

First Principles: The Need for Greater Consensus on the Fundamentals of Polarisation

The conversation about the dangers of polarisation is global. But until there's more consensus on its minimum defining traits, the much-needed solutions to the polarisation of societies and political systems will remain ad hoc and underdeveloped.

By [Mark Freeman](#), IFIT Founder and Executive Director

In 1939, Winston Churchill is reported to have described Russia's political intentions as "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma". In 2023, the same phrase could be ascribed to our collective understanding of the term "polarisation".

The topic is admittedly complex. But the time has come to wrestle more conclusively with the many lingering ambiguities of the subject and move towards a more shared baseline understanding of polarisation. The benefits could prove substantial, allowing for improved capacities to diagnose polarisation's place-based causes and symptoms, develop stronger early warning and response strategies, measure the impact of interventions more precisely, and avoid affronting potential allies who rightly reject certain usages of the term.

Intended as a practical step in that direction, this discussion paper has three main parts. The first focuses at the level of ideas, examining persistent contradictions in our understandings of polarisation and offering a "hallmarks" definition that might facilitate a future baseline. The second part draws on a global survey of de-polarisation practice, and on IFIT's own field work, to formulate an indicative solutions spectrum that broadly corresponds to the hallmarks definition. The third part briefly explores the impact of the absence of any organised global network of scholars and practitioners working collaboratively on polarisation, and reflects on what it might mean for a "field" of polarisation to emerge.

While the problem of polarisation is nowhere on par with civil war, authoritarianism, genocide and other such evils, it can – if ignored – become their harbinger and accelerant. One might call it a hyper-problem: the type of problem that makes the solution to every other problem harder. Inconspicuously and incrementally, polarisation can come to threaten everything – from the ideal of a tolerant society, to the practice of ordinary politics and law-making, to the prospects for peaceful coexistence and basic liberties.

PART ONE: CONCEPTUALISING POLARISATION

The first part of this paper introduces a series of ambiguities in how polarisation is understood, discusses ways to address the ambiguities, and proposes a definition of polarisation that is focused on its basic traits.

1. Definitional ambiguities

In the research, interviews and convenings conducted in the first eighteen months of IFIT's and the Ford Foundation's [Global Initiative on Polarisation](#), six conceptual disagreements and ambiguities surfaced repeatedly. In describing these, the aim is to highlight some of the definitional enigmas that need to be overcome if polarisation is going to be tackled, prevented and measured more effectively.

The ambiguities are surprisingly simple but easily overlooked, largely as a result of the profusion of qualifying adjectives routinely attached to the word polarisation (e.g., affective, ideological, symmetric, asymmetric, political, social, ethnic, religious, racial, elite, mass, pernicious, toxic, benign and so on).

Permanent vs. ephemeral

Is polarisation a phenomenon that appears and disappears, implying that societies and political systems can cease to be polarised? Or is it one that is permanent, implying that societies and political systems are always polarised to some degree? One would think a question this rudimentary was resolved long ago, yet it was not. For one large segment of experts, polarisation is a state that can be entered and exited. For another – including authors of substantial comparative work on indexing and [measuring polarisation](#) – it is a phenomenon that can intensify or de-intensify but, like conflict, never be escaped.

Negative vs. positive

A second ambiguity, which is partly related to the first, turns on whether polarisation is always negative for societies and political systems or could sometimes be “benign”. Advocates of the first view argue that polarisation is inherently a state to be prevented or combatted. By contrast, there are many who deem polarisation tolerable or neutral, and only a cause for concern once it passes a certain threshold and becomes “pernicious”, “severe” or “toxic”. Another line of thinking is that polarisation is net positive, as reflected in Saul Alinsky's oft-cited advice to progressives that [“in order to organize, you must first polarize”](#). The idea is that for noble causes that require large-scale mobilisation of allies, it is strategic to foment polarisation. Less clear is whether advocates of Alinsky's maxim endorse the same tactic (and consequences) when they consider the cause illegitimate.

Bipolar vs. multipolar

Another striking ambiguity in debates over the polarisation of societies and political systems centres on something equally elementary: whether polarisation is always bipolar or could be multipolar. An exclusively bipolar framing – which is often implied but not explicit – holds that polarisation only ever occurs between two poles or axes, as the term’s scientific origin suggests. By contrast, a multipolar framing – a view more associated with fragile states and “ethnic” forms of polarisation – posits that polarisation can occur across several axes. That such a foundational point is not already the subject of explicit and widespread expert consensus is surprising.

Horizontal vs. vertical

A fourth ambiguity of note concerns the direction of polarisation and, by corollary, the position and comparative strength of the “poles”. For most academics and practitioners, polarisation appears to denote a dynamic that is fundamentally horizontal and centrifugal, involving a growing breach between poles of comparable size or force. Yet, polarisation is also sometimes used to describe vertical and asymmetric dynamics in which a powerful side (e.g., a majority social group or an authoritarian central government) is actively hostile towards and able to dominate a comparatively smaller and less hostile side.

Rational vs. emotional

A fifth area of ambiguity in literature and practice turns on whether polarisation is a state in which “affect” (i.e., feeling) overpowers or significantly weakens individual and group openness to persuasion about alternative narratives and contradictory facts. For some, affect is intrinsic to the concept (i.e., polarised people are more feelings-dominated people). For others, polarisation is a label that can also be used to describe inter-group disputes that are rancorous yet predominantly ideas-based. Such disputes are what peacebuilders would term “healthy” forms of conflict.

Large vs. small

A sixth ambiguity about polarisation concerns the minimum scale at which the term is suitable for naming problems in societies and political systems. Mostly, the term is ascribed to divisions that have attained a substantial social and political scale and become a major public concern. Yet, there are some who use polarisation to describe niche disputes between localised groups or causes, even when they do not have macro-level drivers or effects. Some of this ambiguity may be due to the casual way in which the verb “polarise” is equated to the noun “polarisation”, such that polarising statements or actions are assumed to reflect the existence of a state of polarisation, even if they are only isolated clashes.

Six prominent ambiguities in how polarisation is understood

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|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Permanent vs. ephemeral | 4. Horizontal vs. vertical |
| 2. Negative vs. positive | 5. Rational vs. emotional |
| 3. Bipolar vs. multipolar | 6. Large vs. small |

2. Overcoming the ambiguities

If polarisation posed no risk, the ambiguities around its definition would be of no concern. We could calmly debate or ignore them. Yet, polarisation is a progressively rising concern for a great many groups across highly diverse societies and political systems. The amount being written globally about polarisation is simply too great, and swelling too fast, to contend otherwise.

Yet, to become more effective in diagnosing, preventing, combatting and measuring polarisation, there is a profound need for greater precision in how we understand and use the term. In particular, there needs to be both a purposeful effort to gradually achieve greater consensus about the minimal traits of polarisation and a critical reflection on the vast span of qualifying adjectives in circulation, which complicate rather than facilitate definitional clarity.

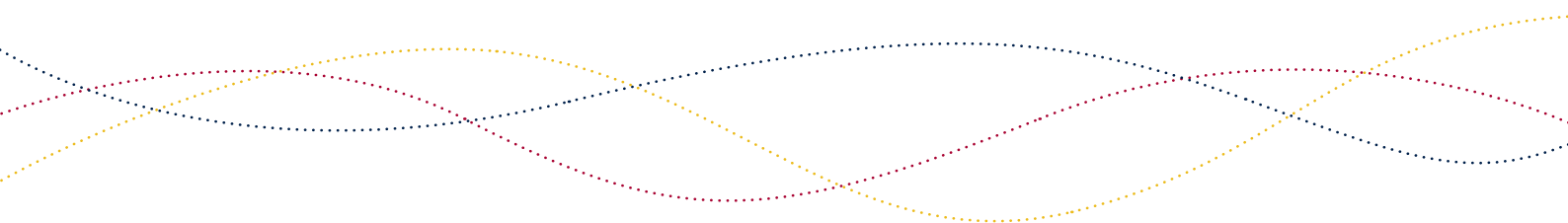
As a thought experiment, consider the general lack of blurriness of an analogous term like “sectarianism”. Unlike with polarisation, there is no ambiguity about whether sectarianism is negative or positive for societies and political systems; it is a clear negative (or toxin) under every definition. It is likewise clear from the root word “sectarian” that sectarianism reflects the dominance of emotion over reason (“narrow-minded adherence”: Oxford). A minimum scale is also implicit, based on the root word “sect”, which is a group unit size that denotes critical mass.

What this shows is that sectarianism is a concept that has reached a maturity of conceptualisation and definition. With sectarianism, qualifying adjectives like “toxic” and “affective” are superfluous. When we use the term, there is a baseline understanding that is clear to one and all. Any qualifying adjectives we might add (“political, ethnic or religious”: Oxford) only serve to bring additional clarity or precision to the baseline term, rather than reinforce an underlying ambiguity or introduce new ones.

With polarisation, by contrast, we are still at an early stage of conceptual development. We are allowing it to be treated as all things: positive and negative; rational and emotional; horizontal and vertical; micro and macro; and so on.

Such expansive ambiguities, if allowed to persist, are not beneficial nuances. In aggregate, they are sources of deeper misunderstanding in which, for example, polarisation can be equated to everything from a fight against oppression, to a rivalry between family clans or competing companies, to an intense policy dispute between political parties in a pluralist democracy.

Arguably, none of these examples should be characterised as polarisation. Yet, the span of ambiguities we have allowed to coexist, and then reinforced through a myriad of qualifying adjectives, makes such questionable comparisons permissible.



3. Towards a shared baseline

Reaching absolute consensus on the definition of polarisation won't happen. The aim of this paper is simpler: to prompt a structured debate among academics and practitioners that, over time, can help bring about a more shared baseline understanding of polarisation, akin to the clarity of a term like sectarianism. With this understanding will come greater local and global capacity for early warning, strategic cooperation, effective response, and impact measurement.

To that end, this paper uses the [hallmarks method](#) to arrive at a proposed definition of polarisation. This technique is sometimes used in the natural sciences, as it helps to organise unusually complex ideas and incorporate everyday usages and connotations of the term that is being classified.

Before applying the method, three points bear mention. First, this paper's definition of polarisation purposely factors in the multiple intellectual origins of the term, which date back at least to ancient Greece (the concept of [stasis](#) is particularly relevant). Sociological and political conceptions of polarisation since the mid-twentieth century show strong echoes of this ancient theory and have been informed over time by many additional fields of knowledge, including social psychology and behavioural economics. By contrast, polarisation's meaning in [physics](#), which focuses on vibrations of the electric vector of light waves, has (interestingly) been less influential.

A second point concerns the etymology of the term polarisation, which comprises at least two key notions: "poles" (and thus distance) and "polarised" (and thus affect). The concept of *poles* is predominantly understood and expressed in bipolar terms when it comes to societies and political systems (i.e., it connotes two poles that combine to form a polarity). By definition, poles imply a comparative distance as opposed to a comparative proximity. As for the verb *polarised*, it normally denotes intensity. One would never, for example, use the word to describe a neutral or indifferent state of mind or spirit (i.e., a polarised electorate is not a tranquil electorate). Finally, when the words are combined, a dynamic of divergence is logically implied. The polarised exist within poles, such that aggravating stimuli will tend to increase, not decrease, the distance between the poles.

A third point concerns the salience of synonyms and the inferences that can be drawn from them. For instance, when describing the polarisation of different societies and political systems, terms like conflict, division, tribalism, sectarianism, extremism and radicalisation are among the most commonly used substitutes or analogies. These are neither neutral nor positive words; instead, they denote negative phenomena. By contrast, terms like oppression, aggression or victimisation – which likewise denote negative phenomena but which correlate with more vertical and asymmetrical dynamics – are rarely used as synonyms for polarisation. Likewise, terms such as competition, disagreement and rivalry – which involve more horizontal and symmetric dynamics but convey less gravity or danger – are seldom equated to polarisation. These wording choices are revelatory of how polarisation is widely understood.

4. A proposed definition

At the risk of provoking controversy, but with the aim of fostering structured debate, this paper offers the following definition of polarisation:

Polarisation: a prominent division or conflict that forms between major groups in a society or political system and that is marked by the clustering and radicalisation of views and beliefs at two distant and antagonistic poles.

This proposed definition is based on eight hallmarks of polarisation, which should be read as an interconnected whole, in which the alteration of one hallmark could potentially result in the alteration of others.

Distance

This hallmark flows from the root concept of poles and is reflected in widespread usage. By their nature, poles exist at a substantial distance from one another, whether that distance is physical, ideological or emotional. Poles are characterised by the absence of proximity.

Binary

Unlike radicalisation, extremism, sectarianism or tribalism, polarisation is typically understood to connote a binary relationship between two poles or extremes. When conflicts involve more sides – a not uncommon reality – a different term is called for (e.g., division, rift, conflict), not a new qualifying adjective.

Critical mass

By their nature, poles exist in some kind of equilibrium with one another, like two ends of a magnet or an axis. *Ex ante*, this excludes the use of the term polarisation to describe a situation in which the middle ground is bigger than the poles. The label of polarisation only makes sense if there is, in fact or in perception, a critical mass at each pole and a smaller mass in between.

Centrifugal

This hallmark is widely used, and also flows logically from the intersection of the root words “polarised” and “poles”. Polarised people at different poles are primed to move away from, not towards, the opposing pole. Finding ways to achieve mutual recognition, avoid destructive feedback loops, and expand what negotiators call the [“zone of possible agreement”](#) are thus intrinsic challenges of polarisation.

Horizontal

Polarisation is fundamentally a relationship problem in which, structurally, the dynamic is more horizontal than vertical. As such, solutions are geared more to relationship repair than to self-defence against the kind of one-way onslaught which, for example, Nazism in Germany or apartheid in South Africa exemplify. Polarisation is not a story of David

and Goliath; it is a story of conflict between two comparably sized clusters (whether in power, numbers or influence).

Impermanent

A corollary of the centrifugal hallmark (which is a concept of *movement*) is that polarisation is a state that can be entered into and exited from. The argument is that, once the movement between the poles becomes centripetal over a long enough time, the label of polarisation is untenable. The same argument applies to the root word “poles”: once the middle grows larger than the extremities, it is no longer logical to speak of poles and thus of polarisation.

Threat

Not every fiery dispute is reducible to the label of polarisation. FC Barcelona vs. Real Madrid is not a story of polarisation; their fans are merely participants in a rivalry. Cars vs. pedestrians is not a story of polarisation; their advocates are simply on opposite sides of a policy dispute. Polarisation arises around bigger questions involving perceived threats to the stability of society or the political system. For anything less than that, there are better words to use.

Othering

This hallmark is the logical consequence of many of the other hallmarks and overlaps directly with phenomena such as tribalism and sectarianism and their emphasis on antagonism between tribes and sects, respectively. With polarisation, it is no different. In a state of polarisation, affect is the norm. Viewpoints radicalise, complexity declines, allegiance trumps ideas, and a combination of in-group romanticisation and out-group demonisation prevails.

Eight hallmarks of polarisation

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| 1. Distance | 5. Horizontal |
| 2. Binary | 6. Impermanent |
| 3. Critical mass | 7. Threat |
| 4. Centrifugal | 8. Othering |

As emphasised earlier, this definition is not meant to close discussion but rather to stimulate more structured deliberation about our collective understanding of what polarisation is and what it is not. That process will require time, as well as a reckoning with the mentioned surplus of qualifying adjectives.

Eventually, it should become possible to speak about polarisation in the same unambiguous way one speaks about sectarianism, for which the span and number of qualifying adjectives are narrow and few because the baseline definition is so settled. What should emerge, ultimately, is not a conceptual ceiling that eliminates nuance and flexibility in how polarisation is understood, but a conceptual floor that enables greater precision.

PART TWO: A POLARISATION SOLUTIONS SPECTRUM

The second part of this paper introduces a three-part solutions spectrum to the problem of polarisation in societies and political systems. It includes reflections that expand on some of the conceptual and practical questions raised in the preceding analysis. Over time, the initial version of this solutions spectrum can be refined and amplified in lock-step with the development of a greater consensus about the defining traits of polarisation itself.

1. Context assessment

Productive discussion of solutions to any social or political problem, but especially one as complex as polarisation, is more likely when there is a minimal consensus about the nature of the problem itself. To that end, a broadly shared understanding of the phenomenon is vital. However, one must always look at the facts on the ground to determine whether the label fits.

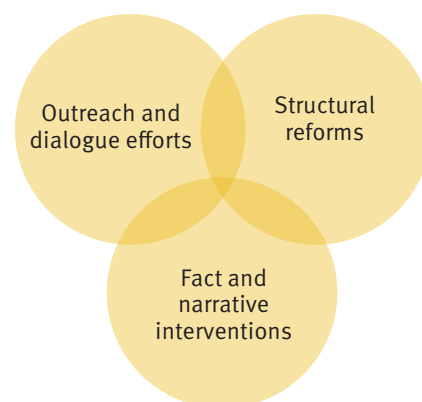
The exercise is anything but academic. A correct situational diagnosis is a precondition to any good strategy formation.

For example, a diagnosis that relies too much on “outside” rather than [“inside” actors, networks, knowledge and leadership](#) is almost certain to miss the mark. What may look like polarisation from the outside may be something very different when examined – and experienced – from the inside.

As always, however, the devil is in the details. Definitions, manuals, toolboxes and checklists are ultimately of no value if the situation analysis is markedly flawed. That includes precision about the main context-specific causes, actors, drivers, symptoms, and consequences of polarisation. Quality assessment – updated as often as necessary – is indispensable.

2. Modelling a solutions spectrum

Through the Global Initiative on Polarisation, an effort was made to map out, globally, all major organisations and projects that had the explicit intent of preventing or combatting polarisation. A clear picture emerged through the exercise. The vast majority of attempted strategies and solutions fell into three categories, as shown in the adjacent Venn diagram. Analogous distributions are found in some [recent literature](#) on polarisation.



Given the hallmarks of polarisation, the least surprising category in the Venn diagram is “outreach and dialogue efforts”. When there is the risk or reality of a conflict between major groups that is marked by the clustering of views and beliefs at antagonistic poles,

dialogue is an understandable tool for those seeking to prevent or reduce the polarisation. It is akin to the peacebuilder's reflex and, as such, most of the methods and strategies correlate to the fields of peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

The second category, “fact and narrative interventions”, also dovetails with the hallmarks of polarisation. When there is viewpoint radicalisation and othering at scale, it is logical that factual clarification and narrative change are understood as necessary parts of the solution. This is the truth and reconciliation reflex and, as such, many of the strategies are reminiscent of the field of transitional justice.

The third category is a much broader one that has to do with changes to the ecosystem in which polarisation thrives or recedes: “structural reforms”. The idea is that polarisation does not arise arbitrarily, but rather as a result of actions taken in environments that offer a mix of incentives and disincentives for certain kinds of behaviour. Some variables will tend to be rigid and slow to change (e.g., geography, demography, political culture, literacy levels) while others will be comparatively more malleable (e.g., institutions, laws and policies). Changes to both kinds of variables will produce shifts in behaviour among major actors – for example, pushing them towards greater or lesser cooperation and tolerance.

Some further observations are warranted. First, the choice of a Venn diagram is due to the fact that the three solution categories sometimes overlap. For example, a dialogue process may aim to change a narrative landscape that is impeding a needed structural reform. The categories can be mutually reinforcing.

Second, a cross-cutting assumption connects the three categories, namely, that successful interventions require coalition building, political analysis, strategy formation and other forms of purposeful organisation. While none of these is a solution category in its own right, each one can be an important methodological ingredient for success at scale across the three solution categories.

Third, the solutions spectrum presented above is neither comprehensive nor prescriptive (e.g., religion and sport may be used in targeted ways to de-polarise). Instead, it is meant as a way of describing the main concentrations of activity of the organisations and projects identified through the Global Initiative on Polarisation as working explicitly and intentionally on polarisation in different parts of the world.

A final point is that some actions related to polarisation may, for varied reasons, omit the label. For example, a massive societal campaign to oppose an authoritarian leader who has openly fomented a state of ethnic, political or religious polarisation may not be waged under the banner of combatting polarisation. That is because, typically, the uppermost goal and corresponding framing in such instances is not to stop polarisation but to stop a villain. While achieving that goal may prove helpful for reducing polarisation, it is a secondary effect rather than a primary intention.

3. Questions of intervention design

The importance of context assessment has been emphasised and a three-part solutions spectrum has been introduced. This section combines the two by looking at the influence of starting conditions on intervention design.

At least two rules of thumb deserve mention. First, *the more severe the polarisation*, the less scope there is for structural reforms (e.g., because building cross-group coalitions is harder), the less impact alternative narratives and impartial fact-finding yield (e.g., because the radicalisation and simplification of views and beliefs have already closed people's minds), and the more necessary an in-group focus for dialogue becomes (e.g., because there isn't a receptive out-group on the other side). Second, *the more authoritarian the political system*, the more need there is for cross-group coalitions (e.g., to advocate democratically enacted structural reforms) but the less political space there is either for out-group trust building (e.g., because of repression) or for independent reporting and unifying narratives (e.g., because of censorship and state control of the media)

Naturally, there are scores of other starting conditions to be assessed prior to developing any strategic response. Those include basic questions about who is polarised and why, and about any windows of opportunity to prevent or reduce polarisation (e.g., external shocks or the inception of peace talks or political transition). But once a strong and locally led diagnosis is ready, five types of combinable variables can usefully inform the intervention design:

Five intervention variables

1. In-group vs. out-group focus
2. Cooperative vs. confrontational approach
3. Short-term vs. long-term aims
4. Micro vs. meso vs. macro scale
5. Local vs. national vs. regional vs. global scope

Intervention design in the category of *outreach and dialogue efforts* could take these five variables into account in myriad ways. For example:

- an in-group intervention might consist of outreach to influential insiders to help de-radicalise in-group opinion, while an out-group intervention might involve confidential outreach to external moderates;
- a cooperative approach might encompass unilateral confidence-building measures, while a confrontational approach might involve public criticism of the spoilers of an ongoing negotiation;
- a short-term aim might be to agree on the design of a formal dialogue, while a long-term aim might be to reach a viable final agreement;
- a micro-scale intervention might focus on a limited ceasefire, while a meso or macro intervention might seek to use dialogue to resolve some of the root causes of the polarisation; and

- in terms of geographic scope, a diverse array of local, national, regional and global dialogue tracks might be needed to reduce polarisation in the aftermath of an inter-state armed conflict between countries with shared borders and pluri-national populations.

Regarding *fact and narrative interventions*:

- an in-group focus might involve efforts to change divisive narratives or disrupt social media echo chambers, while an out-group focus might be directed toward empirical clarification of disputed histories;
- a cooperative approach might include “alternate futures” exercises, while a confrontational approach might involve litigation to combat mis/disinformation;
- a short-term aim might be to train journalists and judges to detect unconscious biases, while a long-term aim might be to transform a harmful [narrative landscape](#);
- a micro intervention might take the form of a public poll on an issue of public controversy, while a meso or macro intervention might involve the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission to [“narrow the range of permissible lies”](#) or the production of a series of films to promote peaceful social norms; and
- in terms of geographic scope, a mix of local, national and transnational measures might be needed to work on deeply entrenched narratives and norms, for example on the Islamist and secularist divide in the Arab world.

As regards *structural reforms*:

- an in-group focus might involve internal democratisation of a single political party, while an out-group focus might imply rule changes to incentivise cross-partisanship;
- a confrontational approach might encompass arbitration to alter property laws that are driving polarisation, while a cooperative approach might see the creation of a citizens’ assembly to address a gridlocked policy issue;
- a short-term aim might include temporary fiscal supports for a mistreated and impoverished minority group, while a long-term aim might focus on policies to redress entrenched [horizontal inequalities](#) or alter “winner-take-all” political cultures;
- a micro intervention might focus on transforming discriminatory recruitment policies within one institution, while a meso or macro intervention might extend to large parts of the public service and private sector; and
- a local reform might see participatory democracy measures at the city level to encourage cross-group civic engagement, while national, regional or global reform efforts might address anything from the regulation of social media and artificial intelligence to problems of corruption or impunity as sources of grievance.

Naturally, these examples only scratch the surface of what might be included in a future comprehensive global toolbox of tested and adaptable strategies. For that to come about, however, the noted absence of a baseline consensus on the defining traits of polarisation must eventually be overcome.

Decades ago, the same limitation existed in the field of conflict resolution, when diagnostic tools were limited, early warning mechanisms rudimentary, response strategies ad hoc, and success measures esoteric. Today, by contrast, there is widespread agreement

among academics and practitioners about the fundamentals of conflict resolution, even if its exact parameters remain open to debate and evolution.

With polarisation, the continuing array of ambiguities about basic questions is producing a kind of chaos in practice and conceptualisation, with conversations frequently going in circles, leading away from rather than toward greater cooperation and global lessons learning. The losers are the societies and political systems in which polarisation entrenches itself, bringing its combination of radicalisation, conflict, othering and division.

PART THREE: IMAGINING A FIELD OF POLARISATION

This third part of the paper briefly explores what it might mean – for better and for worse – to see a “field” of polarisation emerge.

A first observation is that large universities around the world offer diplomas in dozens of fields of study – everything from anthropology to journalism, conflict, environmental science, music and urban planning. Polarisation does not (yet) figure in that list.

Second, fields are more than just areas of study. They also operate as “markets” of actors who alternately cooperate or compete for attention, resources and more.

Third, in mature fields in which a large [third sector](#) has arisen, more time is spent on operations and the controlled application of solutions, and comparatively less on debates over foundational issues. As time passes, the solutions that are proven to work best across jurisdictions often become part of the accepted and transferrable know-how of the field.

Yet, mature and crowded fields can be accompanied by bureaucratic reflexes in which formulaic solutions come to dominate; actors grow territorial; agendas become more donor-driven; intellectual inquiry is stifled; lessons grow stale through repetition; and silos form that reduce cross-sector learning, coordination and integration with other fields.

Neither polarisation nor de-polarisation is a field in any global sense, thus these reflexes are not yet widely present. Yet, this benefit has come at the price of the precision, order and structure in concepts, debates, strategies and alliance formation that accompany field formation and development. As such, there are pros and cons to be weighed, especially by actors with the capacity and interest to invest in deliberate global-level [field building](#).

In the case of polarisation, there is another issue to weigh: the dominance of a United States-specific conceptualisation. Undeniably, the biggest volume of academic work and organisational activity on the topic of polarisation is being produced in the US. This brings the advantage, for example, of a growing literature by some of the world’s top scholars and think tanks; but also the risk of an idiosyncratic, time-bound and place-specific case coming to be treated as the universal form of polarisation. More globally [comparative work](#) – and more globally structured networks, alliances and convenings – will thus be critical.

In the meantime, it would be a significant step forward if, as this paper advocates, the most active academics and practitioners worldwide reached an incremental baseline consensus about the (unqualified) phenomenon of polarisation. The intellectual and practical benefits would be considerable, independent of any future prospect of field formation.

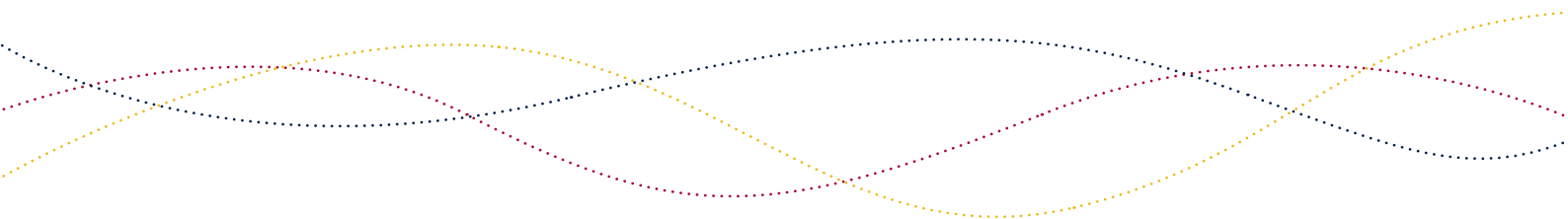
CONCLUSION

This discussion paper has identified a series of chronic ambiguities in our global understanding of polarisation. In response, it has proposed a definition of polarisation that, through future debate, is meant to advance the possibility of a more shared baseline among academics and practitioners alike. A sign of progress will be the gradual winding down of the excess of qualifying adjectives in circulation, which have created more confusion than clarity. Eventually, it should become possible to speak about polarisation with the same lucidity as about sectarianism.

Drawing on a global survey, and on IFIT's own work, this paper has also introduced an indicative solutions spectrum to polarisation that is broadly in line with the proposed definition. The spectrum highlights that responses to polarisation run a broad gamut and offers criteria for context-based intervention design.

Yet, solutions will only be of interest to those who consider polarisation to be a serious problem; one that no society or political system should wish upon itself. On that front, there remain a great many sceptics – people who, for example, see polarisation as a dilution or distraction from more important social concerns or individual malefactors; as a rhetorical lever or majoritarian pretext to force unacceptable political compromises or status quo arrangements on less powerful groups; as a term to dissuade activists from using more confrontational or divisive tactics; or as an issue whose true risks are simply overstated.

That scepticism is welcome and understandable. Yet, because the scepticism may be founded on highly divergent understandings of what polarisation is, this paper presents a call for going back a step to clarify first principles with much greater precision. Once that happens, we might discover what is evident in IFIT's global work across very diverse authoritarian, fragile and conflict-affected states: polarisation in all its forms is something best avoided. "Why didn't we act sooner?" is the refrain we should seek to elude next time.



Acknowledgements. The author wishes to thank the many colleagues, partners and experts who contributed valuable insights at the various convenings, meetings and workshops held by IFIT and the Ford Foundation in the preceding year under the auspices of the Global Initiative on Polarisation. These informed key ideas and arguments advanced in this paper. The author also expresses particular thanks to Hilary Pennington, Annamie Paul, Barney Afako, Dana Habib, Alejandra González, Jasmina Brankovic and Melanie Greenberg for their constructive feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

About IFIT. Founded in 2012, the [Institute for Integrated Transitions](#) (IFIT) is an independent, international, non-governmental organisation offering interdisciplinary analysis and technical advice to national actors involved in negotiations and transitions in fragile and conflict-affected societies. IFIT has supported negotiations and transitions in countries including Afghanistan, Colombia, El Salvador, Libya, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, The Gambia, Tunisia, Ukraine, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.

