed to defuse conflicts, open dialogue between rival groups, and prevent retaliatory attacks. Supported by UPI, the programme linked violence interruption with social services, community engagement, and trauma-informed support. The model contributed to reductions in gang-related violence and remains institutionalised within the GRYD Office. Today it is widely recognised internationally as a pioneering, locally anchored, multi-stakeholder approach to urban violence mediation.

c. Urban political settlements

While intervention models focus on reducing immediate violence, some contexts have also seen the emergence of more structured arrangements governing relations between groups, communities, and authorities. These “urban political settlements” operate at a broader scale and with longer time horizons, though they share with intervention models the aim of stabilising volatile environments and reducing harms associated with CAG behaviour, either as a standalone agreement or as a bridge between short-term violence reduction and longer-term transformation. They are bargains between municipal or state actors, CAGs, business networks, and community leaders that determine who controls territory, how markets and services operate, and the level of coercion tolerated. For CPAGs that combine governance roles with significant illicit-economy activity, urban political settlements can help move a process beyond truces towards more predictable, harm-reducing arrangements.¹³¹

Mirroring elements sometimes included in traditional ceasefire-related agreements, these settlements establish operational rules for daily life in specific areas, such as market opening hours, extortion-free zones around schools or clinics, agreed movement corridors, dispute-resolution mechanisms, and policing protocols. They often involve a broader set of counterparts, including municipal agencies, utilities, traders' associations, churches, and women's networks, and are commonly framed as time-bound, reviewable arrangements rather than one-off pacts. This approach resonates with CAGs because it prioritises predictable rules around security and markets without requiring political recognition.¹³²

In practice, the settlements that endure tend to be geographically specific, address points of contact with the illicit economy, link commitments to visible service delivery and policing protocols, and incorporate light monitoring through trusted community members. They also usually include review points or expiry clauses to allow adaptation as conditions change.¹³³ Critics point to the risk that such arrangements can inadvertently consolidate a dominant group, entrench corrupt practices, or lack public legitimacy, although inclusive participation, red lines on abuses, and transparent review mechanisms can help mitigate these risks.¹³⁴

Examples of urban political settlements may include Medellín, Colombia, in 2013, where an informal "pacto del fusil" among major armed groups reduced open warfare, creating the conditions for the municipal government to expand outreach and service delivery initiatives in previously violent neighborhoods¹³⁵ and Kingston, Jamaica, where the Peace Management Initiative brokered neighbourhood-level compacts that established no-violence zones and rapid de-escalation mechanisms.¹³⁶ Similar approaches have also been applied in non-urban areas where CAGs or hybrid politico-criminal actors regulate access to resources or movement. For example, in the case of the Sundarbans in Bangladesh, agreements on safe passage and

taxation norms, combined with rehabilitation measures, helped to reduce piracy. In the Sahel, local peace committees have negotiated grazing corridors and market-day rules.¹³⁷

5.2 Transformational or longer-term agreements

At the furthest end of the spectrum, some engagement processes aim to reshape the landscape of organised criminality by shifting groups away from their criminal enterprises. Historically, many gangs and other CAGs have transformed over generations, from the Yakuza in Japan and the Triads in China in the 17th century, to the US-based Irish mob and Jewish-American mafia in the 19th and 20th centuries, but shorter-term transformations based on agreements are rare in recent times. This reflects the difficulty of conceptualising realistic end-states for CAGs. A consequence of this is that most examples of negotiations with CAGs take the form of ongoing conflict management and violence reduction over long periods of time.

Even so, there are examples, such as Ecuador’s reclassification of certain gangs as legal cultural associations, that suggest transformation is possible under the right conditions. More commonly, transformational negotiations resemble “plea bargaining”, where the group demobilises in exchange for legal leniency or economic opportunities, for example. Such negotiations are simpler when the power balance is tipped in favour of the state.

The **Colombian** government negotiated with a paramilitary federation, the AUC, in the 2000s when the government had increased its military strength and the AUC was fragmented. The state negotiated from a position of relative strength, enabling it to focus on DDR and transitional-justice provisions. Some AUC members, however, never demobilised, and by 2006 others had remobilised into an array of CAGs, exploiting the inability

of the state to fill the security vacuum that resulted from the AUC's demobilisation. In the years that followed, they recruited heavily, growing in size and influence to dominate key transnational drug trafficking routes. When the FARC demobilised after the 2016 peace agreement, these CAGs again exploited the security vacuum in certain areas to gain territory, members, and markets.

Transformational agreements usually only succeed when embedded within broader societal change agendas.¹³⁸ These require sustained government commitment to reform political, legal, and economic systems, often beyond what a single administration can guarantee.¹³⁹ While some governments may explore programmes that encourage individual exits from CAGs, typically alongside repressive approaches, it remains more difficult to support long-term reintegration or to address the root causes of criminality, such as youth marginalisation or economic exclusion. Effective prevention typically demands holistic, multi-year strategies backed by sustained political and financial investment.¹⁴⁰ In Italy, for example, efforts to dismantle the Mafia were most effective when judicial reform, regional development, and local governance improvements were pursued together.

Peacemakers can therefore only realistically pursue truly transformational outcomes when governments are willing to lead comprehensive reform efforts, ideally across successive administrations. The role of a third-party mediator is usually to advise the state on what is possible (realistic objectives), what elements need to be considered (economics, governance, security etc.), and what sort of process could work. While peacemakers are rarely directly involved in addressing structural drivers, such as illicit economies or justice reform, they must understand these dynamics well enough to provide meaningful guidance, and to engage relevant external expertise when needed.¹⁴¹

The typology introduced earlier can help to start to shape this understanding: CPAGs may be more responsive to political reforms and constituency-based incentives, while CEAGs are often more affected by shifts in economic opportunity and market access. Keeping these differences in view can help practitioners start to prioritise which structural levers are most likely to influence each type of group.

Bearing this in mind, the following sections outline key considerations and approaches for transformational or longer-term agreements, without attempting an exhaustive treatment of each theme.

Transformational and longer-term agreements typically include:

- Economic and social bargains, e.g.:
 - Provision of public services in marginalised communities controlled or influenced by the group (e.g. El Salvador’s 2012 gang truce)
 - Education and vocational training, especially for lower-ranking members (e.g. in the case of the Latin Kings and the Ñetas in Ecuador)
 - Job creation/economic opportunities (e.g. in Belize)¹⁴²
- Legal bargains, e.g.:
 - Recognition or legalisation of groups as cultural or social entities in exchange for reduced criminal activity (e.g. the Latin Kings and Ñetas in Ecuador and Spain, or marital arts gangs in Timor-Leste)
 - Legal leniency or conditional amnesty agreements in exchange for demobilisation (e.g. conditional amnesties granted to some Nigerian “cults” in the 2009 Niger Delta Amnesty programme)
 - An end to extradition (e.g. the famous case of Colombia’s negotiations with Pablo Escobar and Los Extraditables in the early 1990s)

- Political and security governance shifts to replace a group's security and economic functions with state institutions (e.g. the introduction of community policing in Honduras)
- Full demobilisation and reintegration of group members into society – with different packages depending on their level – under state oversight (e.g. the Sundarbans pirates in Bangladesh).

These categories can of course overlap, and a single engagement process can contain a mix of objectives. In some cases, the most realistic long-term objective may not be full disarmament or reintegration, but the negotiation of more inclusive and accountable governance arrangements (as discussed earlier in the section on ‘Urban political settlements’, p.55). For CPAGs, transformational agreements may require something resembling a political settlement alongside economic alternatives. For CEAGs, sustained disruption of illicit economies combined with viable legal livelihoods is more critical.¹⁴³

In **Antigua**, in September 2024, Prime Minister Gaston Browne facilitated a truce between two rival gangs, the 2Drilly gang and the Grays Farm Killers. As part of the peace deal, Browne introduced several initiatives aimed at rehabilitating gang members and providing them with opportunities to transform their lives (education, professional training, employment or entrepreneurship) on the condition that violence ends.

In **Spain** in 2006, the Catalan government officially recognised the Cultural Organisation of Latin Kings and Queens of Catalonia as a legal cultural association. The following year, in 2007, it granted similar recognition to the Netas Sociocultural, Sports and Musical Association. This initia-

tive aimed to transform these groups from street gangs into community-based organisations, promoting social integration and reducing violence. Supported by academic researchers and civil society actors, the process included educational and socio-economic programmes for members. However, by the early 2010s, shifts in political leadership and policing strategies led to a decline in institutional support, causing the activities of these associations to diminish significantly.

a. Legal bargains and transitional justice

Legal bargains often feature in confidential talks with CAGs to create incentives, sequence steps, and reduce exposure for participants, but this strategy carries risk. If made public, legal bargains may be seen as granting impunity, especially where transparency is lacking, risking political backlash and undermining the credibility of the process. An inclusive approach that incorporates community voices and ensures broad-based support can be a way to strengthen the legitimacy of legal frameworks while promoting reconciliation.¹⁴⁴

Many CAGs, from Colombia to Haiti, seek to position themselves as “political” actors to gain status and legitimacy and improve their chances of benefiting from conditional amnesty or leniency provisions (e.g. sentence reductions, pardons, or alternative sentencing). This is especially likely where there are national precedents involving armed groups that were perceived as political. As with any such negotiations, balancing incentives with justice and accountability is important to prevent the abuse of legal loopholes and reduce the risk of recidivism.¹⁴⁵

Transitional justice can be applied to CAGs, but it requires careful adaptation to reflect their distinct characteristics. While its principles – including truth, justice, reparations, and institutional reform – are not traditionally designed for criminal

groups, they can help break cycles of violence and support reintegration in ways that prevent further harm.¹⁴⁶ Experience from political conflict settings shows that those responsible for the gravest crimes can face accountability while lower-ranking members are reintegrated through restorative approaches.

However, direct transplantation of transitional justice tools, without adaptation, risks failure, particularly since CAGs lack broad political legitimacy, and may put greater emphasis on illicit rents. Moreover, in contexts dominated by organised criminal violence such as Latin America, violence is often ongoing rather than post-conflict. Transitional justice measures, such as truth commissions and reparations, have been attempted without fully addressing the criminal-political nexus or ongoing illicit economies.¹⁴⁷

Useful ways to adapt transitional justice for CAGs include:

- Supporting the documentation of harm, public acknowledgment, and reparations, potentially funded by the seizure of criminal assets or other economic contributions from former members
- Recognising and addressing the political, social and economic dimensions of organised crime, not just its criminality
- Incorporating economic dimensions – such as access to legitimate livelihoods, community development projects, and infrastructure investment in affected areas – funded in part by redirected illicit assets¹⁴⁸
- Using hybrid accountability models that blend retributive justice (punishment and deterrence) with restorative justice (healing, reconciliation, and reintegration)¹⁴⁹
- Embedding victim-centred approaches, the reform of police and justice institutions, and safeguards to avoid state co-optation by criminal interests, selective justice, or the legitimisation of actors without genuine transformation.¹⁵⁰

In Ecuador in the 2010s, the legalisation of urban gangs, including the Sacred Tribe Atahualpa of Ecuador, Ñetas, and Masters of the Street, was a major outcome of successful negotiations between the gangs and then later with the state. Several of these groups were reclassified as “cultural associations”, which reduced violence but did not entirely eliminate their criminal activities or the illicit economies that remained important forms of subsistence in their communities.

b. Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, disengagement and desistance

Experiences from both peace agreement contexts and urban violence reduction suggest that approaches to CAGs can benefit from combining elements of DDR with insights from desistance theory.¹⁵¹ DDR, when applied in political conflict settings, typically operates at the group level, negotiating collective disarmament and offering reintegration incentives to prevent splintering and renewed conflict. This can bring leverage, clear sequencing, and guarantees.¹⁵² By contrast, approaches drawn from urban peace processes often work at the individual level, supporting disengagement (leaving the group) and desistance (ceasing criminal behaviour and pursuing personal transformation). These methods focus less on formal demobilisation and more on sustained change in personal identity, behaviour and social ties.

Desistance theory highlights how individuals often move away from crime gradually, influenced by age, life events and targeted interventions.¹⁵³ Programmes tend to emphasise personal agency, trust-based relationships, and long-term support, often relying on reformed individuals as violence interrupters, mediators, or outreach workers, in coordination with law enforcement or municipal authorities. Unlike traditional

DDR, these processes do not assume clear hierarchies or the ability of leaders to compel compliance, making them more adaptable to the fluid structures that are arguably more common in CAGs.¹⁵⁴

For CAG contexts, combining the structure and visibility of DDR with the flexibility and personalisation of desistance approaches can help address the different drivers of disengagement.¹⁵⁵ The collective dimension of DDR can offer security guarantees, incentives, and visibility, while desistance approaches provide the adaptability to respond to varied and unpredictable motives for leaving, whether linked to economic hardship, social grievances, victimisation, or belonging. Within this, tailoring approaches to women and children is critical, as they may face greater stigma and barriers to reintegration than adult men.¹⁵⁶

Evidence suggests that access to legal employment has the most immediate impact on reducing violence in the short term.¹⁵⁷ Over the longer term, deeper reductions in violent behaviour – including violence that shifts into private spaces such as gender-based domestic violence – are linked to more holistic support. This includes mentorship, education, and psychosocial or trauma counselling, often in combination. As recent DDR practice indicates, sustainable reintegration also depends on community engagement, ensuring that support benefits the wider community to reduce resentment and promote shared recovery.¹⁵⁸

Where smaller CAGs are connected to transnational networks, breaking those ties can be critical to lasting transformation. Ecuador's support for the Latin Kings' disengagement from cartel-linked activity, and the group's subsequent evolution into a community organisation, illustrates how a mix of structural incentives, personal transformation, and community grounding can work together to change trajectories.¹⁵⁹

In **Nicaragua**, in the Luis Fanor Hernández neighbourhood of the capital city Managua, there is a quasi-universal natural desistance process from gangs, whereby individuals inevitably leave due to their age and are generally assumed to become less violent as a result. Studies show that the behaviour of ex-members is highly dependent on the nature of individuals' post-gang occupations. Irregular economic activity, professional criminality, and political activism often give rise to violence. Whereas employment, whether formal or informal, tends to lead to ex-members adopting less violent behaviours.¹⁶⁰

In **Northern Ireland**, criminal or paramilitary groups persist almost three decades after the 1998 Good Friday agreement and despite Sinn Féin becoming a legitimate political party and gaining significant political influence. This persistence can be explained by three main features – legitimacy (continued community acceptance), utility (economic or social functions), and threat (capacity for violence)¹⁶¹ – which are consistent but have manifested differently over time. The continued existence of these groups is shown most visibly by so-called “punishment attacks”, gang-related drug dealing, and attacks on police officers. So-called ‘hidden harms’, and related economic costs in terms of distorting local economies and deterring wider investment, are much more difficult to quantify and describe.¹⁶²

c. State reform

A major challenge for the state in any dialogue with CAGs is recognising that it may be part of the problem. Much like political armed groups, CAGs often emerge and thrive in contexts marked by economic hardship, social exclusion, lack of opportunity, and systemic neglect.¹⁶³ Acknowledging the state's role

in the emergence and entrenchment of such groups, whether through repression, corruption, or abandonment, can be a critical step towards transformation. This also means recognising that the state itself may need to undergo structural reforms in parallel with any efforts to transform the group.¹⁶⁴

By recognising this complex and often fraught relationship, peacemakers can help design engagement strategies that go beyond temporary truces and lay the groundwork for longer-term change. This requires not only attention to the armed groups themselves, but also a commitment to reforming the state institutions and practices that helped produce the conditions for their rise. Peacemakers can play a vital role in helping state representatives understand how they are perceived and support efforts to rebuild trust through inclusive, transparent policy commitments that go beyond rhetoric.¹⁶⁵

Coordinated, cross-sectoral state engagement is essential for achieving effective reforms. This includes aligning law enforcement and military actors with governance reform, economic development, and social service provision. Fragmented or inconsistent approaches can erode progress, especially during political transitions. A durable strategy requires integration across institutions and political continuity to maintain credibility.¹⁶⁶

In 2016, **Colombian** authorities carried out a large-scale intervention in El Bronx, Bogotá’s most notorious open-air drug market, which was also a hub for human trafficking, stolen goods and organised crime. Instead of relying solely on militarised crackdowns, the intervention combined therapeutic policing with urban revitalisation efforts. The goal was not only to disrupt the illicit economies that thrived in the area but also to support vulnerable populations – including homeless individuals and children exploited by gangs – while regaining state control over the neighbourhood.

A key aspect of this innovative policing approach was its emphasis on social services and harm reduction rather than zero-tolerance enforcement. Authorities first focused on dismantling state-sponsored protection rackets that had allowed gangs to operate with impunity. This was followed by the provision of access to shelters, rehabilitation programmes, and employment opportunities for those affected by the illicit economy, rather than treating them solely as offenders.

In areas where CAGs exercise territorial control, one of the most sensitive and important issues for negotiators is how and when the state will return. This includes decisions about which services are prioritised, how the security presence is reintroduced, and how local populations are consulted. Coercive force is usually insufficient to establish state authority on its own, requiring backing from tangible benefits such as access to education, healthcare, security, and jobs. Such sustained investment can greatly increase the chance of the state rebuilding its legitimacy and restoring the social contract in these areas.¹⁶⁷

Security Sector Reform (SSR) plays a central role in this equation. In many affected contexts, policing institutions function less as impartial enforcers of the law and more as predatory or rival actors. Without credible oversight, accountability, and reform, the presence of security forces can deepen mistrust and risk reigniting violence. Where politically feasible, peacemakers may need to support parallel discussions on policing reform as part of a broader peace strategy.¹⁶⁸

Ecuador is to date one of the few examples of an attempt at a holistic approach to state transformation, promoting economic and social inclusion policies as well as innova-

tions in criminal justice and police reform. Many people in Ecuador did not realise negotiations were happening until much later. Public security was viewed holistically, with improvements in education, health, and welfare being equally important as community policing and crime prevention. President Correa’s transformational politics and an economic boom (from oil revenues) enabled this holistic approach to be supported by generous state funding over several years. Rather than trying to eliminate the gangs, the process sought to change them as part of a broader transformation towards a more inclusionary state and society, a process that has been described as ‘collective desistance’.¹⁶⁹

In **New York City, USA**, Latin Kings leader Antonio Fernandez (known as ‘King Tone’) initiated the transformation of one of the most feared street gangs in the USA into a social movement acting on behalf of the dispossessed. Increasingly concerned with the media and police portrayal of the Latin Kings as criminals, Fernandez decided to demonstrate his willingness to transform the organisation. He was accompanied by a church which provided a safe space to organise workshops with gang members on conflict resolution, gender equality, domestic violence and LGBTQ issues. As part of the transformation process, the Latin Kings renounced violence and the underground economy, and mandated school attendance for its members. However, the FBI grew concerned that the transformation was becoming a political revolution, based on contact between the Latin Kings and leaders of the Black Panthers and Liberation Theology who came to speak at workshops.¹⁷⁰ Fernandez now leads a team of ex-felons called Credible Messengers, part of a restorative justice programme in Washington, DC.

d. Transforming illicit economies

Addressing illicit economies is often one of the most sensitive and consequential elements of longer-term agreements with CAGs. If left unaddressed, new groups will likely emerge to replace those that demobilise. Conversely, sudden disruption without viable alternatives can destabilise communities, undermine trust, and drive members back into illicit activity.¹⁷¹

While third-party peacemakers may have limited influence over economic questions, they can still play a vital role in bringing these challenges into the conversation, either within the core dialogue process or in parallel tracks involving the private sector and civil society actors. Involving groups, the state, communities, and private sector stakeholders in frank discussions on illicit economies can help keep all actors engaged, broaden participation, and buy time even when major structural reforms are politically out of reach.¹⁷²

The kind of economic transformation that is possible will depend on the nature of the armed group itself: CPAGs may be more open to negotiating changes to illicit economic activities if these are paired with political recognition or governance reforms, whereas CEAGs often require approaches that focus directly on replacing or restructuring their economic base. Understanding these differences can help peacemakers anticipate which forms of economic transformation are most feasible and what kinds of accompanying measures – political, social or security-related – will be required.

Building on these distinctions, practitioners may need to account for several recurring factors when engaging with illicit economies in peace processes:

- **Political protection and corruption:** Many illicit economies thrive not only because of economic incentives, but also due to state corruption, collusion, and political protection.

If these structures remain intact, illicit activities may persist despite demobilisation efforts.

- **Community-based economic alternatives:** Localised economic transformation – such as cooperatives, social enterprises, and grassroots initiatives – can provide viable alternatives, particularly for rank-and-file members, fostering social cohesion and preventing recidivism.
- **Financial networks and money laundering:** Illicit economies rely on money laundering, informal banking systems, and illicit financial flows. Peacemakers may not regulate finance directly, but understanding these dynamics can help determine how to raise them in talks and what expertise to involve.
- **Hybrid economic models:** Some groups transition into semi-legitimate businesses that retain some illicit elements. While ethically complex, such transitions may be an intermediate step. This can present peacemakers and state representatives with a challenge around balancing pragmatism with legal and moral concerns.
- **Managing state crackdowns:** If governments launch aggressive crackdowns on illicit economies without offering viable alternatives, they may undermine negotiated agreements and push demobilised actors back into criminality.¹⁷³

These factors often overlap and addressing them typically requires a blend of state-level reforms, transitional justice tools, and private sector engagement. Innovative instruments may be needed to redirect illicit capital into legal frameworks¹⁷⁴ such as profit repatriation, free trade zones, tax relief, or tax amnesties to incentivise transitions to the formal economy.¹⁷⁵ While such tools might serve as pragmatic entry points for negotiated economic transformation, they risk alienating the wider public, who may perceive them as unjust. Transparent design, inclusive consultation, and outcomes that benefit communities as well as CAGs can help anchor their legitimacy.

Where agreements envisage redirecting illicit capital into legal channels, practitioners have found it useful to anchor this in simple but credible compliance mechanisms. These can include temporary licences or authorisations with clear end dates, escrow or trust arrangements managed by independent fiduciaries, basic beneficial-ownership disclosure, and community benefit vehicles that visibly channel part of the profits into public goods or victim-centred reparations.¹⁷⁶ Public legitimacy tends to improve when eligibility criteria are transparent, private sector partners are involved in designing viable pathways to licit income, and safeguards against elite capture are in place – independent oversight boards, conflict-of-interest rules, or periodic external review, for example.¹⁷⁷

The private sector remains underused in many peace processes, yet it can play a critical role in expanding legitimate opportunities. Employment, training, and entrepreneurial support – including inside prison systems – reduce incentives for re-engagement in crime. Third parties can facilitate trust-building between business actors, government, and CAGs, challenging stigma against former members.¹⁷⁸ At the same time, strengthening informal economies at the local level can help manage pressures in rapidly growing cities and limit the influence of powerful transnational cartels. Where such linkages are weak, engagement can focus on preventing CAGs from professionalising their control over criminal markets or forging alliances with transnational criminal actors.¹⁷⁹

The private sector remains underused in many peace processes, yet it can play a critical role in expanding legitimate opportunities.

In long-term agreements, monitoring whether economic commitments are being met can be as important as tracking security clauses. Embedding “ratchets and resets” – incremental benefits for verified progress, and proportionate responses to breaches – can help manage risk without derailing the process.¹⁸⁰

In **Colombia's** southwestern department of Nariño, artisanal mining featured in the negotiations between the Colombian government and the the Comuneros del Sur, an armed faction that broke from the ELN in early 2024. An agreement was reportedly reached whereby the group committed to handing over lethal weapons in exchange for the government establishing a legal mining district in the area, enabling artisanal miners to join the legal supply chain. The Comuneros are said to have strong ties to the mining sector, and the group may believe that operating legally offers greater earnings than continuing illegally.¹⁸¹

6 Conclusion

This publication has offered a practice-oriented introduction to the challenges and possibilities of engaging criminal armed groups. Drawing on practitioner experience from diverse contexts, it has aimed not to present definitive solutions but to map a wide range of entry points and frameworks that may support more effective peacemaking. Many of the thematic areas touched upon – such as reintegration, transitional justice, transforming illicit economies, urban political settlements, and institutional reform – require further, specialised guidance. These are long-term, complex processes that cannot be resolved through short-term initiatives alone.

Yet the urgency of this work is growing. In many regions, traditional peacemaking approaches are stalling, not because they lack technical skill, but because they often shy away from the political and economic realities that drive and sustain conflict. Engagement with CAGs forces peacemakers to confront these realities head-on, offering insights that are just as applicable to state-based or politically motivated conflicts. By broadening the conceptual and practical toolkit of mediation,

approaches developed in the context of criminal armed groups have the potential to reinvigorate peacemaking globally, not by abandoning normative frameworks, but by engaging more honestly with the forces shaping violence and governance today.

To move forward, however, a shift is needed in how the international community supports peace. Too often, work with CAGs is underfunded or excluded altogether from peacebuilding portfolios. Donor governments, multilateral institutions, and INGOs must begin to move past simplistic labels such as “criminal”, “political”, or “terrorist” and instead support context-driven, risk-aware engagement strategies. That means creating space for experimentation, investing in long-term transformation processes, and backing the local actors and third-party facilitators who are already doing this work, often with little recognition or resourcing.

We hope this publication serves as a starting point: a contribution to ongoing discussions, and an invitation to explore further. For peacemakers willing to wrestle with complexity, and for funders prepared to invest in more grounded, adaptive approaches, there is real potential to open up new pathways to peace, even in places long deemed unreachable.

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