

# What works? Effectiveness in Mediation and Peacemaking

## Brief Summary

This research draws on interviews with 30 highly experienced mediators and peacemakers to identify the most effective peacemaking strategies. Given that we are over 30 years into the post-Cold War era, it is worth taking stock and asking: 'What works?' The most regularly mentioned effective strategy was sustained networks that enable communication between conflict parties.

## Long-term Track 1.5 networks that allow conflict parties to exchange ideas

Interviewees raised the importance of sustained networks that enable conflict parties to explore ideas and become acquainted with one another. The benefits of such networks included rapport and trust-building, ideas seeding and generation, spotting potential influencers, and prompting difficult discussions within governments, armed groups, and political parties. Often these networks have no immediate impact but by being in place they show their value when the time is right. Interviewees spoke of networks being in place for decades and 'allowing people to talk to people they cannot talk to'. They can be quietly catalytic, maintaining connection across difference, and working in the background to acculturate individuals and groups to different ideas.

A key role of such networks was on reframing conflicts in terms of the future. This calls for network members who can engage in strategic foresight and build frameworks for discussion that encourage a focus on strategic issues or shared interests and needs. In some iterations, these networks were semi-formal, producing 'government quality documents' that have the potential to prompt thinking about next steps.

Discussion of these networks prompted some interviewees to question the notion of Tracks 1, 1.5 and 2 as somehow discrete. Instead they pointed to the fluidity of these Tracks with, for example, someone moving from government into a think-tank and back again. They noted how individuals were often adaptable and, as a result, networks had to adapt as well.

**'Dialogue processes for second line leaders create relational resilience'**

## Key Messages

Long-term networks for contact between conflict parties are essential

Conflict analysis pays off

Working on conflict should not be confused with working in conflict

People on-the-ground need to see benefits from peacemaking

It is important to work with the actual situation, not the situation you wish for

The need to recognize a changed international context

Take the wins - even small gains matter

Judging effectiveness is complex



## Investing in good conflict analysis

The need for thinking before acting was often mentioned. Interviewees pointed to the importance of deep contextual understanding and the need for outsiders to recognize their knowledge limitations or 'know what they do not know'. A key part of a conflict analysis is a power analysis: 'What needs to happen and who has the power to do it?' The power analysis point was linked with a need to understand that peacemaking is political and that elites – however unpalatable – have to be involved. As one mediator noted, 'Nothing is going to happen unless you engage with elites.' The need to understand substate dynamics, and to keep up-to-date, encourages collaboration between academics, practitioners, and policymakers, as well as involving local actors in any analysis. It also pointed to the need for peacemakers and mediators to have sustained involvement in the context.

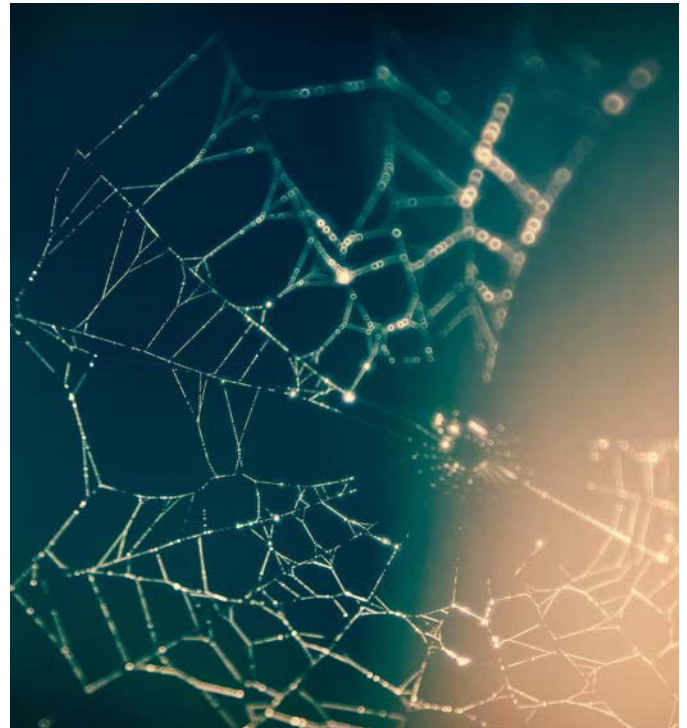
## Differentiating between working on conflict and working in conflict

A number of interviewees pointed to the need to differentiate between seeking to end violence and mitigate its direct effects and working on more general peacebuilding issues. Indeed, there was pushback from some interviewees on the utility of peacebuilding and the inclusion agenda. While they could see its benefits in improving lives, some felt that many peacebuilding activities were overly projectized, were 'spinning wheels', and resulted in some organizations becoming trapped in a political economy of competing for grants. These interviewees felt that a more strategic approach was necessary to target efforts at governments and armed actors, and to have a theory of change directed at the core of the conflict. Interviewees were, of course, aware that working on conflicts is difficult, sometimes forbidden by governments and employing organizations, and indeed sometimes made impossible by the escalatory dynamics of a conflict. At the same time, a number of interviewees pointed to the need to take risks, be ambitious and maintain 'a balance between patience and impatience'.

**'If you go to an armed group and talk about International Humanitarian Law or Responsibility to Protect they laugh at you. It is too easy for them to talk about double standards.'**

## Peacemaking needs to be seen to be working for people

While there was some pushback against peacebuilding and inclusion, there was also – somewhat contradictorily – a recognition that there had to be a bridge between elite settlements and the lives of people in the conflict context. Interviewees were alert to the perils of elite capture and of elites hoarding resources. One interviewee noted that any public negotiation process has to 'provide wins', especially given that many conflict contexts have substantial youth populations and limited employment prospects. Another interviewee noted how 'The national elite settlement needs to bring benefits to people broadly and in ways that are seen to be fair'. This very probably means recognizing the merits of some pre-existing governance systems, despite how dysfunctional they may seem. It also means thinking about sustainability and therefore beyond a one-off deal.



## Working with what you have got

A number of mediators stressed the importance of an honest assessment of what is possible: 'base your strategy more on your assessment of what is happening and will happen, not on what you want to happen'. As one interviewee put it, 'We often pretend away the battlefield'. In essence, this point is about working with the grain rather than against it and moving beyond an optimism bias. A number of interviewees noted that it is very difficult for governments and armed groups engaged in a violent conflict to stop fighting but, as one said, 'When parties are ready to stop fighting they need to find ways to end it'. This is where prior existing networks of contact and frameworks for negotiation may come into play. The aim, stressed a number of interviewees, is not to change the identity or core beliefs of conflict actors. Instead, it is about accepting what they stand for and seeking to nudge them towards shared thinking on a framework for negotiation or a set of values such as not killing civilians.

## A changed international context

Most interviewees discussed the changing international context with a weakened United Nations, an emerging geopolitics that is shaping regional and localized conflicts, and the greater prominence of alternative peacemaking actors such as Turkey, Qatar and China. One interviewee noted how the international system provides conflict actors with the resources that enables them to avoid the types of peace negotiations that were prevalent in the 1990s. As a result, potential mediators felt they have less leverage than in previous eras.

The terms 'fragmentation' and 'complexity' were mentioned repeatedly, with some interviewees pointing out that the mediation field was increasingly crowded, and other noting the messiness of an era of networked multilateralism. While a few had nostalgia for 'the liberal peace', most interviewees were realistic about the emerging peacemaking terrain and the mix of actors that comprise it.

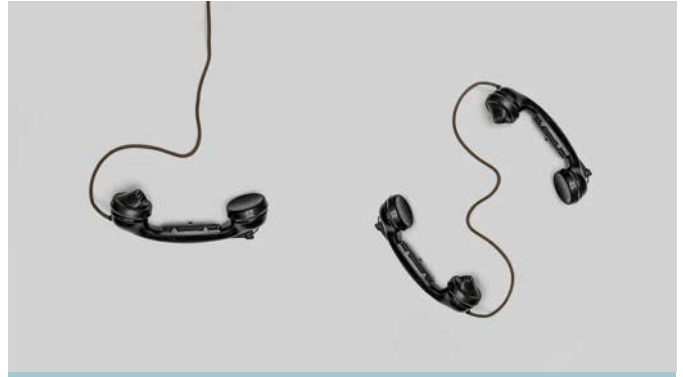
There was a sense among some interviewees that the spaces for peace, and talking about peace, were shrinking, with the notion of military victories and zero-sum games gaining traction.

## Take the wins – even small gains matter

As one highly experienced mediator noted, 'Just because it is unresolved, does not mean it is all negative'. Gains may be small and temporary but they can save and improve lives and so are not to be dismissed. There is no such thing as perfection. Moreover, a number of interviewees stressed that peacemakers and mediators are just one component in a complex context. Their efforts must be seen in the round. As one said, 'It is not a cake with a single ingredient'. Another noted, 'Yours will not be the last dialogue' – especially in a context with more potential mediators.

## Judging effectiveness is complex

There was much discussion of how effectiveness might be judged. Any judgement is complicated by the long-term nature of many peacemaking processes, the lows brought on by set-backs, and by an increasingly crowded field of peacemakers and mediators. Much depended on the strategic goals that peacemakers set for themselves, but most agreed that peace as an end-goal was an unrealistic target. Instead, the focus was on conflict mitigation and helping to establish and maintain processes and structures that would allow conflict parties to remain in contact.



## About the research

Thirty senior mediators and peacemakers were interviewed in June- August 2024 on effectiveness in peacemaking. All had over two decades of experience and had worked in multiple contexts. They worked for international organizations, governments, INGOs, NGOs, and donor organizations. A number worked independently. They mainly worked in Track 1.5 and often between Tracks 1 and 2. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and on the basis of complete anonymity for individuals and employer organizations. Questions centred around effectiveness and "What works?" in mediation and peacemaking rather than on peacebuilding.

## About the author and acknowledgements

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