

Research Brief: Insider Mediators and Trust Building

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Terminating armed conflicts and healing the social fabric in the long-run is a complex and contentious socio-political negotiation process involving individuals, families, communities, and society at large. These processes are often assisted by institutional mediators, who are traditionally conceptualised as “impartial” third parties like specialised NGOs and IOs, UN agencies and government actors that manage or resolve potential conflicts. Much of the crucial mediation work on the ground, however, is being conducted by **insider mediators**:

Insider mediators are individuals who come from the society or community affected by a conflict and work to facilitate communication and negotiation between the conflicting parties. These mediators are influential and legitimate, precisely because of their internal links to the conflict context and personal closeness to the conflict parties. Insider mediators can be community leaders, religious leaders, civil society activists, or other respected figures trusted by both sides of the conflict, and often take on multiple roles simultaneously, such as messenger, intermediary, conflict analyst, witness, mentor, and ceasefire monitor. Although the term “insider mediation” is relatively new, cultural practices of local mediation have been present for a long time. For example, in many regions of Africa, religious leaders have always played a significant role in conflict resolution. The benefit of introducing the concept of insider mediation is that it allows for a larger conversation around the practice, including on strategic support, capacity-building mechanisms, funding opportunities, and good practices.

With the changing nature of conflicts globally, insider mediators become more crucial. Conflicts are becoming increasingly complex and fragmented, resulting in the decrease of formal peace processes and comprehensive peace agreements. At the same time, the number of mediation and conflict actors has increased, along with the awareness of the need to engage with local actors and to focus on inclusion. Rather than third-party mediators or peacebuilding actors who fly in and out of a conflict, insider mediators are rooted in the communities. In contexts of protracted and multi-faceted conflicts characterised by fragile relations, where there is often no option of a single agreement as an end-all solution, insider mediators are well-placed to step in. As such, they are essential for conflict resolution in today's world.

Building trust through relationships. Insider mediators often have pre-existing relationships with both sides of the conflict, which can help to build trust between the parties. They tend to be seen as impartial and trustworthy, even if they are not neutral, and their involvement in a mediation effort can lend credibility to it. All mediators should be good at building relationships. These skills are even more important when trust is based primarily on interpersonal connections rather than official responsibilities and mandates. Because of their reputation and personal connections, insider mediators are likely to be more effective than official or third-party mediators in conflict-affected contexts where formal power structures are challenged, authorities are frequently viewed as untrustworthy, and suspicion or resistance may occur towards external actors. For

example, in the central region of Cote d'Ivoire, women who had received insider mediation training stepped in to resolve intercommunity tensions when the mayor was perceived to be partisan. They successfully convinced protesting youth to refrain from using violence and hate speech, thereby preventing the escalation of tensions, by leveraging their existing relationships with the communities.

Understanding the (cultural) context. Insider mediators have a profound understanding of the cultural context in which a conflict occurred or is currently occurring. This can assist them in navigating the underlying social, political, and economic dynamics and to help identify solutions that are culturally appropriate and acceptable to both sides. Insider mediators may understand why armed groups mobilise and, more importantly, what they require to demobilise and (re)integrate. They understand their grievances because they have experienced them. This can help to transition Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) from a technical issue to something that is embedded in people's daily lives. In the Great Lakes Region, many (former) fighters have crossed borders and started families in different Great Lakes Region countries. In this complex context, insider mediators draw on and use cultural practices, ways of understanding reality, and communication techniques specific to the communities to foster trust. Although high-level political processes unquestionably remain important, insider mediators play a critical role in promoting reconciliation and ensuring official initiatives are sensitive to local cultural dynamics in receiving communities.

Promoting communication and dialogue. Insider mediators can help to promote communication and dialogue between conflicting parties. They can serve as a link between different groups and contribute to creating a safe space for discussions. They can help to reduce tensions and build trust by encouraging both sides to listen to and understand each other's perspectives. Insider mediators play an important role in community-based reintegration programmes for ex-combatants in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They serve as a conduit for communication between non-state armed groups, the government, and the receiving communities. Insider mediators connect the different narratives where direct communication between parties has been strained. They also connect community-level needs and issues to national and state-level processes.

Sustainability. Insider mediators can help to promote the long-term viability of peace agreements by fostering ongoing communication and cooperation among the parties involved. They may be able to identify potential conflicts or misunderstandings and work to keep them from escalating. Insiders can help to build trust over time and promote a more lasting resolution by maintaining an ongoing dialogue and acting as an early warning system. Furthermore, they establish a sense of local ownership over peace arrangements. Involving insider mediators in drafting peace agreements ensures that the proposals align with the issues on the ground, securing their implementability and sustainability. They ensure that, to those affected, peace doesn't feel as imposed from the outside but rather as crafted from within. In Nigeria, traditional rulers from Benue state act as insider mediators to enforce the Natural Resource Peace Agreement in the Agatu Local Government Area. They use their position of power in the communities to explain the reached agreements to the constituencies and encourage them to accept them, as well as to ensure that the agreements are embedded in local contexts.

Supporting Insider Mediation Initiatives and Capacity Building Mechanisms

Increasingly, (international) peacebuilding actors are supporting insider mediator (IM) networks and initiatives. However, **experience so far has shown that these initiatives have capacity gaps that prevent them from realising their full potential** to better resolve conflicts and contribute to trust- and cohesion building in their communities. Based on a needs assessment carried out by Clingendael Academy, several areas were identified where they specifically require support to ensure their long-term impact.

Area	Issue	Capacity Strengthening
Time and Resources for Strategic Planning	Strategic planning for IM projects requires close collaboration between insider mediators and their (international) support organisations. However, this can be difficult due to differing backgrounds and ideas about conflict resolution. Moreover, rushed discussions due to a lack of time and resources can result in insufficiently formulated strategies. Joint conflict analyses are sometimes marginalised, leading to challenges in agreeing on a mandate, road map, or strategy. Funding proposals can be driven by support organisations with limited input from insider mediators, resulting in overly ambitious proposals and a lack of ownership over the work processes and intended outcomes.	Strategic planning workshops can aid IM initiatives and support organisations, jointly or separately. Capacity strengthening can focus on key questions for IMs, such as formulating a mandate (if suitable) and road map, preparing for mediation, organising a support team, and assessing networks for entry points. Workshops may also include conflict, ripeness, positions-interests-needs, and stakeholder analyses.
Organisational Setup	Balancing the formal-versus-informal organisational setup of IM initiatives is essential. Low organisation allows for flexibility, informal meetings, and information sharing, building trust and relationships. High organisation can limit quick action, increase rigidity, and be perceived as political. However, some seek formalisation for legal protection or credibility to reach wider audiences.	Tailored training can aid insider mediators and support organisations in balancing their organisational setup. Workshops can facilitate discussions on the purpose and function of the initiative and compare loose/informal versus structured/formal setups using examples from other contexts. Capacity strengthening can focus on optimising the use of informal talks and raising awareness of how they can benefit the formal sphere. Training can also address effective communication about impartiality towards third parties and actors in conflict.
Internal Group Dynamics	Issues with internal dynamics in insider mediation initiatives are often recognised but not discussed due to their sensitive nature. IMs cited trust, competition, personal and constituencies' interests, cultural and religious perspectives, impartiality, incomplete information, misinformation, and impatience as factors that hinder effective decision-making and leadership. These issues can threaten the entire initiative and lead to generic agreements to avoid conflict.	Capacity strengthening for IM initiatives should include building trust among members, consensus-building skills, mapping out different actors' positions, interests, and needs, and effective communication and decision-making processes. Training can also promote the inclusion of diverse perspectives and use comparative case studies for new insights.
Constituency Engagement	Insider mediators are crucial in including diverse perspectives in the peace process. However, their close relationship with one or more parties in conflict can create perceptions of partiality and challenge their role as mediators. Balancing their role as credible mediators with their role as leaders of their constituencies can be challenging and sometimes hinder progress.	Capacity strengthening can focus on clarifying who their constituents are and developing communication strategies for before, during, and after mediation activities. Strategies should consider the messaging, framing, and engagement of focal persons or all members. Communication must also be tailored to the specific conflicting parties and maintain confidentiality.
Track 1-2-3 Collaboration and Coordination	Insider mediation initiatives often work across different tracks in peace processes, connecting international and local mediation efforts. However, divergent approaches and goals can hinder collaboration between the tracks. External mediators tend to prioritise reaching an agreement in track 1, while insiders focus on building relationships and trust in the longer term. This difference in perspective can cause friction between insiders and external mediators, and the latter may need to consult more with the former.	Support organisations and relevant actors can improve multi-track processes by bringing actors from various levels together. Capacity strengthening support could focus on stakeholder analysis and management, striking a balance between formal and informal processes, connecting with different initiatives, deepening understanding of political nature, and creating opportunities for learning and collaboration. Comparative case studies can provide useful examples. Training in itself can provide an opportunity for insiders and outsiders to work together.