

International Mediation Networks Research Project Observations and Food for Thought Paper

Introduction

Over the past two decades the concept of mediation has evolved significantly. Mediation has moved away from the negotiation of fairly limited ceasefire agreements behind closed doors with the aim of stopping fighting towards more complex multi-level, multi-stakeholder negotiations that tend to go beyond achieving a temporary negative peace and instead seek to develop solutions to address the root causes of conflict (Mason 2007; Papagianni 2014). In operational terms, as a result this now means that individual mediators often lead mediation teams (Herrberg 2015). Over the past decade there has also been a marked “inclusion turn” in the field of mediation and peace process design, highlighting the value of the role of a broad range of actors beyond the main conflict parties in peace and political transition processes (Paffenholz 2014). A number of normative frameworks for promoting greater meaningful inclusion in peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts have also been established, including the Women, Peace and Security agenda enshrined in UNSCR 1325 and its implementation; UNSC Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security; the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals—in particular Goal 16; the Sustaining Peace Resolution simultaneously adopted by the UN Security Council (S/RES/2282) and the General Assembly (A/RES/70/262); and the UN–World Bank “Pathways for Peace” Study.

The field of mediation is also becoming increasingly crowded, with an increase in the number and diversity of individuals and organizations practicing mediation at various levels, including the UN and other international organizations, regional organizations, governments, and NGOs (Lanz and Gasser 2013).

In recent years, the conflict mediation field has seen the emergence of a substantial number of international mediation and mediators’ networks. The 2018 report of the UN Secretary General on the implementation of UNSCR 1325 identifies these networks as another manifestation of the growing global recognition of the need to go beyond approaches aimed only at “stopping the guns” towards processes that can help foster positive inclusive peace.

International mediation and mediators’ networks are networks comprised of a narrow to broad range of mediators, conflict mediation professionals, and a variety of experts on mediation, peacemaking and peacebuilding at various different levels (national and global, and grassroots and local) and tracks including formal (track 1) mediation but also more informal (tracks 2 and 3) efforts.

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Project Aims and Objectives

IPTI's International Mediation Networks research project – facilitated by a grant from the Wihuri Foundation – seeks to create the first [mapping](#) of existing international mediation and mediators' networks, and to outline their different mandates, membership, structures, and objectives. The project focuses on networks with a range of geographical and thematic scope, but which include an international (sub-regional, regional, or global) focus either in terms of membership or activity. To date the project has focused on networks that include mediators as members, meaning networks that are comprised solely of mediators and networks with a mixture of mediators and mediation support professionals are covered by the scope of the project. Networks that solely provide mediation support are not currently included in the scope of the project.

The project also seeks to understand the context and reasoning behind the formation of these networks, examine the assumptions upon which they are based, and provide insights into the rationales, aims, and hopes of mediators, funders, and mediation professionals in relation to this emerging phenomenon. The objective of phase 1 of the project is to produce an overview of existing networks and findings in the form of food-for-thought that will stimulate discussion and feed into the ongoing development of existing international mediation networks.

Observations and Food for Thought

Nature and scope of mandates

There is a broad variety of mandates across the range of mediation networks, including promoting mediation; promoting insider mediators (a more bottom-up/horizontal approach); increasing local ownership of mediation; promoting exchange between mediators on learning and good practices to further mediation efforts; and providing training and mentoring for mediation practitioners. Specifically in the case of women mediators networks, while all the networks generally aim to provide a platform for women mediators to be able to advance and facilitate an increase in women's meaningful participation in peace processes, in particular formal peace processes (track 1), women mediators networks vary substantially in terms of their mandates. Mandates include promoting women's attainment of high-level (track 1) mediator positions (a more top-down/vertical approach); promoting the involvement of women in peacemaking efforts more broadly, in line with UNSCR 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda; and promoting greater gender equality in peacemaking (especially at the track 1 level) and a more gender sensitive approach to peacemaking efforts.

Overall across networks, there are differing interpretations of mandates among members of the same network (e.g.): different interpretations of what mediation is, of what priority objectives should be, and even about the mandate – an example is the Nordic network; some members believe the network should promote insider women mediators and WPS more broadly, while others think it should mainly focus on promoting the members of the network and getting them high level Track I mediation positions in UN-led processes.

The variations in mandate suggest differing visions of what mediation entails, from a narrow to a much broader understanding of mediation. The classical definition of mediation is quite narrow, involving a third party assisting two or more parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage or resolve a conflict by helping them to develop mutually acceptable agreements. Certain networks adhere to this more circumscribed notion of mediation, whereas others take a much broader view of mediation's scope to including peacebuilding and multiple mediation tracks. In addition to the question of what is mediation, there is also the issue of who can call themselves a mediator; some (women) mediators with experience as high-level mediators feel that the notion of mediation is being watered down by too great a diversity of membership of certain networks to include members without high-level (track 1) mediation experience. Some networks are less concerned with mediation as a concept, and more focused on promoting equality of opportunity and access to both mediation posts as well as political posts related to international relations and diplomacy more broadly speaking.

The variation in mandates can also be explained by the differing political objectives behind the creation of the networks. These include: an equality agenda; foreign policy agendas and objectives; access to insider mediators at track 1 level; increased local/regional ownership of mediation efforts; provision of capacity-building/transfer of mediation best practices; and in the case of women mediators networks, as a means of fulfilling normative WPS commitments. The phenomenon of the mushrooming of mediation networks also leads to potential pressure on political actors from particular regions or sectors to establish a network for fear of being left behind or excluded.

Organisational structure

There are significant differences in organisational architecture among different international mediation networks, ranging from more highly structured networks – with a combination of multiple organisational elements including secretariats, steering committees, advisory groups, and contact groups, to more loosely structured networks with just a secretariat, and consortia.

Are these differences in the degree of institutional structure deliberate or expedient? There are factors such as variations in funding, and the amount and level of political backing that may impact the need or desire for a greater or lesser degree of institutional structure within a network. The fact

that networks with greater levels of funding and political backing tend to have more established structures (Femwise, Nordic Women Mediators Network, and the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers are cases in point) suggests there might be a direct correlation between availability of funding and (high-level) political support and degree of organisational structure.

Membership

All networks have some kind of selection criteria and procedures to determine membership. But selection criteria and procedures differ from network to network. All existing networks have either a thematic or a regional focus (e.g. various regional mediators networks; networks such as the Network for Religious and Traditional Actors). Some networks have more targeted selection criteria and procedures or are more closed, operating by invitation only. Other networks have fewer criteria for membership and a (seemingly) more open application process. The majority of existing networks are women mediators' networks, and thus focus on women. Women mediators' networks currently only invite women members.

The background of the membership also differs between networks, with some favouring high-level (track 1) mediators and others bringing together insider mediators and NGOs.

Membership differs according to: tracks; closed or open selection criteria and procedures; vertical or horizontal links; clarity of affiliation (between inner and outer circles).

Differing degrees of affiliation can be observed from network to network, and there are discrepancies in terms of understanding of the extent of affiliation, with several instances of an inner circle that is aware of the extent of the membership and an outer circle of members for whom the extent of their affiliation is less clear. There may also be a correlation between a network's level of selectivity and targeted membership and the degree of clarity of affiliation of its membership.

Tensions/competition between networks

There is a certain degree of overlap among different networks in terms of geographical focus, scope, mandate, and membership. This could potentially give rise to tension or competition among networks.

Tensions could potentially arise from the overlapping but contrasting mandates of different networks, for instance networks with mandates that seek to facilitate capacity-building and the transfer of mediation best practices from outsiders to insiders might be viewed as employing an 'imperialistic' approach through the prism of networks with mandates that seek to increase local/regional ownership of mediation efforts. This could also lead to suspicions that certain

networks might be pursuing hidden agendas.

Funding presents a clear danger of competition among different networks. Different networks may find themselves competing for the same resources. The funding bases of certain, particularly western networks are likely to be much larger than those in other parts of the world, even those directly incorporated within regional institutional bodies (e.g. Femwise and the AU), which can lead to frustration. There also appears to be a tendency to prioritise the establishment of new networks rather than channelling funding to existing networks. This seems to particularly be the case for countries or regions that do not yet have their “own” network, which seek to prioritize setting up a new network for their respective country/region over investing in existing peace infrastructure that could align with their interests and objectives. This means that the continued existence of some networks is uncertain due to lack of funding.

Opportunities

The potential complementarity among networks presents a number of opportunities. There is great potential for collaborative messaging, including through collaborative advocacy (both public and quiet advocacy) and joint communications. While the institutional affiliation of certain networks to specific political bodies means collaborative messaging could prove complex, collaborative messaging can focus on supporting specific shared objectives, such as furthering aims related to the WPS agenda (e.g. lobbying for women envoys or concerted efforts to support women candidates) or improving local ownership in peacemaking efforts. There is an opportunity for networks to coordinate activities and actions, such as early warning or prevention.

Exchanging information and good practices is a significant opportunity, and has been identified as such by meetings bringing together regional women mediators’ networks. This can be supported and enhanced through access to evidence-based research and comparative knowledge across the globe and the ‘harvesting’ of members’ experiences in a systematic way. There is also potential for cross-learning and peer-to-peer support, particularly examining whether the experiences of more established networks – such as the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers – could be useful for more fledgling networks.

A specific opportunity relating to women mediators networks entails leveraging the benefits of sisterhood through networking, solidarity, and reciprocal support. Women mediators networks are providing space for women to come together to strategize, mobilize, and share experiences.

Conclusions and key challenges

A number of mediation networks have emerged over a relatively short period of time and it is likely

that more will continue to emerge. The mapping exercise in the framework of IPTI's International Mediation Networks research project shows that existing networks are at differing levels of institutionalisation and establishment, and the more fledgling networks will continue to expand their membership, fine tune their mandates and objectives, establish their institutional architecture, and define and undertake activities.

From a research perspective, the recent proliferation of a large number of networks over a short period of time, few of which are currently active, poses the challenge of how to go about interpreting the data at this stage. However, this also provides a clear opportunity to consult with networks in order to determine how this kind of research project and its outputs can be useful to feed into the ongoing development of networks.

For networks to effectively contribute to joint action and inclusive peace process outcomes there are a number of key challenges that they must address:

Navigating and challenging the questions of what is mediation and who can call themselves a mediator. This particularly involves challenging and nuancing the narrow definition of mediation that seems to be applied at the UN/track I-level, to take account of mediation activities and actors working at all levels, to cultivate a more inclusive definition of what mediation is and who mediators are.

Ensuring clarity of goals. Clarity of goals can help to ensure that initiatives such as mediation networks are transformative for our approaches to conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and sustainable peace. In the specific case of women's networks, this involves establishing whether the main aim is representation, gender mainstreaming, or greater influence, and how these different aims can complement one another.

Clearly defining selection criteria and procedures and clarifying affiliation, particularly regarding members of networks outside the "inner circle".

Ensuring complementarity of profiles and roles of members and support structures within a network.

Identifying points of complementarity among networks and then making sure complementarity is leveraged through partnerships. Specifically looking at complementarity of training – burden sharing (the UN, and research and training institutions can support) – sharing materials and modules, especially on technical points that are not context-specific. Training needs should be targeted in line with aims and objectives. Certain networks have suggested the need for a mapping of expertise within networks.

Leveraging complementarity and establishing partnerships will also help to assuage potential

tensions.

Ensuring systematic harvesting of experiences (including storytelling) to feed into exchange of information and good practices, and cross-learning. **Developing mechanisms to share information among networks**, and to ensure cross-learning (exchange of lessons learned and good practices to fill knowledge or capacity gaps). **Developing mechanisms to measure and communicate success**, which are also positive ways of managing expectations. IPTI's [interactive map](#) of international mediation networks could help to facilitate the communication of networks' activities, and information sharing and cross-learning among networks through its continuing development as a collective repository of information on the evolution and activities of international mediation networks.

Importance of identifying ways to move cooperation forward as networks, but also with other partners (UN, civil society, research institutes). Experience has shown that to be effective networks also need support structures to assist with their development, including information sharing, training, or networking. Support structures can be provided by a combination of internal and external structures and actors that also help to identify strategic entry points for the use of the networks by different mediation actors such as the UN, regional organizations, and national and local governmental and non-governmental actors including leveraging the link between the national and the community levels.

Going forward, effective cooperation among networks and supporting institutions will not only avert the danger of individual networks becoming new siloes in the mediation landscape, but will also help to realize the transformative potential of these networks, particularly in terms of providing guidance and learning, building up a repository of knowledge on mediation, and channelling expertise and experience across peacemaking tracks.

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