STILL TIME TO TALK
Adaptation and innovation in peace mediation

Innovation in peace mediation has come at critical junctures in world politics – from the founding of the United Nations, to the end of the Cold War, and 9/11 and its aftermath. We are at such a critical juncture now: a moment of profound geopolitical polarisation, surging armed conflict, deep technological change, mounting resistance to human rights and inclusion, and rising systemic threats like the climate emergency. With peacemaking under severe stress, mediation policy and practice need to adapt and innovate to keep pace.

10 PRIORITIES

Mediation strategy and process

1. Prioritise mediation and the pursuit of political solutions as primary objectives in strategies to tackle armed conflict. Negotiated political solutions are always hard and often contentious. Supporting peace processes is not an easy policy choice with war on the rise and amid polarised geopolitics. But the human costs and risks of escalation of failure to seek political solutions are unacceptable.
   • commit to the peaceful settlement of disputes as the priority in a conflict theatre.
   • be prepared to take calculated political risks to create and sustain appropriate space for dialogue.
   • states should guarantee greater and more reliable financing for mediation capacity and set a minimum percentage of GDP to bolster falling levels of funding on peace and conflict prevention.

2. Pursue mediation and political solutions below and beyond the state – the state should not be the only locus for conflict resolution. Internal and internationalised conflicts are fragmented and interwoven with transnational threats like the climate emergency and organised crime.
   • support climate-informed mediation at different levels – local, national and regional.
   • facilitate ‘intra-party’ dialogue among fragmented conflict parties and opposition movements.
   • prepare for negotiations around blockades, sanctions and extreme protectionism.

3. Redefine ‘success’ in mediation as achieving specific or localised gains that make people safer, reduce violence and support momentum towards sustainable peace. Fragmented conflict and geopolitical contestation mean that comprehensive peace agreements will be the exception. Mediators will need to pursue what it is possible to achieve, and to adjust expectations, training and preparation for more iterative processes.
   • embrace incremental or local mediation, ceasefire agreements and monitoring mechanisms.
   • support conflict parties to develop adaptive frameworks that enable progressive inclusion.
   • enhance complementarity among mediation initiatives to increase their cumulative impact.

Mediation partnerships and principles

4. Commit to partnerships between diverse mediators, to support peace processes effectively, balance skills and interests, avoid competition and maximise collective impact. Mediation is increasingly crowded, with more diverse mediators with different interests. Collaboration is difficult but essential, and there is no single partnership model.
   • use leadership to build conceptual clarity on how a peace process can move forward.
   • explore ways to include external actors in processes to resolve internationalised civil wars.
   • hybrid official / unofficial partnerships can blend legitimacy, capacities and relationships.
5. Build consensus among diverse mediators around core peacemaking values and principles – but acknowledge that there will often be different worldviews that need to be managed carefully. Divisions between the West, Russia and China, and a global power shift towards the South and East, mean mediators need greater self-awareness, and capacity to work across worldviews.
   • reaffirm consensus where possible – on sovereignty, consent and national ownership.
   • support initiatives to build trust among mediators, even when they have different goals.
   • states in particular should avoid actions that lead to accusations of double standards.

6. Defend impartiality as a mediation ‘fundamental’ – accepting that this may need to be balanced among diverse mediators in a peace process. Amidst rising geopolitical polarisation and the erosion of long-held norms, the impartiality needed for mediators to work with all conflict parties is essential but hard to safeguard.
   • continuous demonstration of the UN’s impartiality can help reinforce its convening power.
   • impartiality enables third parties to gain the trust of conflict parties, engage with them fairly, and help identify areas for agreement.
   • combinations of different mediators can balance perceptions of partiality.

Mediation approaches and tools

7. Support engagement with ‘hard-to-reach’ armed groups as a policy imperative, facilitating pathways and reducing barriers to mediation. Armed groups associated with terrorism or criminality control territory, impact livelihoods, and challenge states’ authority, but can be hard to reach for mediation. Pathways to enable engagement include:
   • greater flexibility in the proscription and de-listing of armed groups in sanctions regimes.
   • extending humanitarian ‘carve-outs’ from sanctions regimes to include mediation activities.
   • developing a legal framework to safeguard dialogue with groups identified as criminal.

8. Encourage and enable inclusion in mediation processes, emphasising its tactical and strategic value in generating momentum and achieving sustainable outcomes. Mediators should stress the strategic benefits of inclusion of non-military stakeholders. Digital innovation can help increase participation of women, young people, marginalised groups and grassroots movements.
   • draw on innovative practice to further meaningful participation of women and young people.
   • explore mechanisms to enable the participation of dissenting popular movements.
   • ensure that digital inclusion initiatives complement but do not replace in-person participation.

9. Upskill mediators to keep pace with rapidly changing conflict issues, and to adapt peace processes, talks and agreements to prevent and resolve them. Mediators need to develop understanding of evolving issues that affect why and how conflict parties fight.
   • new expertise is needed in mediation teams, and through expert and private partnerships – e.g. data scientists, climate and digital experts, epidemiologists and environmentalists.
   • skills in mediating the economic dimensions of conflicts need resourcing.
   • mediators will need to carefully assess how and when to discuss behaviours in digital spaces as part of a mediation process – digital drivers of violence are inherent to the new conflict landscape.

10. Do no harm to prospects for peace amid mediation adaptation and innovation. This is a minimum obligation and needs extra vigilance in a time of dramatic global change.
    • mediators must not put those with whom they engage or support in danger; worsen divisions, exacerbate or entrench power inequality or obstruct pathways to advance inclusion; or lose sight of the root causes driving conflicts.
    • mediators should engage on the basis of comparative advantage and coordinate with other mediators in the best interests of the peace process; promote and strengthen local partners and communities; be wary of the potential for unintended harm, and have the courage to reverse course as needed; and conduct themselves in ways that increase trust and hope in the benefits of dialogue, engagement and political paths to peace.

Recommendations are drawn from analysis presented in Accord 30: www.c-r.org/accord/still-time-to-talk

Photo: A local woman speaks to members of the Congolese army at a peace event, Beni, DRC, 9 July 2022. © Hugh Kinsella Cunningham

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