

# *Falling short* Exploring mediation effectiveness

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and development



FBA

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EXPLORING MEDIATION EFFECTIVENESS

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# 1. Introduction

**ON 22 NOVEMBER 2021** the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) held a half-day colloquium in Stockholm, involving 17 mediation specialists and FBA staff members, who participated in-person and by virtual means. Matt Waldman, an Associate of the Centre for International Studies at Oxford University, was invited to present on issues emerging from his ongoing research on mediation effectiveness. The presentation was intended to serve as the springboard for a wider discussion among mediation experts on flaws and weaknesses in mediation practice, the changing international environment, and how the field should adapt and improve.

This note, drafted by Matt Waldman, attempts to capture key insights, observations and ideas from that discussion. The meeting was convened under the Chatham House rule, and therefore points made are not individually attributed.

The participants had worked on a range of conflicts, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Sudan, Mali, Central African Republic, Colombia, Myanmar, and Ukraine. Participants were currently or previously affiliated with institutions that have strong credentials in mediation research and practice.<sup>1</sup>

The meeting had the following elements: (1) the research presentation; (2) reactions to the research; (3) challenges to effective mediation; and (4) adapting and enhancing mediation. This note follows the above sequence, and includes points made in the relevant section even if, due to the fluidity of interactions, they were made at other points of the colloquium. As stated, the note is in no way intended as a full record of the meeting. Rather, it attempts to outline, summarise and synthesize key points and observations made during the meeting.

The colloquium took place before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The eruption of inter-state war in Europe, with such devastating human consequences, and profound geopolitical implications, only underscores the case for enhancing mediation effectiveness.

<sup>1</sup> These include the United Nations, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Uppsala University, Lund University, Swisspeace, The Graduate Institute Geneva, ETH Zurich, as well as the Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish Ministries of Foreign Affairs. Those seeking more details about the meeting are kindly requested to contact the FBA.

# 2. Research Overview and Emerging Issues

**THIS SECTION CAPTURES KEY** points and emerging issues from the ongoing research on mediation effectiveness by Matt Waldman. All quotations are from individuals interviewed for the research. A range of quotations were included in the presentation, some of which are included here for the purposes of illustration. The presentation contained introductory remarks about the research, the changing international context, and overall state of mediation, followed by two main sections covering perceived flaws and deficiencies in mediation practice, and differing paradigmatic approaches to enhancing mediation effectiveness. Due to time constraints in the colloquium, not all of the points included in this section were included in the presentation.

## **Introduction to the research**

Armed conflicts are proliferating. There are more armed conflicts worldwide than at any point since 1946, and they are having a devastating impact on the health, safety, welfare and opportunities of hundreds of thousands of women, men and children worldwide. The number of internationalised civil wars has risen substantially over the past decade, and the threat of inter-state conflict, involving major powers, is also increasing.<sup>2</sup> The rationale for analysing mediation effectiveness is therefore self-evident.

The research was initiated during a fellowship at Harvard Law School's Program on Negotiation. It has involved in-depth, non-attributable interviews with 86 mediation specialists on what could be done to enhance the effectiveness of high-level mediation efforts to resolve and prevent armed conflict. Effectiveness was broadly defined as preventing armed conflict or making progress towards sustainable peace. The research takes an inductive, grounded approach, with a focus on endogenous factors that have the potential to affect mediation outcomes. In essence, it considers what should change, within the field of mediation, to improve the prospects for peace.

The research has obvious limitations, in that it relies on the views of interviewees who may be biased or mistaken. It is based on opinion rather than evidentiary analysis. Yet, testimonial evidence has considerable value, especially that provided by numerous experts and practitioners with decades of experience. Between them, the interviewees have over 1,500 years of mediation experience.

The researcher used a snowball method to identify interviewees, who ultimately comprised 26 principal mediators, including 14 current or former UN envoys, 43 mediation experts, and 17 academics with mediation experience. The cohort of mediation specialists comprised 62 men and 24 women, reflecting the gender imbalance of the field at senior levels. This imbalance should be taken into account in future work on mediation effectiveness, including in consultations and dialogue processes, to ensure a genuine diversity of knowledge, experience and perspectives. Non-western and traditional actors must also be included in such efforts.

Only one third of the research interviews have so far been transcribed and analysed, and therefore this presentation only seeks to outline emerging issues, and as such, it necessarily involves simplifications. For the sake of clarity, it seeks to avoid jargon from the mediation literature.

### **Prefatory observations**

Interviewees were eager to share their views on mediation effectiveness, spoke at length and believed it to be an issue of importance. Substitution bias was often evident: rather than directly answering the question of what should change to enhance effectiveness, interviewees tended to describe what, in their opinion, is being done badly or wrongly, by drawing on their own experience. Alternatively, some described the components of successful mediation. Experiential egocentric bias was also evident. Interviewees understandably tended to overweight their own particular experience in making judgments about the field as a whole, arguably leading to overgeneralizations. The immense diversity of interviewees' experiences was also evident, underscoring the heterogeneity of mediation practice.

### **The challenge of mediation**

Mediation specialists say that the mediation of armed conflict is inherently challenging, given the power and range of conflict drivers. As one put it, "They [the parties] are locked in a deadly struggle trying to exterminate each other (...) The miracle is that it sometimes works." The challenge is reinforced by the complexity of contemporary conflicts, at multiple levels, and the intrinsic limitations of mediation itself. Mediation is a "second order tool

<sup>2</sup> Palik, J., Rustad, S. A., Methi, F. (2020), "Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946-2019", Prio Paper 2020. Available at: <https://www.prio.org/publications/12442>

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*Mediation is not physics.  
It's not even engineering.  
It's actually plumbing.*

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[that cannot] transform international relations structurally (...) Mediation is not physics. It's not even engineering. It's actually plumbing." Arguably, mediation requires favourable conditions to flourish. However, interviewees universally drew attention to what they see as a more difficult operating environment.

### **The international context**

The contemporary international context entails huge challenges for the resolution, prevention and management of armed conflict. Mediation specialists identify at least six factors.

First, conflicts are increasingly complex, given the involvement of a wider range of actors, operating at different levels and by different means, including vicariously and through "grey zone" tactics. Second, the international system is ever more fragmented, especially given deadlock and disagreement at the UN Security Council on global security issues and the management of conflict. As one practitioner put it, "I don't know any case where there is a united international response to a conflict." Third, there is a perceived disengagement and lack of political will, on the part of the United States and other powers, to resolve or mitigate civil conflicts. To quote one practitioner:

"It seems to me that purposeful international action is at its lowest at the moment. [There is no] fundamental commitment to mediating the end of armed conflicts [but rather intermittent attempts to] keep them off the media agenda and hoping that things won't go too badly wrong."

Fourth, civil conflicts are increasingly internationalized, with a higher incidence of global and regional powers sponsoring and supporting conflict actors. Reflecting the views of many interviewees, one expert observed that:

"Regional and international involvement has stepped up to a completely different level (...) Regional powers that are ever more assertive and sort of throwing their own weight around (...) They're not really wanting to end conflicts through compromise. They want to make sure that their allies win."

This, of course, makes it challenging for mediators to engage with and obtain the consent of all the parties necessary for a process to succeed. Fifth, there has been a rise of authoritarianism worldwide, including at the level of major powers, who are sceptical of or antagonistic towards liberal mediation efforts. And sixth, connected to these factors, interviewees believe that conflict parties are generally more willing to reject, exit or sabotage mediation processes, largely because they have higher levels of external support and face lower costs for doing so.

Given these factors, intensifying great power rivalry, and rising global pressures and challenges, such as posed by climate change, many mediation specialists believe the prevalence, severity and impact of armed conflict will only get worse. “We’ll be constantly at war,” said one highly experienced mediator. There is a powerful need for mediation to adapt to this new, more challenging international environment.

### **The state of mediation**

There is immense diversity in the practice of international mediation, with significant areas of progress and cases of success. Many successes are confidential, incremental or preventative and therefore not widely known and acknowledged. Yet, among mediation experts and practitioners there is widespread questioning and self-doubt:

“She [mediation] finds herself questioning her identity, saying basically, with nuances, it can’t get worse than it is (...) There’s a common agreement that we’re in trouble. And then mediation, well she’s in crisis even though we won’t call it crisis and she’s got to find a way out.”

Broadly, there is a sense that mediation is falling short. This is partly ascribed to exogenous factors, especially the more challenging international environment described above. But it is also attributed, in two, interconnected ways, to mediation itself. First, many aspects of contemporary practice are seen as deriving from the 1990s, a wholly different era of geopolitics, and the field is seen as having failed to adapt to new challenges: “[We’re] working from an unrealistic and outdated playbook.” Second, independently of geopolitics, experts and practitioners think that elements of mediation practice are too often inadequate, defective or unfit for purpose. These factors, outlined in the following section, correlate with a strong and widely held belief that the field needs to adapt and improve.

### **Flaws and deficiencies**

Mediation specialists point to various flaws, weaknesses and deficiencies in mediation practice. They can be categorised in various ways. For concision, and for present purposes, they are categorised as relating to: (1) resources, (2) goals and methods, (3) qualities and skills, (4) knowledge and expertise, and (5) systems and standards.

#### **RESOURCES**

Interviewees argue that overall funding for mediation is inadequate given the scale of the needs:

“There’s so much more potential – international mediation is just scratching the surface of what it can contribute to, and what it needs to contribute to the planet. “

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Many voice strong objections to limited, short-term funding, and its attachment to projects, leading to a kind of projectivisation out of sync with the protracted and variable dynamics of armed conflicts. Some interviewees believe other dimensions of peacemaking, including peacebuilding and reconciliation, are not receiving the funding they require. Others raised concerns about foreign policies of states that undermine the very efforts they are funding.

#### GOALS AND METHODS

##### *Overambition and short timeframes*

A high proportion of interviewees believe mediation efforts are often expected to achieve too much, in too little time. The transformation of society, involving significant progress across multiple domains, is not seen as feasible over short timeframes. By one account, “It’s an ideal; but it is actually sort of a fantasy.” Some states, donors and organisations are critiqued accordingly: “It’s sort of instant gratification they want. They want the Nobel prize, and then bugger off.”

##### *Neglect of relationships*

Interviewees challenged the wisdom of highly publicized processes which are not conducive to trust-building and are seen as failing to respond to the psychological dimensions of conflict. Many interviewees also believe there has been an overemphasis on peace agreements – seen as defining and effecting the resolution of conflict – rather than a focus on relationships, as strengthened through processes of dialogue, trust-building and reconciliation. As one academic puts it:

“This obsession with moving fast to sign the agreement (...) as opposed to addressing the relationship between the parties (...) [We should be] forging reconciliation between the parties’ leaders, before they sign the f\*\*\*g agreement.”

##### *Neglect and misconception of implementation*

Many interviewees believe that too often international attention diminishes or disappears after the signing of a peace accord, when in fact a huge amount of support, assistance and mediation is still required. As a prominent African mediator puts it:

“What I see is usually an agreement has been reached, signed, sealed – and champagne, pat one another’s backs, laugh. Everybody disappears (...) And then you don’t see any progress. You arrive at a point that the agreement collapses, [and] the country could easily go back to war.”

Some interviewees believe that the linear, sequential conception of peace processes – moving from confidence building, to negotiations and then to agreement, followed by implementation – is out of touch with the non-linear

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trajectories of fragile and divided societies. They argue international donors are not only insufficiently willing to invest in long-term implementation but also long-term peacebuilding.

## **QUALITIES AND SKILLS**

### *Unqualified appointments*

An overwhelming majority of mediation specialists express serious misgivings about individuals appointed to senior mediation roles. Many former politicians, such as heads of state and ministers, and diplomats are seen as lacking real knowledge, experience and skills in mediation. Interviewees also note that such appointees may lack the temperament and personal qualities, such as patience or emotional intelligence, required to be an effective mediator. “People are fundamentally not appointed because they’re good people or because they’re any good at their job.”

### *Lack of logical, strategic or creative thinking*

Interviewees raised questions about the ability of mediation practitioners to think logically and strategically – in other words, to make reasoned assessments of the means required to achieve certain ends. Expressly or impliedly, they questioned a tendency to assume that convening dialogue would be beneficial, without first engaging in a rigorous and realistic consideration of what is required in any given circumstances, whether relating to dialogue itself or other factors, to achieve intended objectives. As one put it: “We somehow believe that all problems in the world have a solution if enlightened men and women simply sit down and are made to see clearly what their own interests are.” Related to this, many interviewees think there is insufficient intellectual creativity in mediation practice.

## **KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE**

### *Lack of contextual knowledge*

Interviewees argue that in some cases mediation efforts are not informed by sufficient knowledge of a local context and culture. These perceived gaps range from lacking a deep appreciation of local values or conceptions of issues germane to mediation, such as justice and reconciliation, to a rigorous understanding of the political economy. As one UN expert puts it: “I’m going to actually invoke the [UN mediation] guidelines, they said ‘preparedness’ (...) Bullshit (...) We’re not prepared.”

### *Gaps in expertise*

Mediation teams are seen as sometimes lacking expertise in mediation and related fields. Interviewees also say there are knowledge gaps in fields that are critical for effective mediation. For instance, psychology and the behavioural sciences is identified by some as “one of the big areas that... is missing in high level practice.” Another example is the argument that mediators sometimes lack an understanding of how an agreement will

function in practice and what it requires for successful implementation. According to this critique, “[Some mediators] treat agreements as if they’re just somehow going to be self-executing.” Interviewees acknowledge that steps have been taken, including through the UN’s Mediation Support Unit, to address gaps in knowledge and skills, but there remains a strong sense that across the field levels of mediation and related expertise need to improve.

#### *Learning gaps*

Interviewees say that high-quality mediation courses and trainings have been developed and are available to mediation practitioners. However, many feel that the breadth of participation, regularity, duration, and substantive depth of training undertaken across the field is insufficient. Interviewees tend to underscore the value of skills-based training and argued for more effective high-level coaching and mentoring. Experiential learning was considered to be poor. To expand, many say that mediation organisations, including the UN, do not have the systems in place to ensure that they learn from their own experience. What is lacking, interviewees say, is rigorous self-evaluation, external assessment and mechanisms to institutionalise lessons learned. More broadly, some interviewees are deeply critical of a perceived gap between academic research and practice.

### **SYSTEMS AND STANDARDS**

#### *Lack of coherence*

Some experts and practitioners see advantages to the expansion of actors in the field of mediation: “There are different horses for different courses,” and having multiple actors means that where “one gets burned, others (...) can pick up the baton.” Others think this creates confusion, incoherence or discordance. According to one UN envoy:

“[Mediation is becoming a] hungry and competitive sort of feast (...) transactional (...) almost entrepreneurial. It also raises some problems around the kind of chaos or cacophony, which now swamps a conflict with so many players all pulling in a [certain] direction, all backed by different national states.”

#### *Variable standards*

Related to issues noted above, many interviewees raise concerns about the lack of consistently high standards across the field. Some see it as a “wild (...) unregulated space,” in which anyone can operate. They advocate for efforts to professionalise the field, support and promote excellence in mediation, develop mechanisms of oversight, and improve monitoring and evaluation. Others worry that standard-setting could “create gatekeepers,” potentially entrench an outdated paradigm, stifle creativity, and disadvantage more “traditional modes” of mediation that can be highly effective.

## Enhancing effectiveness

Many of the changes required to enhance effectiveness are logically implicit in these critiques. The flaws or deficiencies identified point to changes and reforms, by different actors, in spheres such as resources, goals, timeframes, methods, techniques, appointments, teams, expertise, research, training and implementation. In many of these areas, opinion among mediation specialists converges. Opinion tends to diverge on systems and standards. There is less convergence, and even contention, on if and how the field, at a macro level, should change – in other words, the fundamental, paradigmatic shifts required.

Several overarching arguments can be identified from the research so far, three of which are mentioned here: (1) pragmatism, (2) diffusion, and (3) diversification. It is important to emphasise that none of these approaches is necessarily incompatible with the others. However, some of those who argue for pragmatism express scepticism about elements of diffusion and diversification, and vice versa.

### PRAGMATISM

Some practitioners and experts call for realism and pragmatism in mediation work, and argue for processes that do not seek to transform society but to end violence. They raise deep concerns about overambitious processes that can be counterproductive. As one UN envoy puts it:

“Suddenly, the original purpose of the mediation becomes a very distinct and small adjunct [to the process]; a Christmas tree of laudable objectives, which [are a threat] to the peace agreement itself.”

These interviewees say processes are sometimes overloaded with western values. “We have sometimes certain normative principles (...) which are just impossible to apply [over short timeframes] (...) can you put more pressure on society than it can bear?” They tend to argue that mediation efforts should be limited in scope, and focus on achieving a political settlement between the warring parties. As one mediation specialist puts it:

“[Mediation] is meant to bring warring parties together so that they find an agreement and stop fighting (...) Let’s become a little bit more modest (...) and a little bit more back to the roots, what this tool is meant to achieve rather than saving the world. “

By this account, ending the violence opens the door for positive change: “Silencing the guns makes everything else possible.” In their view: “We’re trying to draw a compromise (...) What we try to do is get society to go down another path, if possible, in better conditions.”

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There are, of course, powerful challenges to this line of thinking which are only briefly referenced here. Many interviewees argue that such an approach would be dangerous and short-sighted if it leads to a narrow focus on securing elite deals between powerholders, without long-term, continual and effective efforts throughout society, to address the deeper causes of conflict, without which violence is likely to recur. Dispensing with liberal norms, they say, could yield superficial, short-term successes and long-term injustice and instability.

#### **DIFFUSION**

Dovetailing with that critique, a substantial number of experts and practitioners emphasize the need for a more decentralised, multi-actor approach, centred around improving relationships. This approach, which draws on complexity and systems thinking, stresses that centralised, elite level negotiations are insufficient. Rather, it points to the critically important role to be played by national mediation teams, local partners, and insider mediators, especially in light of their local knowledge, insights, networks, and influence. This approach posits that “sustainable peace is built on local sinews.” As one leading practitioner puts it: “There’s a whole community of people around a conflict, who want the peace and are willing to try and get it. And they can make it happen.”

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#### **DIVERSIFICATION**

It is increasingly acknowledged that mediation organisations rarely mediate, as such. Indeed, some interviewees argue that more complex, fragmented conflicts require mediators and mediation organisations to diversify. They may still mediate, but increasingly they will need to orchestrate, manage, persuade, motivate, connect, create, rethink and advise. By this account, mediators need to engage with a wide range of actors, support and assist them, bring them into processes, and help to move things forward over time. Advocates of diversification often argue for stronger networks of mediators and mediation organisations working in collaboration. Some make the case for a kind of mediation without mediators, through partnership and liaison between teams of advisers working with different conflict parties: “Negotiation advice given to all the sides, which, in effect, is a kind of mediation.”

#### **FLASHPOINTS**

As noted above, none of these approaches is necessarily incompatible, depending on how they are conceived and articulated. Nevertheless, on certain touchstone issues exponents of different paradigms are sometimes at odds. By way of illustration, some of those arguing for pragmatism see inclusivity as a luxury.

“In a world where you’re increasingly dealing with the Russians or the Saudis or the Qataris or Turkey, then it’s not going to be about broad inclusive peace deals, it’s going to be about elite understandings (...) between the most powerful armed actors. “

Others make a compelling principled and pragmatic case for inclusion, given that so often a wide range of actors have influence over a process and can so easily undermine it. Elites predominate in mediation efforts and yet research shows they tend to resist positive change. By this account, “the theory of change in many mediation efforts is hope.”

### **Wrap-up**

To summarize, the mediation of armed conflict is inherently challenging but especially so in the current international context. The research reveals widespread agreement among mediation experts and practitioners that current approaches are falling short. Detailed analysis of one third of the interviews conducted suggests a degree of convergence on key flaws and deficiencies, especially in respect of resources; goals and methods; qualities and skills; and knowledge and expertise. Corresponding policy and practical changes could help to address these issues. There is less convergence on systems and standards, and other issues, such as conflict prevention.

As for overarching shifts required by the field as a whole, mediation specialists emphasise different approaches, three of which could be categorized as pragmatism, diffusion and diversification. In this respect, there is divergence within the field, and in some cases outright contention. A structured discourse is required to address these differences, secure consensus, where feasible, on necessary changes or reforms, and chart the way ahead. Such a discourse is critical for enabling global mediation efforts to realise their potential, overcome new challenges, and maximise their impact on the ground.

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# 3. *Reactions to the research*

**PARTICIPANTS REGARDED** Waldman's ongoing research as addressing vitally important issues, and shared reactions, including on future, complementary research, and the challenges to measuring mediation effectiveness.

## **Future research**

Future research on effectiveness could consult conflict parties about their experience of mediation, as they have unique perspectives which should be taken into account. Such research does not appear to have been undertaken previously and could be both useful and insightful.

Any discussion on effectiveness should differentiate between different kinds of mediation (tracks one, one point five, two and so on), and consider how these tracks interrelate and change over time. Analysis should consider non-western perspectives on mediation, such as traditional approaches used in Africa and Asia. It should also take into account and assess alternatives to mediation, such as high-powered diplomacy, stabilisation, and conflict management as pursued by some major powers.

## **Challenges in measuring effectiveness**

Mediation effectiveness can only accurately be assessed on a case-by-case basis and is necessarily difficult to gauge, as illustrated by the following factors. First, notwithstanding the appointment of international mediators, many conflicts have not been mediated at all, or only partly or partially mediated. Consider Syria, where arguably there never was a genuine mediation and the world's most advanced mediation skill or techniques might not have made a difference. Second, a mediator's views on effectiveness are often shaped by their own biases and particular experience, thereby reducing objectivity. Third, typical indicators of success, such as political agreements, may be misleading if, as noted above, the relationship between the parties has not fundamentally changed. Cases hailed as successes, such as Lebanon or Bosnia, have proven to be deeply problematic.



Attempts to measure mediation success should therefore draw on different perspectives, use a range of analytical tools, and take a long-term lens. Even then, a great deal of mediation work is confidential and undisclosed, making it difficult to assess, especially backchannel efforts to prevent the escalation of a dispute into armed conflict. Looking ahead, it was suggested that mandates, which set out a mediator's authority, objectives and parameters, could potentially be used as a tool for measuring mediation effectiveness. Nevertheless, this would require mandates to establish realistic objectives, which is too often not the case.

# 4. Challenges to mediation effectiveness

**PARTICIPANTS SHARED A RANGE** of observations on challenges to mediation effectiveness, which correspond with many of the points emerging from the research. In particular, they addressed the changing international environment, conflict ripeness, and the gap between research and practice. Various points made by participants are set out below, clustered by issue-area. It should not be assumed that participants concur with all of these points, although many seemed to be broadly accepted.

## **Changing international environment**

If specific mediation efforts are considered to be ineffective, a key question is whether this is attributable to the mediation efforts or the conflict itself and the wider context. As noted in the research testimonies, the international environment for mediation has changed considerably since the 1990s, with the end of American global primacy, rising regional involvement in armed conflicts, division between the major powers, and deadlock on how to manage specific conflicts. Conflicts are also increasingly fragmented and complex, not least due to vicarious warfare and hybrid operations that include cyberattacks and misinformation.

It is important to try to differentiate and disaggregate how certain dimensions of the international environment affect particular kinds of mediation work differently. This enables better judgements about how to understand and respond to international developments. For instance, deadlock in the UN Security Council may have quite a different impact on UN mediation efforts from those of mediation organizations. A major research project on ceasefires found that in almost every process from the early 1990s to today, the alignment of the major regional and global powers was the key factor that determined whether the ceasefire was adhered to and whether it progressed into a political process.

## **Ripeness and conflict drivers**

Arguably, the liberal mediation world, strongly associated with the West, has not been able to adapt and respond to the new and emerging challenges noted above. Yet, exponents of ripeness theory anticipate limits to what mediation can achieve in such circumstances. Regional and global powers who are increasingly sponsoring conflict parties are less exposed to the costs of conflict, and the parties themselves can continue to obtain funding and munitions. This reduces the likelihood that they will reach a mutually hurting stalemate, seen as conducive to negotiations.

Moreover, as noted above, armed conflicts are intrinsically difficult to resolve. Changes in the international environment and the nature of conflict make it even more difficult, and mediators are rarely capable of altering fundamental conflict dynamics. In many cases, therefore, it would be wrong to attribute unresolved conflict to a failure of mediation, per se. Yet, this only reinforces the need to enhance the effectiveness of mediation efforts, not least because they may, over time, change attitudes or relationships which enable later progress. Indeed, critics of ripeness theory argue that the best measure of effectiveness is the sustainability of change processes that improve the quality of relationships across society.

## **Expertise and the gap between research and practice**

Levels of mediation expertise vary throughout the field. Economic advisors to world leaders virtually all have academic credentials in economics. Impressive mediation courses have been developed, but advisers to peace processes, or heads of mission, have often not had the same kind of rigorous training in designing and managing peace processes.

Related to this, the gap between mediation research and practice is an impediment to advancing mediation effectiveness. The UN Academic Advisory Council on Mediation, founded in 2012, had huge potential in this respect but did not succeed. There are misunderstandings on both sides, with practitioners frustrated that academic materials are too theoretical, inaccessible and untimely. Academics express frustration about the willingness of practitioners to absorb and apply insights from research. Indeed, some experts are deeply concerned by how little mediation approaches and processes have adapted and improved since the 1990s.

# 5. *Enhancing mediation*

**PARTICIPANTS SHARED THEIR** thoughts on paradigmatic differences within the field, and specific ways in which mediation effectiveness could be enhanced, especially localised, multi-layered approaches, negotiation support, political transformation, and upgrading expertise. Unsurprisingly, many of these observations resemble those emerging from Waldman's research. As noted above, the points collated below reflect observations made by individual participants, which are not necessarily shared by all those who participated in the colloquium.

## **Tension between pragmatism and value-based approaches**

There is divergence in the mediation world about how to respond to new challenges. Some say that mediation idealism is failing to deliver and placing impossible demands on difficult processes. Others ask how far pragmatism should go, especially if it means relying on elite pacts, entrenching authoritarian actors or perpetuating injustices. They maintain that without principled, value-based approaches conflicts will re-erupt. As this research indicates, inclusivity is seen by some as unrealistic and by others as essential for success. Of course, this partly reflects diverse interpretations of what inclusivity means and entails in practice. Nevertheless, according to some, a key variable is how mediation is conceived: Is it minimalistic, as a means of ending violence, or transformational, a way of building peace?

## **Localised, multi-layered mediation**

Arguably, mediation has already begun to respond to a more complex and challenging environment by generating a range of responses, at different levels, that go well beyond elite-level, track one mediation. Mediation organisations look to enable meaningful dialogue and support political processes. They are accompanied by a wide range of actors that are searching for entry-points, seeking to empower insider mediators and advance localised approaches. Indeed, according to this line of thinking, more support should be given to local mediation efforts, which may not be as structured or formal as international efforts, but have in some cases proven effective. In South Sudan, for example, communities have successfully mediated conflicts related to seasonal pastoralist migration. By this account, insider mediation has significant potential, providing it caters for the safety of the individuals involved.

These diverse levels and lines of activity should be interconnected, including but not limited to track one efforts. In some eyes, what is required is a reconceptualization of mediation efforts as continual, holistic, and multi-layered. They must also be grounded in local realities, and especially the values, needs and expectations of affected populations, which requires corresponding research, analysis and consultation.

### **Facilitation and negotiation support**

In some cases, proposing facilitation or negotiation support to separate conflict parties could increase their willingness to enter into a dialogue process, as in Colombia. Parties are more likely to reject mediation if they see it as being externally imposed or a means of political interference. Teams advising separate conflict parties could liaise and collaborate thereby forming informal mediation networks. Empirical research could identify and compare experiences of mediation, facilitation and assisted negotiation, to help move beyond conventional thinking around third party mediation.

### **Support for political transformation**

Given their history, experience and culture, many non-state armed groups lack an understanding of how to transform themselves from an armed actor to a political party or social movement. This increases the group's reluctance to move into the realm of politics. Consider the support provided to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines, which helped the group make the transition into politics. Greater support and advice on political transformation, from mediation organisations and others, at all stages, could encourage armed groups to participate in and remain committed to dialogue processes. Correspondingly, governments should ensure that counter-terrorism legislation which proscribes certain armed groups does not impede the dialogue work undertaken by mediation organisations.

### **Training, expertise and standards**

More professional training could prove valuable, especially if it is practically focused. Other means of strengthening skills and expertise should be considered. Should experienced mediators be encouraged or required to undertake intermittent refresher courses, as required of practising lawyers? Could a greater number of senior appointees, especially those without mediation experience, be provided with expert coaching and mentoring? Could steps be made to ensure senior staff in mediation teams have had training in mediation and peace processes? Could mediation teams be expanded to include more experts in relevant fields, such as in digital tools for mediation and consultation, or psychology and the behavioural sciences? These kinds of measures, according to some, could help close the gap between research and practice.

# 6. *The way ahead*

**THE MEDIATION WORLD** is undergoing a kind of identity crisis, due in part to the changing international context, and to the numerous cases where mediation efforts have been unable to resolve or prevent armed conflict. New approaches and perspectives are emerging in response to new challenges, but they are far from universally embraced or supported.

Participants appeared to agree that a structured process is required to understand how the field should evolve, adapt and improve. What could be more important, it was asked, than determining how mediation can more effectively contribute to the resolution and prevention of armed conflict and the establishment of sustainable peace? Indeed, the rationale for such a process is only reinforced by the war in Ukraine, which is likely to have immense and enduring adverse implications for peace and security in Europe and beyond.

The colloquium did not discuss in depth how a process to enhance mediation effectiveness should be organised, but it was generally felt that it should be anchored in dialogue involving western and non-western mediation specialists, including practitioners from the Global South. It should be inclusive, involving, at different stages, experts, practitioners and professionals in related fields, such as politics, diplomacy, negotiation, peacebuilding, and reconciliation.

The process could benefit from other inputs, including from experts in related disciplines, such as political science and psychology; individuals with expertise in approaches taken by authoritarian governments such as China; and even current or former conflict parties themselves.

The process should engage relevant institutions: states, intergovernmental and international organisations, NGOs, universities and other research institutions. Indeed, it was argued influential actors in the mediation world, including Scandinavian governments and the UN's Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, should encourage and support the involvement of research institutions.

It was suggested that the process should begin by considering the fundamentals of mediation itself: the forms it takes, core principles and values, and how the practice of mediation is changing. It was also suggested the process could consider what previous initiatives have been taken to enhance the mediation field and with what success. It could consider how to build on what has already been undertaken by mediation institutions and networks, such as the Mediation Support Network, a network of mediation support organisations that aims to improve mediation practice. The process should also consider what can be learned from major reform or change processes in other fields, such as humanitarian assistance and peace operations in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

This author believes the process should draw on insights from mediation practice itself. It requires effective organisation and skilful facilitation to achieve constructive engagement, a sense of ownership and substantive outcomes. Broadly, the process should involve an honest and open exchange of views and perspectives; joint analysis, self-scrutiny and self-reflection; and the identification of problems, challenges and opportunities. It requires both macro-level deliberations and focussed efforts on specific issues; the generation of ideas and options; problem-solving and practical recommendations on ways forward.

Substantively, there are arguably three interrelated priorities: (1) identify flaws and weaknesses in mediation capacities and practices that potentially impair effectiveness; (2) determine what has changed in the nature of conflict and the international environment that affects mediation effectiveness; and (3) consider what changes could be made, in any area of mediation practice or even related spheres, that could increase the prospects for achieving sustainable peace.

The process should consider the full range of spheres which have a bearing on mediation effectiveness, including but not limited to mediation resources, objectives, methods, skills and expertise, as well as systems and standards. It should of course take into account the heterogeneity of mediation and its vital relationship with closely connected fields such as peacebuilding and reconciliation. It should also consider the importance of actively integrating a gender perspective and awareness of power relations.

Finally, mediation effectiveness is a vitally important issue upon which lives depend. One-off discussions are necessary but not sufficient. A structured, ongoing process is needed to strengthen and improve this critical element of peacemaking.

# *The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) is the Swedish government agency for peace, security and development.*

FBA supports international peace operations and international development cooperation. The agency conducts training, research and method development in order to strengthen peacebuilding and statebuilding in conflict and post-conflict countries. We also recruit civilian personnel and expertise for peace operations and election observation missions led by the EU, UN and OSCE. The agency is named after Count Folke Bernadotte, the first UN mediator.

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