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STRENGTHENING INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION IN EU PEACE MEDIATION SUPPORT

The Role of Insider Mediators

Meeting Report

Civil Society Dialogue Network

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Strengthening inclusion and participation in EU peace mediation support: Role of insider mediators

5 December 2023, Madrid

The overall objective of this Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) Member State Meeting was to gather analysis and recommendations on the challenges connected to inclusion and meaningful participation in peace processes and EU peace mediation initiatives, looking specifically at the role of insider mediators.

The meeting brought together 33 participants, including 21 civil society experts, 4 officials from the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Commission (EC), and 8 diplomats from the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule. There was no attempt to reach a consensus during the meeting or through this report. The key points and recommendations which are included in this report may not be attributed to any participating individual or organisation, nor do they necessarily represent the views of all the meeting participants, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), or the EU institutions.

Civil Society Dialogue Network

The Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) is a mechanism for dialogue between civil society and EU policy-makers on issues related to peace and conflict. It is co-financed by the European Union (Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace). It is managed by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), a civil society network, in cooperation with the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The fourth phase of the CSDN will last from 2020 to 2023. For more information, please visit the EPLO website.



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THE ADDED VALUE PROVIDED BY INSIDER MEDIATORS

- Insider Mediators (IMs) do not only contribute to bringing conflict parties together swiftly. By engaging with people who have comparable language, cultural background and life experiences, **trust** among parties is built quicker and entry points for engagement are more easily identified.
- Parties are more willing to engage on issues that are brought up through a **bottom-up approach** rather than imposed from the top. Being directly affected by the conflict, stakeholders are easily transformed into mediators when the issues presented are relevant to their interests. This indicates that, in comparison to typical international mediators, IMs can bring greater levels of commitment.
- While outsider mediators are overall perceived as more impartial, IMs excel at introducing topics and solutions that closely mirror the contextual reality and realistic opportunities. Mediation and dialogue with conflict parties is part of most IMs' everyday life, giving them a **great understanding of the needs and concerns of the people affected by the conflict**, as well as the strategies and incentives of warring parties. These elements are frequently overlooked by track one processes, which focus more on wider political and state security issues.
 - Terrorist groups in the Sahel are often seen by international actors through the lens of religious extremism, failing to address the complexity of the problems at play. Since IMs have to constantly mediate with armed groups in their everyday life (e.g., in accessing food markets, school, land...), they have a far more granular understanding of the issues at hand, including aspects such as land management, livelihood opportunities, social service, justice, and decentralisation.
- IMs typically have a thorough understanding of the incentives to conflict, but agendas are frequently set by outsiders who sometimes fail to concentrate on the most important topics, increasing the risk of exacerbating existing conflict drivers. Their proximity to the conflict allows IMs to be particularly resourceful in **identifying and preventing triggers for conflict**.
 - In Somalia, IMs identified rainfall as a catalyst for pastoral communities to migrate, resulting in intercommunal conflict. Through training and awareness, mediation efforts made it possible for these communities to be hosted by other communities in a peaceful manner.
- IMs are also able to better identify when it is the **right time to engage** conflict parties, what level of intensity and pace to sustain, and when it would be more prudent to play for time.
- IMs' knowledge is particularly useful in **identifying opportunities** for shared small steps that can improve the situation of the people affected by the conflict and provide possible entry points for wider negotiations in the future.
 - During heavy fighting in Aleppo, IMs and international actors successfully mediated with conflict parties to get access to infrastructures for people with disabilities, orphanages, and elderly houses. These kinds of local issues are not tackled in wider ceasefire negotiations, while they actually have a massive impact on people's lives.
- IMs usually have **access to areas and communities** which outsider mediators do not have access to. Collaboration with IMs can therefore grant international actors a certain degree of access, credibility, and, at times, safety.
- IMs play a crucial role in the implementation of agreements in post-conflict scenarios because of their involvement in the conflict and the experience they have gained during mediation processes.
 - In Colombia, mediators are playing a crucial role in transitional justice efforts resulting from the implementation of the agreements. Positive examples include the creation of the Truth Commission, the establishment of a sub-commission on gender, and work with trade unions and peasants' representatives, which inter alia allowed to address issues relating to gender and youth.
- Given their particularly rich insights on conflicts, IMs' perspective and experience could be particularly meaningful and serve as a **reality check** during mediation initiatives conducted by international mediators.

CHALLENGES IN SUPPORTING IMs

- IMs have developed toolboxes tailored to the contexts they are working in. **Capacity building** initiatives provided by international actors can be extremely useful, especially on issues such as climate change and gender issues. However, it is very important that these are designed with the objective of complementing existing knowledge and functioning tools developed by locals, and are tailored towards the specific conflict needs. A ‘train the trainers’ approach can be particularly impactful.
- IMs often work under different hats and have **multiple identities**. They may be implicated in the conflict, while also working with an international NGO or multilateral organisation. They might be viewed differently by a community depending on the identity they represent at that particular time, which might have implications on the developments of the mediation processes, as well as on the credibility and reputation of the individual IMs.
- International actors and donors often advocate for swift developments and riskier negotiations. However, unlike IMs, they are not directly involved in the conflict, which gives them the option to leave and not deal with repercussions in case things go wrong. This raises significant concerns, particularly regarding **confidentiality**. When IMs align themselves with formal institutions and processes, there is a potential risk of compromising their credibility. In order to preserve the credibility and reputation of IMs, in some contexts it is therefore important not to explicitly associate individual IMs with the work of outsiders.
 - Following the peace agreements, a large number of community leaders in Colombia began working for local governmental authorities, attracted by greater physical and financial security. In this new role, they lost credibility and therefore ability to effectively represent their community at the negotiating table. As a result, years of gradual efforts to foster confidence and trust at the local level were lost.
- Due to the nature of their work and their delicate role in balancing conflict parties, IMs may face significant **personal safety** concerns. For example, IMs can be harassed or spied on by opposing parties. The lack of protection mechanisms or security provision for IMs may compromise their full participation in mediation efforts and have a negative impact on their personal lives.
 - In Nicaragua, where there were no meaningful protection mechanisms for IMs, many individuals from the opposition involved in negotiation processes with the ruling party were imprisoned, disappeared or forced into exile.
 - In Syria, the presence of international actors such as the EU and major international humanitarian organisations provided a minimal buffer for local representatives to negotiate local agreements on humanitarian issues.

CHALLENGES IN MEANINGFUL INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION

- Agreements by themselves do not resolve conflicts. It is critical that relevant issues are discussed and conflict drivers addressed. A crucial importance must be given to the **quality and sustainability** of an agreement. The likelihood that an agreement will result in positive outcomes increases with the number of interests that are considered and brought to the table. In this context, IMs are crucial in identifying what interests and needs to address.
- Participation of IMs most active at the very local level is undermined by a series of **logistical issues**. Many lack sufficient resources, the proper documentation to travel, or they cannot afford to leave their daily life and business to participate in dialogues (e.g., due to childcare). In addition, discussions are rarely held in local languages, which prevents grassroots mediators from participating.

- Protection and security are essential to ensure nobody is afraid of repercussions on their safety or reputation by engaging in mediation processes. The lack of **safe spaces** thus plays a significant role in impeding meaningful participation by IMs.
- The way a mediation exercise is designed has a strong impact on the outcome of the discussions. A particular attention should be put on ensuring the design does not replicate or even accentuate existing conflict drivers.
- In certain contexts, **power inequalities** are so strong that an 'impartial' position may inadvertently favour the most powerful. Process design should ensure this bias is addressed.
- Design should also take into account elements relating to **trauma healing and social cohesion**. While victims should have a central role in processes, it is important that perpetrators are also included and are not excluded from the discussions.
- The use of a specific **language** can also discourage certain groups from participating in processes (e.g., labelling certain groups as 'terrorist').
- Design should consider the trade-off between creating processes that are conducive to tangible outcomes and being able to reflect the complexity of conflict scenarios. It is important to view the **multidimensional nature** of mediation processes, considering them not as the only means to end a conflict, but rather as one of the tools in a broader peace framework.
- A particular attention should be put on more **vulnerable groups**. Youth and women are often classified into two whole homogenous groups, which is a very distorted representation of their reality. It is important that their participation is incentivised and that they sit at the table as mediators, just as everyone else, ensuring that they are not just tokenised.
- **Youth engagement** is particularly difficult. Large leaderless youth-led movements calling for political change have emerged strongly in many conflict-affected countries, but their nature distinguishes them from more common institutionalised political movements, making them harder to engage. Intergenerational components can be considerable obstacles for engagement since younger generations might adhere to a different set of cultural norms and use a different language than their elders.
- International actors have very high expectations of **women mediators** to contribute meaningfully to mediation processes and these expectations are often difficult to meet. While efforts to include women at the negotiating tables are appreciated, their meaningful inclusion will lag behind until more structural inequality is addressed. A considerable number of women mediators are increasingly involved in peace processes, but there are very few women with leading roles in other sectors (e.g., energy, trade, etc.) which are essential for peace.
- It is also important to consider the delicate power dynamics resulting from inclusive processes. For example, **traditional leaders** and local governmental authorities can play very similar roles at community level, and therefore enter in competition for power, resources and legitimacy.
- IMs can benefit massively from **exposure** to experiences of other stakeholders, as well as decision-makers. People tend to grow attached to their own contexts and perspectives, which prevents them from developing the mental elasticity needed to fully grasp other stakeholders' understandings, experiences and perspectives. More exposure contributes to the sustainability of the engagement, allowing for better feedback loops, and creative arrangements to overcome stalls. IMs can also benefit from exchanging best practices and learnings with IMs operating in other contexts.

CONNECTING THE TRACKS

- Some IMs can be involved at different levels under the same or different capacity. For example, they might work on local mediation at community level while also being engaged at higher level collaborating with international NGOs or multilateral organisations. This property allows for agile movement within the different tracks.
- To foster the multilevel dynamics of mediation processes, ensuring **feedback loops** between community, national and international levels is crucial. Mediation efforts at the local level typically address highly practical aspects that are relatively easy to implement. Progress at community level often occurs while the broader political process is at a standstill. It is essential to highlight and incorporate these successes in discussions at higher levels, as they can potentially stimulate opportunities for restarting stalled processes. At the same time, keeping communities informed about the progress or lack thereof at the higher-level fosters transparency and ensures a well-informed grassroots engagement.
- It is beneficial to have hybrid groups of mediators to minimise **risks of siloisation** between tracks. When only outsider mediators are involved, discussions tend to revolve around liberal peace considerations with little focus on local dynamics. However, mediation efforts conducted by IMs only can be unbalanced towards the groups that hold more power. For this reason, bottom-up and top-down approaches should coexist and be part of the same wider process.
- Great interconnection among the tracks strengthens the **resilience** of the whole process. Tracks should be separated but interconnected so that if mediation efforts collapse on one level, the process can be sustained by progress made on a different track.
- Increased coordination and transparency between tracks can also reduce competition among mediation actors and improve efficacy by reducing the risk of duplications.
- Reducing the distance between tracks would allow higher-level political processes to be more **conflict sensitive** thanks to an improved integration of the primary needs of conflict parties, and better understanding of priorities and expectations from ordinary citizens. Sometimes populations are dissatisfied with the outcomes because the process did not address their needs or there is no sufficient interest or the adequate culture or education to understand the functioning and rationale behind resulting new institutional frameworks.
- Many IMs do not share or identify with the commonly used definitions of “mediation tracks”. International Relations and academic jargon is not commonly understood in conflict contexts, where conditions and definitions for engagement should actually be identified by affected people.
- The precondition for effective multi-track approaches is that the different levels of engagement appreciate each other. The terminology “Track 1-2-3” implies a defined **hierarchy**, which reduces the importance of processes happening at the local level. In general, IMs often feel that their efforts are undervalued by the mediators involved at national or international levels. The use of alternative terms (e.g. “pathways”) may serve to better explain the multilayered nature of mediation processes.

RELATIONS WITH DONORS

- Donors and international actors often urge mediators to adopt more daring strategies to achieve visible results promptly, including to justify financial resources provided. IMs are therefore subjected to considerable pressure, despite typically leaning towards more risk-averse approaches, mindful of preserving their safety and reputation.
- Donors do not fully appreciate the **complexity of conflict contexts**, which include factors ranging from demographics to history and socio-economics. External perspectives on a given context are typically oversimplified, therefore expectations for the time it takes to mediate and outcomes of mediation processes are sometimes unrealistic.
- While there is an increased understanding and acknowledgment of the multi-track nature of processes, **donors still overwhelmingly fund and prioritise Track 1** formal processes. The changing and multi-track nature of processes are extremely challenging to fit within donor logframes, thus a high degree of creativity is required in implementation. In addition, funding is often directed towards the process rather than the conditions that produce the intended outcomes.
 - In the Sahel, significant resources have been allocated to enhance women's role in monitoring agreements, but this has not really resulted in tangible improvements in mainstreaming gender issues in peace negotiations. **Gender-sensitive funding**, such as childcare assistance, can be more effective in increasing women's participation because it has an impact on the conditions that facilitate women's participation.
- To improve synergies between donors and implementing partners, **reciprocal trust** should be strengthened. This is accomplished by assuming an honest and transparent relationship. It is important that financing regulations are clearly explained to communities, as much as implementing partners should be transparent in describing both achievements and mistakes.
- Due to the way most donors allocate funding, it is unusual to be able to resource mediation-focused projects that span over different geographic contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE EU

- In order to create more successful and impactful programmes, international donors, including the EU, should **focus programmes towards the needs of the populations**.
- The EU should ensure that its **funding is conflict sensitive** and does not skew sensitive balances among local actors, thereby contributing to tensions and conflicts. The EU should also strengthen **gender sensitive budgeting**, which means creating a budget line specifically to put into place practices aiming at increasing women's participation.
- **Direct and flexible support for IMs, local NGOs and grassroots organisations** has been demonstrated as a low cost, high reward undertaking.
 - Women's organisations in the Sahel are among the most influential and connected groups with terrorist groups. Direct and indirect support (e.g., providing financial resources, spaces to network, translations in local languages) is a safe and effective way to support preventing violent extremism.
- The EU should ensure there is no **siloesation in funding**. Since IMs' work spans over humanitarian, development, human rights and peacebuilding sectors, it is crucial that that funding instruments account for this transversality and do not impede IM's ability to carry out their overall mission by only covering a portion of work they do.
- The EU and MS should **improve proximity** with its implementing partners. In mediation contexts, local partners

often have the perception that by supporting a programme the EU is effectively outsourcing the risks and accepting as little responsibility as possible. For this, the EU should try to maintain a presence in conflict contexts as much as possible, which would also benefit the physical safety of people engaged.

- The EU should further support programmes aimed at strengthening the conditions for the **engagement of young people**, such as education and capacity building initiatives.
- When the political conditions to engage with a government in a third country are no longer met, the EU should not completely withdraw since human security aspects are at stake. The EU should **maintain at least a minimal presence** and engage with non-governmental actors to support the local populations' human security needs, especially since local organisations are usually limited on resources. In addition, while complete disengagement is understandable politically, it deprives the EU of its residual leverage.
- Despite the ongoing crisis of the multilateral system worldwide, the EU still enjoys a positive reputation in some regions (for example, Latin America) when compared to other international actors involved. In these contexts, the EU should expand its engagement and position itself clearly and consistently on **value-based issues**, such as democracy support and the rule of law. In the long term, such clear positioning would improve the EU's credibility and therefore influence.
- The EU's credibility as a mediation actor also depends on its **openness and honesty** in publicly presenting its objectives in a given conflict situation, as well as its choices in supporting specific domestic actors. The EU should approach a conflict context with flexibility and adaptability to accurately assess its added value. For example, in certain contexts, the EU could use its leverage to influence the government to take specific decisions, while in others, it could use its financial means to support already existing effective efforts or fund grassroots organisations.
- The EU should make better use of its **integrated approach** to ensure its expertise in different areas (such as energy, trade, finance, etc.), which have considerable impacts on peace and security, support and complement foreign policy actions.
- The EU should improve **strategic communications** where confidentiality is not critical to the success of a peace process. For example, the EU should be more intentional in showcasing the mediation work carried out via and with partners, as well as publicising its relationship with local and international NGOs, which could benefit its reputation at a local level.
- The EU could explore opportunities to involve businesses and private sector actors in mediation initiatives.