



United Nations



European Union

Second Technical Expert Workshop, Nairobi, Kenya, 17-19 October 2018

Operationalizing mediation support within intergovernmental organizations: sharing experience and good practice

Summary Note

The United Nations (UN) Department of Political Affairs and the European Union (EU) External Action Service co-hosted the second technical expert workshop on “Operationalizing mediation support within intergovernmental organizations – sharing experience and good practice” in Nairobi, Kenya, 17-19 October 2018. The retreat brought together participants (eight women and seven men) from ten organizations: the Africa Union, the Commonwealth, the East African Community, the Economic Commission of Central African States, the EU, the Intergovernmental Authority for Development, the Organization of American States, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Organization of Security and Cooperation of Europe, and the UN to share good practice, approaches to and tools of mediation and dialogue support. These organizations were invited on the basis of having either an existing mediation support office¹ or a commitment to establish such a capacity.²

This was the second meeting of its kind, following a successful first meeting in 2016 at which participants agreed on the value of biennial meetings to promote engagement and experience sharing between similar functions of different intergovernmental organizations on support to peace processes.

While conscious of the political implications of mediation engagements, the workshop examined lessons learned from mediation support as a technical service, with the purpose of making such services more targeted, fit for purpose and effective. This summary note follows the structure of

¹ As not all organizations are engaged in mediation, these offices include also those who provide support to the good offices and dialogue activities of their respective organizations.

² The Association of South East Asian Nations, the Economic Commission of West African States and Southern African Development Community were invited but could not attend.

the workshop, namely: 1) mediation support resources and tools; 2) mediation support in the changing conflict landscape; and, 3) promotion of mediation support and cooperation.

Mediation support resources and tools

The participants discussed the varying political and organizational contexts in which they operate. Each organization's mediation and good offices mandate is different and as a result so is the space for mediation support. A common feature across those organizations which already had an operational mediation support office was a formal mandate from their membership to systematize and professionalize support to their organization's peacemaking efforts. For their part, EAC and OIC are still exploring how to institutionalize mediation support services within their structures.

Dedicated support structures respond to an identified need within the given organization, each with their own characteristics. Existing mediation support offices differ in size and composition (from one to sixteen full-time staff members) as well as in their proximity to the organization's mediation activities. Some offices are subsets of political/regional offices, while others may be attached to early warning services or placed within the crisis response structures. Some offices are calibrated to support their respective Secretary-General's good offices while some others were designed to provide direct support to the mediation efforts of Member States. Across organizations, the selection and appointment of mediators and their teams differ, as do their skills and capacities and, consequently, their support needs. The increasing trend of establishing advisory boards or groups of the wise with diverse backgrounds has further increased the potential internal client base of mediation support offices. While some mediation support offices have succeeded to some degree in formalizing their role, most still need to negotiate space and access to mediators and their teams each time they provide support. Since the previous meeting in 2016, however, mediation support structures seem to have become more integrated and recognized in their respective organizations.

Resource constraints continue to hinder the capacity development of most mediation support offices. Funding is typically ad-hoc, with insufficient amounts reserved for human resources. Some had developed creative mechanisms to finance their work through peace funds or facilities but have faced challenges with continuity and investment in institutional capacities.

The participants also recognized that in some cases mediation support offices in different organizations may find they are providing support to the same process. Exchanges like this workshop were commended as important for building relationships and direct communication channels among mediation support offices to help de-conflict overlapping requests.

Each mediation entity has developed a range of tools and approaches for supporting their organization's peacemaking efforts. The workshop explored two types of approaches: 1) advisory support; and 2) capacity building and training.

Advisory support. The most common form of mediation support practiced in all participating organizations. There are, however, differences in their approaches. One organization has

developed a holistic and systematic model to advisory support, which covers the entire cycle of the organizations mediation engagement. This approach includes advice on the selection of the envoy/mediator, mediation briefing to the newly appointed mediator and maintenance of a complete documentation of lessons learnt of past engagement in the conflict in question, a handover retreat organized between outgoing and incoming envoys, thematic briefings tailored to the context, peer-to-peer coaching with a former envoy, periodic strategic reflection retreats for the envoy and her/his team, technical coaching on mediation techniques as well as debriefings. More commonly, however, advisory support is more opportunistic and ad hoc. Entry points are actively sought through regular check-ins with country desks and field operations, and seeking meeting opportunities with envoys and their teams, for example in the margins of conferences and trainings. The lack of an institutional approach makes it more difficult to have a strategic approach to support.

Mediation support offices also agreed that there remains some confusion within organizations and mediation teams of how ‘process design’ differs from political analysis, making it more difficult to frame process design mediation support, compared to mediation support in a thematic area, such as on ceasefire management or constitution making. It was agreed that building a solid base of knowledge management products and other written materials could greatly facilitate and help clarify what is meant by process design advice.

Capacity building and training. Most mediation support offices are involved in capacity building and training as one of their basic services. Typically, such support is provided to strengthen the organizations’ own mediation capacities by training staff or offering envoys opportunities for peer-to-peer exchange. Many have struggled, though, to find a way to train envoys on mediation strategy, process development and mediation techniques albeit that there was general agreement on the need for such skills strengthening. Developing a pool of senior envoys that have undergone training and can speak to its value has proved one way to increase the demand. The possibility to make trainings mandatory for senior officials involved in peace processes or part of their induction was also discussed.

Some mediation support offices also provide training services as an entry-point into a process. Enhancing capacities of the envoy, and his/her team can also provide space for reflections on the process design, in addition to strengthening their technical skills and competencies. Conducted jointly with other mediation actors, these activities can also contribute to a more coherent approach to the process among different stakeholders.

It was agreed that organizations in the lead mediation role may not be best placed to train conflict parties and other national stakeholders, including non-state armed actors, as maintaining the impartiality of the mediation is important. In some situations, however, the mediation can engage in training in order to build relationships and trust. Other options include linking up with trusted partners in the academia and NGOs to take on such capacity building roles.

Mediation support in the changing conflict landscape

The second day of the workshop was dedicated to discussing and analyzing mediation support, particularly advice on process design, in the changing conflict landscape. Following an

introductory briefing on the Central African Republic, the participants focused on three dimensions of process design: 1) inclusion of women and civil society; 2) use of communication tools and social media; 3) mediation efforts at subnational and local levels.

Inclusion of women and civil society. All participants agreed that translating the normative framework on inclusion to practical action remains challenging. New creative ways to broaden participation and include a wider range of voices in a mediation process through consultative mechanisms as well as direct participation in negotiations are required. An early engagement with the mediation team, including assistance with analysis, is needed for mediation support to influence the mediation strategy and assist the teams in designing more inclusive processes. Participants noted, however, that this was often challenging due to the political pressure mediators face to demonstrate quick momentum on the ground, resulting in insufficient time for strategizing and planning. Participants emphasized the importance of conflict analysis, both to ensure the inclusion of gender perspectives in the process design and the to test some of the assumptions of the mediation team. Skipping the critical phase of analysis and strategy development risks processes being designed based on an oversimplified understanding of the conflict dynamics. Weak and non-gendered conflict analysis also tend to result in processes being designed around traditional notions of power and power sharing, excluding stakeholders who are not politically or militarily organized.

Communication tools and social media. Interacting with media and making use of social communication tools presents a challenge for mediation processes. Participants noted that mediators often find it difficult to manage the public narrative surrounding the peace processes. Lack of knowledge of various media platforms and how they relate to different parts of the society in a given conflict context weakens the mediator's ability to communicate efficiently on the process. Guided by an external expert, the participants reflected on media as part of a mediation process, highlighting the importance of undertaking a media mapping as part of the conflict analysis in order to use different media platforms and messages to reach different interest groups, and noting that a fragmented media environment can further deepen the rifts between different political views and stakeholder groups. Addressing rumors was flagged as a particular challenge that needs to be taken into account in the mediator's media strategy.

Mediation efforts at subnational and local levels. Peace processes develop at different societal levels each requiring tailored response. Conflicts within or among communities may not always require a national level political response; however, when they do, the interlinkages must be identified, analyzed and considered in process design both at national and local level processes. Some mediation support offices support facilitation of local disputes as part of subregional early warning and action mechanisms. Some focus on supporting national and local mediators with capacity building. Some support the work done by networks of local interlocutors. In order to respond effectively to the fragmentation of groups and the localization of grievances often found in contemporary conflicts, mediation (support) actors will have to learn how to engage with and take into account local dynamics, while being mindful of the limitations, both in terms of mandate and capacity, of intergovernmental organizations to engage at the community level.

Promotion of mediation support and cooperation

On the final day of the workshop, the mediation support offices explored different ways in which they could 1) promote mediation support services within their own organizational structures and beyond; and, 2) concrete areas in which mediation support offices could deepen their cooperation going forward.

Promotion of mediation support. Mediation support has received a lot of attention in recent years leading to the establishment of more mediation support capacities within intergovernmental organizations; this same trend has led to the establishment of similar capacities within the national structures of some member states. However, much work still needs to be done to increase understanding of what mediation support services can provide and how such services can be accessed. Initiatives to increase awareness could include regular briefings on mediation support activities to decision-makers of the given organization and providing periodic reports and exchanges of information with member states. Some participants underscored the need for mediation support structures to build a track record to demonstrate added value and establish their role in the internal processes related to the organizations activities in good offices, mediation and dialogue. This would lead to better understanding of the complementary nature of mediation support vis-à-vis political offices. Capacity building efforts can provide one such tool for raising awareness within a given organization, including its senior leadership, about the value of mediation support as a professional in-house service.

Many participants agreed on the need to move from referring to a “normative capacity”, such as rosters or standard operating procedures, to using mediation support units in practice to shape and improve peace processes. Mediation support units are often structures with a transformative mindset and an entrepreneurial spirit, which needs to be preserved. Building on knowledge management products, mediation support structures should excel in drawing lessons from past engagements to improve future mediation support efforts.

Partnerships and cooperation among mediation support offices. The participants discussed some ideas for possible ways forward:

- Facilitating staff exchange visits to increase exposure to and ability to learn from different organizational practices;
- Developing technical-level workshops on dedicated topics related to mediation support to strengthen the capacities of mediation support professionals to deliver services;
- Hosting retreats for special envoys/representatives from different organizations covering the same regions or dealing with similar dynamics;
- Investing in thematic collaborations around emerging issues such as natural resources, transhumance, etc.;
- Holding structured and regular consultations between the mediation support structures, including continuing the biennial meetings among mediation support structures to provide mutual support;
- Sharing information on publications, training opportunities and research through a periodic group email.