



PHOTO RADIK AGGI/UNSPASH

Coherence, coordination and complementarity? Multi-track mediation and quality peace agreements

Marie-Joëlle Zahar

THE COMPLEXITY of contemporary conflicts and the profusion of mediation actors create new challenges for mediation actors. As multi-track mediation becomes the norm, effective mediation efforts and sustainable peace agreements necessitate coherence and coordination as recognized in the UN Guidance on Effective Mediation. This brief proposes three concrete measures that mediation actors can take to improve coherence and coordination. Relatively common in peacebuilding settings, the first two measures constitute exceptions to common practice in the mediation world. The third measure, when adopted, has not yielded particularly positive results. The brief suggests that the measures, while insufficient when taken individually, could yield fruitful results if implemented in concert.

HOW TO REFER TO THIS BRIEF:

Zahar. 2023. Coherence, coordination and complementarity in multi-track mediation. *Joint brief series: Improving Mediation Effectiveness*. Stockholm: Folke Bernadotte Academy & ACCORD
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61880/SJHL1073>

Policy recommendations



1. Conduct joint conflict analyses to create a shared understanding of the problem, agree on an overall strategy and formulate joint objectives. Coherence between mediation efforts requires a joint frame of reference that allows all mediation actors to articulate an agreed upon strategy.
2. Establish regular channels for information-sharing. This builds trust, helps to enhance the coherence of efforts, and avoid duplication, and allows mediation actors to better address risks of forum-shopping by the conflict parties.
3. Use double-hatting, i.e., the joint nomination of an envoy by two organizations. This could be used to promote inter-organizational synergies. This would also have to be accompanied by a high level of transparency among all stakeholders in the peace process.

Introduction

ISSUED IN 2012, the UN Guidance on Effective Mediation¹ identifies the coherence, coordination and complementarity of mediation efforts as one of the fundamentals of effective mediation. This reflects the new reality of the mediation landscape.²

Whereas the UN has historically mediated either inter- or intra-state conflicts, today's armed conflicts are often multi-layered with local, national, regional and international dimensions interacting with and feeding into one another. As is cogently illustrated by the Syrian or Yemeni conflicts, this has all but erased the traditional distinction between civil and interstate wars. It has also complicated the task for mediators who are now faced with the prospect of having to defuse conflicts not only between the main conflict parties but also between their regional or international backers, as again illustrated by the impact of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry on the Syrian and Yemeni conflicts.

Contemporary conflicts have created 'a fertile breeding ground for extremist movements.'³ This poses a particular challenge for mediators considering the pressure exerted by powerful UN member states in favor of proscription.⁴ With the UN sometimes hindered from engaging with such groups, a number of non-governmental mediators have stepped in to claim the space.

Contemporary conflicts are also characterized by the sometimes-dizzying multiplication, fragmentation, and re-composition of conflict parties. This has created challenges not only for mediation efforts but also for the sustainability of any peace deal. For instance, shifts in group composition and alliance have been identified as one of the main obstacles to achieving peace in Mali.⁵ The fragmentation of conflict actors has created additional challenges for mediators who are now faced with 'a complex mix of local grievances, proxy interests, ideological or religious fissures, business interests and criminal incentives' as well as with leaders who 'seldom have sufficient command and control to speak for their

groups at the negotiating table, let alone commit their groups to implementing negotiated outcomes'.⁶

These developments pose a serious challenge to the traditional view of mediation as a two-party negotiation facilitated by a third impartial party. No mediation table can accommodate all conflict parties, nor can a mediation table simultaneously deal with the local, national, regional and international dimensions of conflict systems. These challenges are compounded by the fact that, since 2011, renewed tensions between the major power members of the UN Security Council have affected the ability of the United Nations to effectively use mediation as an instrument to address both inter-State and intra-State conflicts.

Last but not least, the mobilization of civil society and its growing demands for meaningful inclusion in peace processes have also changed the landscape of mediation. With mediators acknowledging the importance of broader inclusion for local ownership and the subsequent sustainability of peace, multiple fora including national dialogues or constitutional processes have been designed to insure such inclusion. This has led mediators to consider the sequencing of and linkages between various processes. Failure to do so has sometimes negatively affected mediation efforts. For instance, observers contend that the space taken up by Yemen's National Dialogue Conference may have inadvertently led the United Nations to pay less attention to talks between the conflict parties thus contributing to the resumption of armed conflict in 2015.

This is the context in which we have seen the rise of new governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental mediation actors as well as the growing involvement of insider mediators in efforts to bring about negotiated solutions to armed conflict. Drawing on their specific regional or thematic expertise and leveraging their perception as either impartial, more sympathetic, or trusted third parties, some of these actors have found it easier to gain the necessary

consent to act as mediators. This has contributed to regional and sub-regional organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) or the Intergovernmental Authority on Development in Eastern Africa (IGAD) being called up to mediate crises in their neighborhoods. In a post-9/11 world, the difficulties faced by the UN when dealing with proscribed actors have opened the door to several non-governmental mediation actors who have specialized in setting up dialogues with ‘terrorist’ or ‘extremist’ groups.

The mushrooming of mediation actors is thus partly a function of transformations in the mediation landscape. New mediation actors have engaged in discussions with conflict parties who have been absent or excluded from track one processes such as Islamist or Kurdish groups in the Syrian conflict. They have gained consent to mediate where the UN was being stonewalled by one or more conflict parties as happened when the Algerian government took the mantle of mediation in the Mali crisis away from the United Nations following difficulties with the implementation of the Preliminary Agreement

for the presidential election and inclusive peace negotiations in Mali. They have opened channels with proscribed groups as was the case when Qatar attempted to bring the Taliban into discussions with the United States.

The diversity of mediation actors permitted the development of strategies to address the limitations of traditional mediation in the new conflict environment. However, the multiplication of mediation actors has given rise to new challenges, foremost among which is primarily competition among mediation actors working in the same space. There is also an increased risk that conflict parties will engage in forum shopping or seek mediators who they perceive to offer them a ‘better deal’.

This is the background against which this brief asks: how can multi-track mediation lead to quality peace agreements? In sketching out an answer, we will draw upon the findings of research on coordination and collaboration to identify possible solutions. In closing, we will make a set of recommendations on the way forward.

The Challenges of **Multi-track Mediation**

THE MULTIPLICATION of mediation tracks and the diversity of mediation actors have yielded both positive and negative results. While these have been discussed at length elsewhere,⁷ it is important to recall some of the drawbacks of multi-track approaches as we address the issue of coordination. These can be fruitfully grouped in three categories: objectives, process, and relations. Together they contribute to competition between various mediation efforts, encourage conflict parties to engage in forum shopping, and in the worst cases they can even contribute to the failure of efforts to negotiate a peaceful end to conflicts.

“

The multiplication of mediation actors has given rise to....an increased risk that conflict parties will engage in forum shopping or seek mediators who they perceive to offer them a ‘better deal’.

Objectives – The coexistence of multiple tracks and/or competing mediation attempts has given rise to concerns about competing and sometimes incompatible mediation objectives. While some mediators may be trying to achieve quality peace agreements, there may be differences in what constitutes a quality peace agreement. Further, some mediators may be more concerned with expediency or more sensitive to the position of one of the conflict parties. Whereas some mediators derive their ultimate objectives from a set of guidelines regarding what it takes to reach an agreement that will deliver sustainable peace, others may be driven by narrower political interests. The inability to agree on objectives results in a coherence problem whereby different efforts lack synergy and may even cancel each other out. Similar coherence problems have been identified in related areas such as development and peacebuilding.⁸

Process – Even as they work toward the same objective, process-related disagreements can put strains on mediators’ ability to coordinate. Mediators can differ in their understanding of their role and these differences hinder their ability to coordinate. Some, particularly but not only insider mediators, see themselves as mere facilitators entrusted with convening parties and supporting communication between them. Others are more directive. They control the design process “to manage access to informa-

tion, to redefine contested topics, and to introduce innovative solutions”.⁹ Others resort to coercive mediation, which is what happens when “High-powered diplomacy takes significant control over both the structure and content of the negotiation process.”¹⁰ Other process-related issues can complicate coordination. Mediators can disagree on the criteria for inclusion as regards conflict parties as well as on the necessity (and modalities) of inclusion as regards women or civil society. Operational issues create tensions between mediators, but they can also create tensions within organizations and complicate whole-of-government or agency coherence.

Relations – Coordination problems can also result from a multitude of factors that affect inter-organizational relations more generally. Among these, the high cost in time and money that effective co-ordination entails, the competition between mediators for influence and visibility, and the reluctance of actors to sacrifice their decisional autonomy. Non-governmental mediators are particularly sensitive to these considerations as their institutional survival depends on donor money over which there is fierce competition. Inter-organizational relations can exert particular strain on insider mediators who do not always have the institutional support, time or resources needed to meet the demands of coordination with other mediation actors.

Rethinking Multi-track Coordination

IN ITS GUIDANCE ON EFFECTIVE MEDIATION, the UN draws a distinction between coherence and coordination. According to the Guidance, “Coherence encompasses agreed and/or coordinated approaches, while complementarity refers to the need for a clear division of labour based on comparative advantage among mediation actors operating at the different levels.”¹¹

Given the recurring challenges that we sketched out above, how should would-be mediators, their funders

and friends of mediation think about multi-track coordination? Is coherence attainable? Is complementarity sufficient? In one of the rare publications on the subject matter, Palmiano Federer et al. rightly note that there is little research that addresses these questions.¹² However, research on coordination in peacebuilding provides a useful parallel. Drawing on organization theory, researchers who study the peacebuilding ecosystem underline that coordination depends on organizational form, of which they

identify three ideal-types: hierarchies, markets, and networks.¹³ Hierarchical organizations feature horizontal (according to functional tasks and capabilities) and vertical (according to command and control) differentiation. In hierarchies, coordination is ensured both through interpersonal relations but also via standard operating procedures and plans which are made possible by the repeated interactions between members of a single hierarchy.¹⁴ Markets, on the other hand, include a multiplicity of organizations and encourage functional differentiation between organizations. In a market, linkages between organizations are punctual, lasting for the time it takes to complete a transaction. It is the invisible hand of the market, the law of offer and demand, that regulates otherwise uncoordinated individual activities. “In this instance, coordination is primarily a result – a non-purposeful outcome of the rules of the market.”¹⁵ Lastly, networks, like markets, are composed of a diversity of organizations. However, network members “share information with each other, discuss common objectives, work together to achieve these objectives both at the headquarters-level and in the field, and use several formal and informal coordination mechanisms.”¹⁶ But owing to their loose structure, networks stop short of systematic coordination; “there is little joint planning for missions, patchy information sharing, inconsistent and often non-existent coordination, and no hierarchical command structure for the system as a whole.”

Much like the peacebuilding ecosystem, the mediation ecosystem resembles networks. To rethink multi-track coordination therefore prompts us to think about the way the ecosystem currently functions and to ask whether it should move towards a hierarchy or a market, or whether it may need to improve upon its current practices.

Coordination under market logic. While complementarity is important for multitrack mediation and while the specialization of various mediation actors can be directly linked to some of the challenges of contemporary mediation sketched out earlier in this brief, moving toward a pure market logic would do more harm than good to multitrack mediation. This would suggest that organizations only coordinate when they have transactional needs, i.e. when one

has something on offer that the other requires. This might take the form of international mediators such as the UN or the African Union, drawing upon the expertise that non-governmental mediation outlets or insider mediators have developed in reaching out to specific types of actors. Such transactional situations could be illustrated by the UN drawing on the expertise of the likes of swisspeace, the Berghof Foundation, or the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue to assist in reaching out to and organizing the inclusion of civil society actors in specific processes, as happened for instance in the Syria, Yemen or Libya processes. This may also take the form of several state or NGO mediators working together in a given space. However useful, this pooling of resources and complementary expertise, if dictated by market logic, is only likely to foster competition and to encourage forum-shopping by conflict parties.

Coordination under hierarchy – Existing research on coordination in peacebuilding warns against a move toward hierarchy. Such coordination is likely to be resisted by actors, particularly NGOs, jealous of their autonomy and protective of their space. Hierarchy has also been found to “reduce policy innovation and experimentation by constraining the freedom of individual agencies and actors.”¹⁷ The centralized coordination characteristic of hierarchies can also “reduce the flexibility of constituent organizations in responding to shifting circumstances.”¹⁸ In contexts such as contemporary conflict environments, this can be a disadvantage as it reduces the ability of mediators to address rapid changes in the conflict settings. Even when coordination under hierarchy is seemingly achieved, as could arguable be said to have happened when Algeria led the Mali process,¹⁹ this may create a sense of false coherence “where fundamental tensions and differences are glossed over for the sake of operational expediency, only to re-surface and undermine cooperation at the critical moments when cohesion is most needed.”²⁰ This problem raises the thorny issue of ‘ownership’ of the mediation process, or the issue of who has the ultimate decisional authority over how to run the mediation, a problem that is complicated by the current challenges to the liberal international order. For instance, in spite of the organization’s discursive commitment to local ownership, UN mediation efforts have

increasingly faced accusations of serving as a cover for the imposition of either Western ideas or agendas. This issue of 'ownership' has important implications for the relationship between UN agencies and departments and insider mediators. A hierarchical approach to coordination runs the risk of sidelining insider mediators and thus affecting the trust that conflict parties may have placed in them.

Coordination within networks – If neither market nor hierarchical coordination is the answer, is the current state of network coordination satisfactory and is there room for improvement? Addressing this question requires us to recall that the current state of coordination in mediation efforts is at best patchy. While some organizations like the UN have regular

interactions with other mediation actors, including the European Union, the African Union, or a number of NGOs, these interactions have not overcome differences in objectives or in mediation styles. They have sometimes resulted in uneasy partnerships as was the case, for instance, in the early days of UN support to IGAD's mediation effort in South Sudan. In other instances, close relationships between governmental and non-governmental mediation actors have contributed to the dynamics of competition. Nevertheless, pragmatic reasons underline the need for continuing to think about and improve upon synergies in multitrack mediations. The complexity of conflicts and the growth of international tensions against a background of economic uncertainty and risks of recession all militate for a division of labor.

Policy recommendations

IN THINKING about how to improve synergies, mediation actors ought to also focus on mechanisms that can help ease concerns over 'ownership' of the process. Three such mechanisms come to mind which, if used in combination with one another, could help. These are joint conflict analysis, concerted and regularized information-sharing, and double hatting.

Joint conflict analysis – joint conflict analysis exercises are a way of improving the coherence of simultaneous mediation efforts. Indeed, coherence requires a joint frame of reference that allows all mediation actors to articulate an agreed upon strategy. Unlike hierarchical coordination, this does not require all mediation actors to 'fall in line' with the strategy of the lead mediator. Instead, it suggests that, if and when mediation actors agree on the problem and on the final objective, they can each autonomously work on their part of the process in a more harmonious way than they would otherwise. Joint conflict analysis exercises have become more common in the world of mediation. The UN and the EU have held such exercises in relation to the situation in the Central African Republic, the previous UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, organized a similar effort ahead of his Aleppo Freeze Initiative.

However, these efforts currently often stop at the end of the analysis with actors left to draw conclusions for their course of action separately. It is also important to note here that local actors, including insider mediators, are seldom involved in such joint conflict analysis exercises.

Information-sharing – a staple of coordination practices within networks, the regular sharing of information allows network members to gain better knowledge of each other's work, including learning from one another's successes and failures. This kind of information-sharing can contribute to decreasing the risk of duplication and to enhancing complementarity. Information-sharing in a multi-track mediation context also contributes to enhancing the coherence of the whole and it allows mediation actors to better address risks of forum-shopping by the conflict parties. However, for information-sharing to achieve these outcomes, network members must build sufficient trust to be willing to disclose information. This requires the establishment of regular channels of interaction that foster interpersonal trust between representatives of the various mediation actors. For such information-sharing to be successful also requires that each of the actors has something to gain from

the exchange and something to lose from breaking the rules of confidentiality and losing access.

Double-hatting – a final mechanism that could facilitate synergies is the double-hatting of lead mediators. This was attempted (not fully successfully) in the early stages of UN mediation on Syria when both Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi took on the role of mediator jointly for the UN and the Arab League. The difficulties encountered by both Special Envoys speak to the need for all three mechanisms to work in concert. Indeed, in spite of their personal qualities, neither Annan nor Brahimi was able to overcome the differences in the UN and Arab League approaches to mediation in the Syrian conflict.

All of the above mechanisms are intended to foster synergies and address inter-organizational competition over decisions regarding a mediation process. However, none addresses the tension between external and local ownership. Yet, research has amply demonstrated that the sustainability and quality of peace agreements depend on the latter. The meaningful engagement of local mediation actors is therefore essential to better outcomes. Whether it be their expertise (often still dismissed) that needs to be fronted in conflict analysis exercises or the information they provide which needs to be properly integrated, without due care to their inputs and roles, mediation efforts will continue to suffer from a legitimacy deficit that risks canceling out efforts at better coherence and collaboration.

Endnotes

¹ UN DPPA, *United Nations Guidance on Effective Mediation*, New York: United Nations, 2012.

² For a detailed discussion of these transformations, see Arthur Boutellis, Delphine Méchoulan et Marie-Joëlle Zahar, *Parallel Tracks or Connected Pieces? UN Peace Operations, Local Mediation and Peace Processes*, New York: International Peace Institute, pp. 2-5. 2020.

³ Arthur Boutellis et al., p. 4. 2020.

⁴ See Sophie Haspeslagh, *Proscribing Peace: How Listing Armed Groups Hurts Negotiations*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021. See also Arthur Boutellis and Naureen Chowdhury Fink, *Waging Peace: UN Peace Operations Confronting Terrorism and Violent Extremism*, New York: International Peace Institute, 2016.

⁵ Arthur Boutellis and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, *A Process in Search of Peace: Lessons from the Inter-Malian Agreement*, New York: International Peace Institute, 2017.

⁶ Boutellis et al., p. 4, 2020.

⁷ See Julia Palmiano Federer, Julia Pickhardt, Philipp Lustenberger, Christian Altpeter and Katrina Abatis, *Beyond the Tracks? Reflections on Multitrack Approaches to Peace Processes*, Stockholm and Bonn: Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Centre for Security Studies/ETH Zürich, Folke Bernadotte Akademie and swisspeace, 2019.

⁸ See Cedric de Coning, "The Coherence Dilemma in Peacebuilding and Post-Conflict Reconstruction Systems," *African Journal of Conflict Resolution* 8, no 3, pp. 85-110, 2008. See also Dan Smith, *Towards a Strategic Framework for Peacebuilding: the Synthesis Report of the Joint Utstein Study on Peacebuilding*, Oslo: PRIO, 2003.

⁹ Jonas Bauman and Govinda Clayton, "Mediation in Violent Conflict," *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* no. 211, p. 3, 2017.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ UNDP, op. cit., p. 18.

¹² Palmiano Federer et al., op.cit.

¹³ See Anna Herrhausen, *Coordination in United Nations Peacebuilding—A Theory-Guided Approach*, Discussion Paper SP IV 2007-301, Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, 2007. See also Roland Paris, "Understanding the 'Coordination Problem' in Postwar Statebuilding," in Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk (eds.), *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations*, Milton Park and New York: Routledge, pp. 53-78, 2009.

¹⁴ Herrhausen, op.cit., p. 7.

¹⁵ Roland Paris, "Understanding the 'Coordination Problem' in Postwar Statebuilding," in Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk (eds.), *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations*, Milton Park and New York: Routledge, pp. 61, 2009.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 62.

¹⁹ Algeria was the lead mediator but international and regional organizations (UN, AU, EU, ECOWAS, OIC) as well as regional states (Burkina Faso, Niger, Mauritania) were also involved in the mediation effort.

²⁰ Cedric de Coning, "The Coherence Dilemma in Peacebuilding and Post-Conflict Reconstruction Systems," *African Journal of Conflict Resolution* 8, no 3, p. 92. 2008.

Author biography

Marie-Joëlle Zahar is Professor of Political Science, Director of the Research Network on Peace Operations and Fellow at the Centre for International Research and Studies at the Université de Montréal. Between 2013 and 2015, she served as Senior Expert on Power Sharing on the UN Standby Team of Mediation Experts. In 2017, she was a senior expert in the Office of the Special Envoy of the United Nations for Syria. A graduate of McGill University, her research interests span the politics of conflict-resolution and peace building. Professor Zahar is non-resident Senior Fellow with the International Peace Institute and a member of the Folke Bernadotte Academy's research working groups.

JOINT BRIEF SERIES: THE PERFORMANCE OF PEACEKEEPING

This research brief series is the outcome of a joint initiative by the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) and the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD). The aim of the series is to contribute to policy development by bringing cutting-edge research on key issues within mediation to the attention of policy makers and practitioners. The topics to be explored in the series were selected during joint discussions within the FBA initiative "Improving Mediation Effectiveness" throughout 2021-2023. The Initiative brought together policymakers, practitioners, and researchers within the mediation field to discuss challenges and opportunities for greater effectiveness in mediation. The editorial committee has consisted of Dr. Niklas Hultin, Agnes Cronholm, Dr. Johanna Malm and Maja Jakobsson from FBA, and Andrea Prah from ACCORD. We would like to thank the members of the Mediation Support Network for comments. The views and opinions expressed in the brief series are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the collaborating partners.

The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) is the Swedish government agency for peace, security and development. FBA has since 2005 supported research primarily through its international Research Working Groups. These are composed of well-merited scholars from universities and research institutes worldwide who conduct scientific research on issues related to FBA's areas of expertise.

ACCORD is a civil society organisation working throughout Africa since 1992, to bring creative African solutions to the challenges posed by conflict on the continent. We impact political developments by bringing conflict resolution, dialogue and development to the forefront as an alternative to protracted conflict. As part of its strategic objectives, ACCORD aims to generate, document, and share knowledge that positively impacts on conflict prevention, management, resolution and transformation.