

Mind the Gap: How Mediation Support Can Better Respond to the Needs of Local Societies



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INTRODUCTION

There has been growing evidence and consensus¹ that lasting peace as an outcome of mediated agreements is closely related to local and national ownership: peace processes and agreements emerging from and anchored in local society and politics are likely to have a better chance of success. At the same time, international mediation efforts can play a crucial role in helping societies move towards peace, especially when these societies are highly polarized and have experienced long-term conflict. How can the international community ensure that international mediators and mediation support actors support local and national efforts towards peace, without trampling on local ownership and needs?

This dilemma was at the heart of the discussion during the 8th meeting of the Mediation Support Network (MSN)², a small, global network of organizations that support mediation in peace negotiations.³ The discussions focused on the interplay between local needs and international mediation initiatives, drawing on the experience of MSN member organizations. While the discussions highlighted a number of challenges, this MSN Discussion Point focuses on the following three “gaps” and presents experiences and some tentative suggestions as to how to bridge them⁴:

1. A lack of case-specific understanding and action
2. A lack of generic information sharing and coordination
3. Insufficient local and international collaboration

For the purposes of our discussion, we define the terms “local” and “international” in terms of an actor’s proximity to the specific conflict context. We therefore consider local actors to be those domestic actors whose motivation for involvement in peacebuilding is rooted in the specific conflict context; international actors by contrast are here defined as actors based and governed from outside the conflict context. The boundary between the two types of actor may be blurred, for example if local NGOs employ international staff.

1. LACK OF CASE-SPECIFIC UNDERSTANDING: NEED FOR JOINT ANALYSIS

The purpose of joint analysis is to address a lack of case-specific understanding and improve any action taken. In order to propose an effective response to the needs of a peace process, one must understand both the nature of the conflict and the roles, resources, motivation, capacity and constraints of the different relevant actors involved. There seems to be a natural tendency on the part of mediation support organizations to focus too heavily on the cluster of actors (state, not-state, civil society) with whom they have worked, and possibly also to overestimate their own specific role in the entire process. To avoid this bias, MSN members found it useful to conduct a joint analysis and learn from the perspectives of other actors who are involved in the same specific case. Additionally, participatory analysis conducted by multiple mediation support organizations opened the door to exploring more coordinated and complementary efforts. Joint analysis may also help to clarify why and when international actors engage in a local context. Beyond the more obvious idealistic aspirations, motivations might include raising organizational visibility, responding to donor interests, or other financial or political considerations.

Exercises in joint analysis can bring up questions related to process design, and lead to reflections about how future approaches could be made more collaborative, building on the particular strengths and complementarity of different peacemaking and peacebuilding approaches. One of the first and most useful steps when engaging in joint analysis is to map the different goals of the various conflict parties involved (positions, interests, strategies, etc.) and the goal, role, technical ability and focus of the support actors. Often this step alone clarifies where there is a mismatch and where joint efforts may be possible. Subsequently, it can be useful to share different views and experiences on questions related to inclusivity⁵ and linkages between different processes and structures⁶. Those involved in joint analysis may discuss aspects related to organizational decisions about how to engage in conflict zones, and for how long. They may discuss the issue of accountability, clarifying to whom, for what and with what priority the mediation organizations involved are accountable in a given case (e.g. sending organizations, other donors, conflict parties, inviting organizations, and vulnerable groups in the conflict zone?). These are all issues that implicitly or explicitly shape the approaches and strategies undertaken by mediators and mediation support organizations.

1 See the section on “National Ownership” of the *UN Guidance for Effective Mediation*, Annex to the secretary-general’s report on *Strengthening the Role of Mediation in the Peaceful Settlement of Disputes, Conflict Prevention and Resolution (A/66/811, June 25, 2012): 14, in the following also referred to as “UN Guidance”*.

2 The meeting took place from June 24–26, 2013 in Berlin, hosted by CPM and Berghof Foundation.

3 See the list of members at the back of this document or at <http://www.mediationsupportnetwork.net>

4 Another important challenge is the interaction between national and local dynamics. See Odendaal Andries, “A Crucial Link: Local Peace Committees and National Peacebuilding”, United States Institute of Peace Press, 2013.

5 E.g., which actors need to be included in order to create legitimate and sustainable agreements? How can we phase the inclusion strategy based on the process? Which actors could block the peace process if they are left out of a peace process?

6 E.g., how might local peacebuilders be strengthened to best effect during and after peace negotiations?

Another possible outcome of a joint analysis may be that mediation is not the right tool, and that other peacebuilding approaches are needed. Other approaches, such as Peace Infrastructures (I4P), might be more suitable to address the specific needs of a peace process⁷.

One of the main challenges of case-specific joint analysis is that both local and international mediation support actors may not be able to share information, because they are bound by agreements made with conflict parties on the confidentiality of certain information. In such cases, more generic, strategic process design questions may be discussed and shared.

JOINT ANALYSIS OF THE COLOMBIA PEACE PROCESS

At the Berlin meeting we carried out a one-hour joint analysis of the Colombia peace process. Between us – four informed organizations and interested colleagues – we clustered the conflict issues, domestic and international actors and came up with hypotheses on where our network's combined effort could cater to Colombia's peacebuilding needs. The joint MSN analysis led to a more comprehensive understanding of the peace process and useful new ideas for the support of it, which we can now validate with our domestic contacts and counterparts.

2. LACK OF GENERIC INFORMATION SHARING: NEED FOR NETWORKS

The purpose of forming networks is to address a lack of generic information sharing and coordination. This may highlight more general gaps between what societies in conflict need and what international actors can offer. Organizations often work in the same field or on similar issues, but coordinate and share information only on an ad hoc basis. In order to improve and institutionalize coordination and communication between mediators and mediation support organizations, MSN was created to be a network of likeminded actors, a “community of practice”. Regular meetings serve to exchange information about planned and ongoing activities, plan future collaboration, or to discuss recent trends and emerging challenges in the field of peace mediation. The personal relationships that emerge from the networks further help to smoothen institutional collaboration.

7 UNDP, OSCE and others are looking at the concept of peace infrastructures and endorsing the linkage of domestic initiatives where possible and wished for, respecting the ownership of the actors on the ground. For a comprehensive discussion on peace infrastructures, see Unger B., S. Lundström, K. Planta, B. Austin (eds.), “Peace Infrastructures – Assessing Concept and Practice” Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series No.10, Berghof Foundation, 2013.

Several existing and emerging networks deal with questions related to mediation and mediation support⁸:

- The Group of Friends of Mediation is a constellation of states and regional actors with the aim of promoting the use of mediation. Formed in 2010 and co-chaired by Finland and Turkey, it is working to raise awareness of the need for peaceful settlement of disputes through mediation, and aims to improve cooperation and coordination amongst different actors^{9 10}.
- The MSN was established in part because of the recognition by some of the founding organizations that a lack of information sharing and coordination was undermining the effectiveness of their work. With the institutionalization of the MSN in 2008, mediation support organizations now participate in regular meetings where they exchange information and analysis through formal and informal mechanisms. As personal and institutional relationships have been built, there has been increased exchange regarding planned and ongoing activities and a number of joint activities and collaborations¹¹.
- The Academic Advisory Council on Mediation is a relatively new network, established by the United Nations Department of Political Affairs (UNDPA) in November 2012 to promote more systematic exchanges between academic institutions and practitioners. The idea is for the UN to tap into the best research and knowledge available, and for academic institutions to better understand the challenges and dilemmas with which practitioners are confronted¹².
- Other emerging networks and institutions in the field include the Religious Leaders Community for Mediation¹³ and expert level meetings of regional and sub-regional organisations¹⁴.
- The UNDP's Mediation Support Unit (MSU) was set up to enhance the UN's operational readiness to implement and support mediation efforts¹⁵. On a global level, the MSU potentially has a key role in acting as a hub for different mediation support actor networks.

8 See the UN secretary-general's report *Strengthening the Role of Mediation in the Peaceful Settlement of Disputes, Conflict Prevention and Resolution*, A/66/811, United Nations, 2012: 14–16.

9 Ibid, p. 15.

10 See UN Peacemaker, *Group of Friends of Mediation*.

11 See *Mediation Support Network website*.

12 *Strengthening the Role of Mediation in the Peaceful Settlement of Disputes, Conflict Prevention and Resolution*, op. cit., p. 16.

13 Ibid, p. 16.

14 Ibid, p. 14–15.

15 See UN Peacemaker, *Mediation Support Overview*.

NETWORKING TO AVOID DUPLICATIONS

In some of the earlier MSN meetings, members found they were working on similar mediation guidance notes, thereby duplicating efforts and wasting resources. By regularly exchanging information on guidance notes they were planning to write, these duplications could be avoided. Similarly, several MSN members realized they were supporting the same regional organization. By frequently talking together, they were able to improve impact and use their resources in a more effective manner.

3. INSUFFICIENT LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION: MAPPING MODELS OF COLLABORATIVE SET-UPS

A range of mediation support organizations are drawn into peace processes and often work on creating conditions for the resolution of a conflict, with or without there being an actual mediator. One of the main challenges is to coordinate all these different international and local actors in a way that matches the needs of the conflict parties and local society as a whole. Ideally, the collaboration between local and international mediation support actors is mutually beneficial. The international actor provides the local NGO with access to external expertise, funds, networks, and contacts, as well as help in the dissemination of ideas, practices, and lessons learned. Local NGOs on the other hand provide internationals with access to key local actors, analysis and knowledge regarding the root causes of conflicts, and information and perspectives on locally rooted conflict resolution mechanisms and contexts. However, the collaboration is often less than ideal. International mediation actors may find it difficult to gain access to the relevant local actors and understand the conflict dynamics from their perspective, while local actors may feel frustrated or used by international stakeholders. There is rarely sufficient discussion between international and local NGOs on how they envisage working together considering their different organizational cultures – let alone any discussion on shared visions on how the project or process should develop to produce mutually satisfying outcomes. Furthermore, there is often a marked difference in timeframes, with international actors coming in briefly, and local actors being involved in a case over a much longer period of time.

To avoid this, the nature of the collaboration between international and local actors needs to be examined and improved on. Among other things, the right model of engagement depends on the nature of the work and the process phase (pre-talks, negotiations, implementation etc.), as well as the purpose of the engagement. Different roles, resources and means may be needed depending on the conflict and other organizations that are in-

involved. At the Berlin meetings, MSN members discussed their experiences with the following models of collaboration, highlighting the respective advantages and challenges they faced. There is no single best approach to collaboration; instead, organizations should evaluate the purpose of the collaboration and conduct a context-specific assessment of each model of engagement.

- **Engaging through other actors:** One of the main reasons for engagement through other actors is to support existing structures in a ‘light foot’ style. There are at least two models:

1. *Seconding international staff to local NGOs:* Some MSN members opted to second international staff to local NGOs. This way of supporting local capacity leaves greater control over engagement on the ground in the hands of the local actor, and is less likely to compete with local NGOs. Secondment can be mutually beneficial: the secondee may provide capacity and expertise while at the same time profiting in terms of receiving training, technical expertise, cultural and contextual knowledge, and sometimes language abilities which feed back into the sending organization. The sending institution may gain prestige and recognition. In general, this model provides for far greater local ownership than when an international organization sets up an office in another country.

One challenge concerns how to justify the costs of secondment vis-a-vis the limited control one has over the project or process. Such partnerships must be carefully considered, as affiliation with a particular organization may impact the sending organization’s ability to provide mediation support if the receiving organization is seen as biased by one or all of the conflict parties (e.g. pro group x, y or z).

Experience indicates that it is important to have clearly defined terms of reference, ideally related to a specific project. The terms of reference are ideally co-drafted by the international and local actor, with the local actor having the final word.

GUIDED BY A LOCAL ACTOR

Based on an in-depth conflict analysis, the Mediation Support Project (MSP) decided that the best way for it to support the early peace efforts in Myanmar was to feed into existing peacemaking activities through local partners. As a result, the MSP seconded one of its mediation experts to the Nyein (Shalom) Foundation (NSF) from March to May 2012. The NSF remained in the driver’s seat. For NSF, the added value lay in having an expert bring in additional expertise based on their needs, for instance on public participation in peace processes. For the MSP, the added value of this approach included better knowledge of the conflict dynamics as well as better access to key actors and remote areas of the country.

2. *Working through international actors:* Some mediation support organizations have opted to engage with or through other international actors that are already active on the ground. By doing so, they choose to strengthen rather than compete with other actors. Identifying a suitable international partner and feeding into its efforts reduces competitive behavior and strengthens the cumulative impact. It can also open new networks for the organization and boost its reputation as a reliable partner. One of the key challenges for international mediation organizations is how to sell this approach to their donors, as it may reduce the visibility of a supporting organization and weaken its control over the process. Donors should reflect on the incentive structure they create, to enhance cooperative behavior of NGOs. At the same time, cooperation between mediation support actors that is only motivated by financial incentives has limitations, especially if the organizations differ considerably in their working approaches.

- **Setting up a field office:** One of the main reasons for setting up an office in conflict zones is to establish long-term in-depth contacts and manage large-scale projects. Some of the MSN members discussed their decisions to establish field offices within specific conflict zones, as well as the advantages and disadvantages these decisions precipitated.

On the one hand, opening a field office provides opportunities for closer relationships and more appropriate and custom-designed collaboration with local partners. Having a presence on the ground allows an organization to be able to engage quickly and closely with a process and signals a longer-term commitment to a conflict's resolution. It also allows an organization to gain visibility, to establish and nurture a network with local partners, and to react swiftly to changes in the conflict environment.

On the other hand, this model increases the financial and physical costs to the sponsoring organization, using up resources that might otherwise be invested in other programs. It may even contribute to a rise in local prices, especially if there is an influx of expats. The establishment of a new field office can often raise questions on the ground about an organization's motivations. Transparency regarding an organization's approach and motivation can help reduce this mistrust. The field office model also introduces a number of ethical challenges. Because international organizations are generally able to pay higher salaries than local NGOs or the government, they are often able to attract highly qualified personnel and sometimes contribute to the depletion of organizational capacity and "brain drain." This can be counterbalanced at least in part when there is a clear commitment and investment in building local capacity through training, sharing lessons learned, and improving knowledge management.

Another ethical challenge relates to the longer-term implications of establishing a field office. Assuming that such offices will not last indefinitely, international organizations have a responsibility for considering not only short-term, but medium- and long-term implications of their presence in a field office, as well as the sustainability of their work and their relationships with local partners and employees over time. When the international NGO closes its office, it faces a range of exit strategy challenges (e.g. What happens to local staff employed? To the continuity and long-term impact of implemented programs? How to sustain results? How to ensure local ownership of implemented programs?). Another challenge in setting up an office is that sometimes by choosing a specific location you send a clear political message. This is particularly challenging when dealing with inter-state conflicts and conflicts involving separatist/de facto entities with state attributes.

ALLOWING FOR RESPONSIVE PROGRAMMING

USIP established offices in Baghdad (Iraq) and Kabul (Afghanistan) to better administer large grant-making programs to local organizations. Considerations included the immediate demand for capacity building and financial and technical support for local NGOs. USIP programs have included the training of local staff to staff the office, management training for local partners, and the establishment and nurturing of local networks of mediators. The field offices have also enabled USIP to create and support more responsive programming in the field and to identify and respond to needs more effectively.

- **Joint project proposals & institution building:** One of the main reasons for choosing this approach is to share responsibility between locals and internationals for a targeted project from A to Z. Collaboration in the design and implementation of joint projects might begin with the writing of a project proposal, which is then jointly submitted to a donor. Clarification of roles and finances in the proposal may strengthen collaboration from the beginning and thereby help build up trust between the local and the international organization. Again both the local and international organizations must consider carefully with whom they develop such a proposal, and both sides should discuss and ensure that their institutional mandates are compatible. This is especially important given the high mutual dependency of the endeavor. Longer term collaboration is preferable over one-off collaboration, if expertise is to be developed¹⁶.

Donors tend to prefer to channel money through international as opposed to local NGOs, causing a power asymmetry that is hard to bridge. The challenge with directly funding money to local NGOs is often the regulative framework in which they exist. In

¹⁶ See Stirrat R.L., "Cultures of Consultancy", *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol 20 (1), 2000: 31-46.

some cases new institutions have been built as joint ventures which are clearly in domestic ownership, but which are closely connected to outside partners to provide easier access to state-of-the-art knowledge and expertise. Supporting Peace Resource Centers is an example of international NGOs seeking to support structures for peace that are not controlled only by the government, but that are mandated by the various key conflict actors¹⁷.

COLLABORATION BASED ON SHARED PRINCIPLES

The Peace Resource Center is a plan developed by the Insider Peacebuilders Platform for the conflict in the Deep South of Thailand. It is currently under construction within the framework of a Thai university located in the South, a Bangkok-based Thai foundation and with the conceptual support of the Berghof Foundation. Its three main functions are to provide a sound knowledge base on effective peace processes, to offer an inclusive space for exploring options for consensus building for all stakeholders and to monitor and accompany the peace process with respect to its effectiveness and durability. It is guided by the principles of multi-partiality, academic integrity and independence.

LESSONS LEARNED

An insight from the MSN Berlin meeting was that increasing the effectiveness of third party support to peace processes first needs a careful unpacking of the different types of gaps that have to be surmounted. The primary gap is that between the needs of a society in conflict, and the various forms of engagement in mediation support that local and international actors offer. Looking at the problem only as a challenge of competition between mediators, or between international and local mediation support actors, falls short of the complex ways in which different actors can work together. At the same time, sharing best practices among the MSN members showed that there are rich and diverse experiences of how different mediation support actors are seeking to improve coordination and collaboration in order to better match their responses to what is needed for a peace process to work. This does not mean that competition disappears, but that the destructive aspects of competition can be minimized. Three key lessons came out of the MSN Berlin meeting:

1. *Joint analysis:* A joint conflict analysis with organizations working on different tracks, with different actors, or in different sectors in the same conflict, can help establish personal contacts between the actors present. This makes it easier for all actors involved to better understand individual and institutional mandates, resources, motivations, capacities and constraints. It also constitutes a starting point

for better communication, exchange and collaboration. Even if the mediation support actors decide not to collaborate further, joint analysis can help to open up tunnel views and improve their contribution to the wider process, because it provides them with a better understanding of that wider process and of the actors that engage in it.

2. *Institutionalized information sharing and collaboration:* Setting up networks of organizations and actors involved in similar activities in different conflicts and contexts is an efficient and effective way of institutionalizing information sharing and collaboration, thereby enabling actors to address more long-term, general gaps in the field. Stepping up efforts to get local societies' needs heard in these international networks would be necessary.
3. *Collaborative set-ups:* Collaboration between international and local mediation support actors generally makes sense, as their respective comparative advantages can lead to greater cumulative impact. However, this only works if both sides' interests and mandates are clear and compatible and an agreed framework of how they work together can be established. There is no one blueprint on how best to do this, but various models that can serve as source of inspiration (e.g. field office, secondment, joint project development).

MSN members generally felt that listening more to local actors who are representative, legitimate spokespersons of their society would be highly desirable. However, this is limited by at least two factors:

1. the degree of polarization of the local society, and – at least in some contexts – of their respective representatives such as NGOs, as well as the degree of technical and financial capacity and political legitimacy of these representatives. How can one make sure that the voices of all the key actors in the respective society are being heard, rather than just those who know how to talk to the international community?
2. donors that tend to create incentives that foster NGOs to be competitive and seek visibility of their institution, or donors who create incentives for consortiums that may lead to NGOs working together even if their approaches are incompatible. How can international NGOs avoid blindly accepting donors' priorities and strategies as their own, how can they develop the capacity of local, broadly representative NGO actors, especially if they are committed to the long-term impact of their initiatives?

Bridging the gap between the needs of a peace process and the responses put forward by international and local mediation support actors is essential for achieving sustainable and relevant outcomes in conflict resolution. Creating greater awareness of the complexity of gaps and the diversity of experiences in how they have been dealt with is a crucial step towards improved impact.

¹⁷ See box.

MEDIATION SUPPORT NETWORK

PROFILE

The Mediation Support Network (MSN) is a small, global network of primarily non-governmental organizations that support mediation in peace negotiations.

MISSION

The mission of the MSN is to promote and improve mediation practice, processes, and standards to address political tensions and armed conflict.

Furthermore, the MSN connects different mediation support units and organizations with the intention of

- promoting exchange on planned and ongoing activities to enable synergies and cumulative impact;
- providing opportunities for collaboration, initiating, and encouraging joint activities;
- sharing analysis of trends and ways to address emerging challenges in the field of peace mediation.

ACTIVITIES

The MSN meets once or twice a year in different locations. The organization of the meetings rotates, with each meeting hosted by a network partner. Each meeting has a primary topical focus that is jointly decided by all network members.

MSN MEMBERS IN 2013

- African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) www.accord.org.za
- Berghof Foundation www.berghof-foundation.org
- Carter Center, Conflict Resolution Program www.cart-center.org
- Center for Peace Mediation (CPM) www.peacemediation.de
- Centre for Mediation in Africa, University of Pretoria (CMA) www.centreformediation.up.ac.za
- Conciliation Resources (CR) www.c-r.org
- Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) www.cmi.fi
- Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) www.folkebernadotteacademy.se

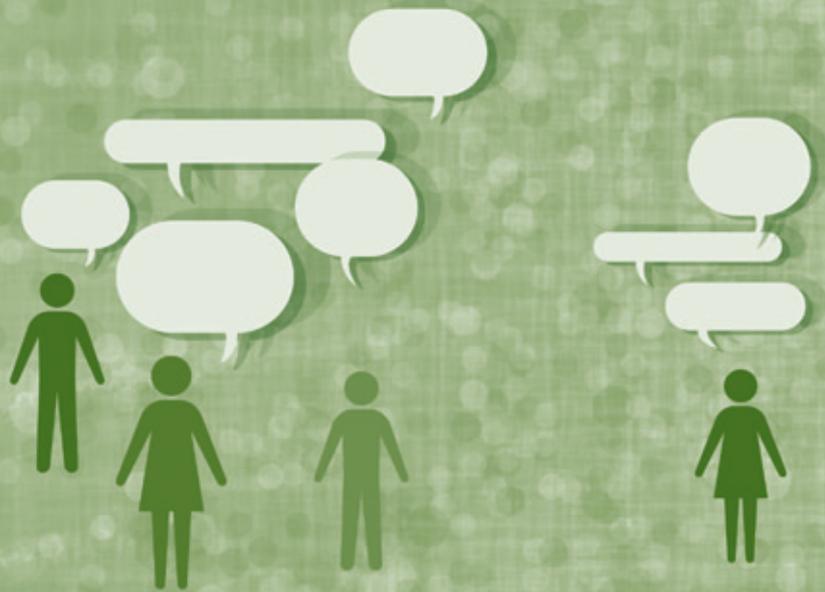
- Foundation for Tolerance International (FTI) <http://fti.org.kg>
- Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HDC) www.hdcentre.org
- Initiative on Quiet Diplomacy (IQD) www.iqdiplomacy.org
- Mediation Support Project (MSP), swisspeace and Center for Security Studies (CSS) ETH Zurich www.swisspeace.ch & www.css.ethz.ch
- Nairobi Peace Initiative (NPI) www.npi-africa.org
- Servicios Y Asesoría Para La Paz (SERAPAZ) www.serapaz.org.mx
- Southeast Asian Conflict Studies Network (SEACSN) www.seacsn.usm.my
- UN Mediation Support Unit (PMD/MSU) <http://peacemaker.un.org/mediation-support>
- US Institute of Peace (USIP) www.usip.org
- West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) <http://www.wanep.org>

PREVIOUS MSN DISCUSSION POINTS:

MSN Discussion Points no. 3 | Regional Intergovernmental Organizations in Mediation Efforts: Lessons from West Africa, 2013

MSN Discussion Points no. 2 | Translating Mediation Guidance into Practice: Commentary on the UN Guidance for Effective Mediation by the Mediation Support Network, 2013

MSN Discussion Points no. 1 | Supporting Peace Processes: Improving Collaboration Between Humanitarian, Development, Security and Mediation Actors, 2011



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