

Engaging at the Local Level: Options for UN Mediators

DPPA Practice Note



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This Practice Note outlines circumstances under which more direct involvement with local conflicts and mediation processes might be strategically relevant for United Nations mediators working on national political processes.¹ These circumstances are identified alongside a spectrum of options for engagement. The Note further includes a set of questions that may serve as an operational tool.

This Note was prepared by the Mediation Support Unit of the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) and is primarily aimed at UN envoys and representatives, Resident Coordinators and senior mediators involved in supporting national-level political processes in UN mission and non-mission settings. At a working level, it is intended to be of use to the wide range of UN actors assisting these senior officials, including political and civil affairs units and Peace and Development Advisers. In addition, the Note may be of interest to other UN actors or external mediation practitioners engaging at multiple levels across the conflict spectrum.

¹ The Note builds on the insights, reflections and guiding principles contained in the 2020 publication “UN support to local mediation: challenges and opportunities”. See: Mediation Support Unit, Policy and Mediation Division, UN DPPA, 2020.

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I. Introduction

The complexity of contemporary conflict requires UN mediators to recognize and evaluate the interconnections between local conflicts and national political processes.² This is particularly relevant in highly fragmented intra-State conflict settings where an abundance of agendas, actors and initiatives shape the dynamics of conflict and prospects for peace.

There is increasing recognition that multilevel mediation strategies that integrate local initiatives are essential to preventing and effectively ending violent conflict and building peace in a sustainable manner.³ Emerging research provides compelling evidence that where civic actors and multilateral bodies such as the UN are involved in local mediation processes, agreements are more likely to be reached and to be durable.⁴

This highlights the need for the UN to pay closer attention to local processes and their interplay with national-level mediation efforts. Being aware of local conflicts, and their trends and shifting dynamics, is an important first step in understanding the potential they have to impact on a national mediation initiative.⁵

In certain circumstances, engagement with local processes may strengthen national peacemaking efforts.

The identification of local mediation opportunities requires consideration of the mandates defining the UN role and presence in a particular context. Several country-specific UN Security Council resolutions include mandated responsibilities in relation to local conflict.⁶ In addition, UN officials are expected to promote cross-cutting norms and legal obligations, such as the protection of civilians; Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security, youth, peace and security, children and armed conflict; as well as international humanitarian law and international human rights law. These principles are likely to be at stake in local conflicts.

Alongside due consideration of mandated responsibilities, proactive interaction with the political dynamics of local conflict requires an adaptive strategy that can help to ensure a coordinated and cohesive UN system-wide approach. Strategies are most likely to yield sustainable outcomes if founded on a thorough gender-sensitive analysis of the local peace and conflict dynamics. Such analysis considers

² Local conflicts can be understood as “involving violence or the risk of violence [...] centred at the subnational level”. As such, they “can be contrasted with national-level conflicts (with significant involvement by the national government and/or parties from a wide swath of the country) or international-level conflicts (with significant involvement by national governments or parties from multiple countries)”. Aditi Gorur and Madeline Velluro, “Local conflict, local peacekeeping”, Stimson Center, 2017, p. 7.

³ For the purpose of this Note, local mediation is understood as often including conflict management, conflict resolution, and conflict transformation processes.

⁴ See, for example, Mary Kaldor, Marika Theros and Rim Turkmani, “War versus peace logics at local levels: findings from the conflict research programme on local agreements and community level mediation”, Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2021, p. 5.

⁵ It is also important to acknowledge that local peace initiatives are valuable in and of themselves and should not be seen simplistically or exclusively in terms of their potential to impact on national processes, or as a substitute for progress at the national level.

⁶ At the time of writing, multiple UN mission mandates included either generic or specific provisions to support local-level conflict mitigation and mediation efforts. These include mandates for MINUSCA (Central African Republic), MINUSMA (Mali), MONUSCO (Democratic Republic of the Congo), UNAMA (Afghanistan), UNITAMS (Sudan), UNMISS (South Sudan), and UNSOM (Somalia).

the gendered impacts of conflict, as well as gendered roles in response to conflict and peacemaking efforts, in part to enhance the full and meaningful participation of women.

Successful engagement builds on existing national and local capacities for peace and incorporates thorough risk assessment and risk mitigation components. This includes evaluating and addressing the risks of undermining or overlooking local capacities, as well as the risk that local mediation could displace violence into neighbouring locales. As in all conflict settings, mediators will need to weigh the risks of intervention against the political cost of inaction.

In some circumstances, the UN may not be well placed to contribute to local mediation processes. Among other factors, host government sensitivities, mandate constraints and complexities related to the presence of proscribed groups can limit UN contributions at the local level. In such situations, other actors, including local peacebuilders and international non-governmental organizations, may be better placed to play a mediative role.



Local peace initiatives should not be seen simplistically or exclusively in terms of their potential to impact on national processes – they are valuable in and of themselves.



It is critical to note that even a comprehensive analysis and risk assessment cannot fully capture all the dynamics of local conflicts. Most attempts at linking mediation tracks tend to be difficult in both the conceptualization and implementation stages. The design behind multilevel efforts could appear to be neat on paper but may not necessarily be well received by those on the ground. Humility, pragmatism and flexibility can help UN actors identify and overcome such limitations when considering suitable engagement options. The most effective initiatives are determined by contextual specificities.

II. Circumstances under which engagement with local conflict may be strategically relevant for UN mediators

This Practice Note is primarily intended for senior UN officials who are mandated to support national-level political processes. In this context, the main consideration when assessing and prioritizing local opportunities lies in the interconnections between local conflict, local mediation and political processes at the national level. The following set of circumstances is not exhaustive but provides a starting point for identifying when it might be beneficial to initiate or strengthen political engagement at the local level.

1. Local conflicts threaten or derail a national mediation process

Local conflicts have the potential to spill over into other localities, generating significant risk of an escalation of violence. At times, parties to a national political process may be implicated or accused of being involved in driving local

conflict. This can lead to calls for such actors to withdraw from national talks. In other circumstances, local parties that are not included in national processes may attempt to escalate local conflict to secure a seat at the table. In addition, national-level actors may forge alliances with local parties and exploit the conflict in pursuit of political objectives or personal gain. Such dynamics may threaten or derail a national political process.

In these circumstances, it may be appropriate to engage at the local level to contain or manage the conflict. Local mediation initiatives may offer opportunities to sustain peace, prevent or reduce violence, constructively engage perceived spoilers and create pockets of stability, even if temporary.⁷ Such efforts may cultivate an environment more conducive to conflict resolution, while helping to protect national peacemaking efforts.

⁷ In Darfur, UN-supported local mediation efforts involving rebel groups, tribal militias and Government forces helped to create lulls in local armed fighting between 2008 and 2009. These pauses contributed to an environment that was more conducive to trust-building and peacemaking efforts. Allard Duursma, "Making disorder more manageable: the short-term effectiveness of local mediation in Darfur", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 58, Iss. 3 (2021), pp. 554–567.

2. Efforts to initiate a national mediation process are slow to gain traction

Effective resolution of local conflicts can help to build momentum for a nascent or fragile national process. For instance, local peace efforts can serve as confidence-building measures for a national process, demonstrating to sceptics or hardliners that mediation can produce tangible results.⁸ Such measures can provide impetus for engagement.⁹

Local processes assume additional significance in settings where conflict parties exhibit a high degree of fragmentation. By building trust and creating a shared understanding of the potential of peacemaking, local mediation can facilitate coordinated and goal-oriented participation in national talks. It can also offer opportunities for contact and exchanges between peacemakers and armed actors who cannot be brought together at the national level.¹⁰ Local mediation processes that engage opposition groups can help them coalesce

into umbrella organizations or strengthen the internal cohesion of conflict parties. This can have a positive impact on prospects for a more comprehensive national settlement process, as groups that are more united and politically coherent are more likely to be able to engage in constructive negotiations.¹¹

3. Progress in a national-level mediation process has stalled

When parties involved in a national process are at an impasse, local processes can offer discrete tracks of engagement to help resolve the blockage. In addition to reinvigorating a national process, separate tracks can also be integrated into a comprehensive agreement at a later stage.¹² If, for example, certain agenda items are considered too divisive to be negotiated at the national level they can potentially be incorporated into local discussions with less controversy.

⁸ In Western Sahara, mediators have used humanitarian and communications-related confidence-building measures at the local level to highlight areas of shared values and interest among conflict parties. These efforts have encouraged parties to consider the more complex and structural issues underlying the conflict. Simon J.A. Mason and Matthias Siegfried, "Confidence building measures (CBMs) in peace processes", in *Managing Peace Processes: Process-related Questions – A Handbook for AU Practitioners*, vol. 1 (African Union and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2013), p. 63, box 3.

⁹ Supported by international third parties, mediation efforts in the Nuba mountains of Sudan may have given confidence to the parties and added to the momentum that led to the signing of the Machakos Protocol in July 2002, paving the way for the Comprehensive Peace Agreement for Sudan reached in January 2005. Simon A. Mason, "Learning from the Swiss mediation and facilitation experiences in Sudan", Mediation Support Project, Centre for Security Studies, ETH Zurich and swisspeace, 2007.

¹⁰ Christine Bell and Laura Wise, "Key findings and policy recommendations", British Academy et al., 2021, p. 2.

¹¹ Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, "Understanding fragmentation in conflict and its impact on prospects for peace", Oslo Forum Paper No. 6, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2016, p. 13.

¹² From August 2011, to reinvigorate a stalled peace process in Myanmar, President U Thein Sein offered to meet separately with each of the ethnic armed organizations at the subnational level. A series of local processes ensued, facilitated by a range of actors, including the Myanmar Peace Centre and civil society groups supported by international actors. The national political process regained traction, which led to the (partial) signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015 and the establishment of a national framework for political dialogue. Alexander Ramsbotham, "Deciding on dialogue: pathways out of violence for armed opposition movements in Myanmar and the Basque Country", in *Accord*, Iss. 29 (2020), pp. 27–28.

Similarly, support for local processes can assist in generating new perspectives on contentious issues or identifying local actors with alternative viewpoints. Such positions can then be deliberately introduced into national processes to enable revitalized approaches to problem solving. Local mediation initiatives may also help to identify good practices around difficult issues that can more easily be resolved at the local level. These methods can subsequently be adopted or replicated at the national level across a wider set of contexts.¹³ Moreover, local mediation processes can establish or renew engagement with conflict parties that have withdrawn from a national process or that are reluctant to participate at the national level.

4. The outcomes of a national-level process are fragile and slow to be implemented

In some settings, local mediation can help to alleviate tensions arising from the implementation of a peace agreement at the local level. The tensions can, for example, relate to changes in the agency and legitimacy of local

authorities; the contestation of new territorial or administrative boundaries; or the disruption of illicit economies and trade routes. If left unaddressed, these issues may contribute to the (re-)emergence of armed groups or new forms of violence, which may impede the full and effective implementation of a national agreement.¹⁴

Local mediation can help to promote implementation at the local level by fostering community buy-in and by building local ownership of a national agreement. After a conflict, and during agreement implementation, local initiatives can support the expansion of state authority; by creating spaces for direct engagement, they can also cultivate trust between state officials and the local population.¹⁵

In addition, local mediation can address pockets of violence where fighting continues or resurges, despite the existence of a national agreement, thereby helping to create conditions for local peace dividends to materialize.

¹³ Examples include provisions relating to rebel fighters, such as offers of amnesty or agreements related to disarmament, demobilization and reintegration. Kaldor, Theros and Turkmani, "War versus peace logics", p. 11.

¹⁴ In Colombia, significant progress has been made in ending armed conflict since the 2016 peace agreement between the Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People's Army (FARC–EP). Nevertheless, many implementation challenges remain, particularly at the local level. Among them are ensuring the security and protection needs of FARC ex-combatants, as well as of social leaders, human rights defenders and local communities in areas formerly controlled by the guerrilla group. Report of the Secretary-General on the UN Verification Mission in Colombia, S/2022/267.

¹⁵ Arthur Boutellis, Delphine Mechoulan and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, "Local mediation and UN peace operations", IPI Global Observatory, 2021.

5. Additional circumstances

While some local conflicts may not be assessed as strategically relevant to a national political process, intervention may still be prioritized.

For example, circumstances in which civilians – including women and at-risk populations – are directly threatened by conflict may present the UN with a moral or mandated imperative to intervene in local conflict and mediation processes.

Engagement may also be warranted if pockets of conflict are located in a national capital, exacerbating threats to a national mediation process.¹⁶

Comparative advantages may also compel the UN to become more involved in a local conflict because of the contribution it could make to a peacemaking process.

These advantages include the ability to work across national boundaries, play a coordinating or convening role, and deploy uniformed peacekeeping personnel to protect a process.

¹⁶ In the Central African Republic, the MINUSCA Civil Affairs Section's support to the 2016 Being-PK5 Non-Aggression Pact in the PK5 neighbourhood of Bangui helped restore security and state authority. Given the strong connections between the local and the national levels in the capital, and the networks of PK5 religious communities and leaders beyond Bangui, this engagement provided additional entry points and opportunities for involving high-level national decision makers. UN Policy, Evaluation and Training Division, "Supporting local solutions in urban settings: the case of MINUSCA in PK5 in Bangui, Central African Republic", forthcoming.

III. Options for engaging with local conflict

A regularly updated, gender-sensitive peace and conflict analysis forms the foundation of any effective mediation strategy.¹⁷ Conflict sensitivity and a careful weighing of potential unintended negative consequences are essential considerations that should accompany any strategy design process. A decision to intensify UN involvement, for instance, may draw unwanted attention to a local process

or inadvertently affect the participation of key constituencies. By the same token, supporting efforts to reach local agreements in one area may displace violence into another area.¹⁸ Local conflict mediation requires context-specific, adaptive and inclusive interventions.

Figure 1 presents a spectrum of options in response to local conflict and in support of multilevel peacemaking efforts.¹⁹ These options

FIGURE 1
OPTIONS FOR UN ENGAGEMENT WITH LOCAL MEDIATION PROCESSES



¹⁷ UN, “Guidance on gender and inclusive mediation strategies”, 2017.

¹⁸ A local agreement reached in 2018 improved the security and living conditions in the al Ghouta area near Damascus. At the same time, however, it reportedly displaced conflict and led to further deterioration in other parts of Syria, such as Afreen and Idlib. Kaldor, Theros and Turkmani, “War versus peace logics”, p. 20.

¹⁹ With acknowledgement to Simon Fisher and others, *Working with Conflict: Skills and Strategies for Action* (London, Zed Books, 2000), p. 82.

are not mutually exclusive. Initiatives are most likely to be effective if they are based on an assessment that considers the comparative advantages of the UN, the potential benefits and drawbacks of UN involvement, and available resources and capacities on the ground.

1. Monitor and observe

Under this option, the UN may choose to step up monitoring and observation of local conflict dynamics or third-party mediation processes. Just as the good offices of the Secretary-General can quietly impact international conflict and national processes, drawing attention to local initiatives or demonstrating that there is interest in a particular conflict can affect the dynamics between conflict parties. In some contexts, UN monitoring can incentivize or motivate conflict parties to cut back on acts of violence and participate in a mediation process.

A monitoring and observation approach can also be helpful in developing a local mediation readiness strategy or contingency plans in case the UN is called upon to play a more robust local mediation role. This option may be particularly appropriate in non-mission settings where a request to the UN to support a national process may be forthcoming but has yet to be received.

In addition, mediators who work on process design and on the substance of national processes may be able to draw useful lessons from observing local mediation processes. Doing so can enhance information gathering, the

analysis of connections between local dynamics and a national process, risk identification, and the design of mitigation strategies.

2. Liaise and connect

This option includes outreach to the conflict parties and different local actors.²⁰ It may involve establishing relationships and developing networks that include local capacities and civil society groups, or even purposefully conferring a degree of legitimacy on specific actors. Sensitivity and vigilance are required to ensure the approach is inclusive of key constituencies, such as women peacebuilders. Nurturing diverse relationships at the local level – through active listening and learning from various stakeholders – can inform analysis and foster deeper understanding of the interconnections and potential interaction between local conflicts and national-level processes.

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Connecting to local women leaders and ensuring that national level discussions and agreements resonate locally enhances women's participation in a peace process.

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²⁰ Engaging with non-state armed groups or illicit business actors can be contentious and politically sensitive. Related decision-making requires due consideration of UN policy and legal frameworks.

The Secretary-General has committed UN entities in fragile and conflict-affected situations to meaningful interaction with diverse women's rights actors.²¹ Direct liaison with women and youth constituencies at the local level can affect the dynamics in a local process, and can strengthen the participation of women or young people in local and national processes over time. Connecting to local women leaders and ensuring that the substance of discussions and agreements at the national level resonates locally may also support efforts to harness the beneficial effect of women's participation in a national process.

In many settings, the comparative advantage of the UN is its presence in both the capital and the field. As a result, the UN is well positioned to foster trust and build positive relations between parties at both the local and the national levels. Relationship building can also afford opportunities to influence local conflict parties, potentially forming the foundation for more direct involvement. By paying closer attention to local conflict, the UN may be able to strengthen the connections between local and national processes where strategically relevant or morally imperative. It may also help to identify certain issues or messages that the UN is well placed to raise with national level decision makers, and internationally.

3. Adapt and reposition

In responding to local conflict dynamics, UN actors may need to adapt their approach to enhance conflict sensitivity, strengthen the inclusion of different stakeholders or

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Sometimes, the most strategic option may be to take a step back so that local peace actors can lead in addressing local conflict.
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introduce more appropriate programming inputs. Repositioning may also be necessary. Examples include tactical withdrawals from certain locations, a reallocation of resources, redeployment of uniformed assets, and downsizing or recalibration of the UN presence, such as political or civil affairs personnel.

In settings where women's participation in peace processes is low or restricted, UN adaptations that promote women mediators and negotiators at the local level can advance the participation of women in national processes. Responses can include elevating the voice of women to the national level, setting goals that prioritize women's participation or advocating inclusive selection measures, while advancing the women, peace and security agenda more broadly. Such strategies need to be sensitive to traditional norms and customary practices, as well as the political and personal risks created for the women involved.

Sometimes, the most strategic option may be to take a step back so that local peace actors can lead in addressing local conflict. Stepping back also allows emerging local initiatives to gain traction and avoids unintended negative consequences, such as drawing unwanted attention, raising expectations or impeding the flexibility of local approaches.

²¹ Report of the UN Secretary-General, S/2019/800, para. 120(e).

4. Strengthen and support

In many contexts, the most appropriate form of UN engagement with local mediation processes is to identify, strengthen and support local capacities.

The UN is often well placed to use its convening power to bring stakeholders together, including conflict parties and actors with the capacity to play a direct mediation role. This approach can include connecting actors, and in some circumstances, playing a coordination role or facilitating partnerships, particularly with local and international non-government organizations, religious actors and private sector representatives.

Local processes can benefit from the logistical capacity of the UN, including transportation, access to communications technology and the provision of security, such as a safe space for meetings. The UN can also facilitate training in relevant skills and capacities, encourage the sharing of lessons learned in comparable contexts, provide technical expertise, and supply resources or funding to local processes and their outcomes. UN support for local initiatives – such as quick impact projects or targeted community violence reduction programmes – can have wide-ranging positive impacts, such as enhancing the sustainability of a UN Country Team’s humanitarian or development projects or contributing to the durability of a local agreement.

5. Initiate and intervene

In specific circumstances, the UN may be well placed or compelled to play a direct role as the mediator. This is more likely to be effective when conducted in partnership with diverse local actors.²² In most situations, the UN would need to be invited by the conflict parties. Maintaining impartiality and ensuring inclusive approaches to peacemaking should always be paramount.

While relatively cost-effective, direct intervention in local mediation processes can be resource- and time-intensive, as the management of even comparatively modest efforts requires sustained engagement. Related decision-making can usefully be based on assessments of available resources and evaluations of which local processes can be scaled up or connected to a national process.

²² Allard Duursma and Hannah Smidt, “Greater than the sum of their parts: how cooperation between UN peacekeepers and local mediators leads to local conflict resolution”, forthcoming.

IV. Conclusion

Efforts to identify the most effective interventions in response to local conflicts are connected to the specifics of the context and the strategic relevance of the circumstances that inform UN interventions.

When such engagement has the potential to support mediation efforts at the national level, UN mediators have several options at their disposal. The annex of this Note presents questions designed to help mediators refine these options.

Identifying diverse local initiatives and placing emphasis on strengthening and adding value to existing capacities forms part of an effective approach to local mediation.

Local actors are likely to have a far more astute grasp of the messiness and complexity of the conflict dynamics than an external third party.



UN mediation processes are most likely to be effective if they are planned and implemented in close coordination with local partners.



Often, it may be better for the UN to step back and leave space for local initiatives to gain momentum. In all cases, UN mediation processes are most likely to be effective if they are planned and implemented in close coordination with local partners.

Annex: Assessing the viability of local engagement



Rationale for UN engagement at the local level

- Has the UN outlined how direct involvement could benefit a particular process? Have complementary regional and local capacities and potential partnerships been identified? Is the comparative advantage of the UN clearly demonstrable?
- Would the UN have the capacities required to support a process in the medium and long term? Is there space for the process to include components aimed at establishing or strengthening local infrastructures or other capacities for durable peace? Is the necessary gender expertise in place?
- Would the UN have hard and soft capacities, including financial resources, logistical and military capacities, established networks of contacts, a solid reputation at different levels, technical expertise, and relevant skills and knowledge?
- Has the UN considered and contacted other external parties that may be supporting local actors and processes? What is the role of the UN in ensuring cohesion, complementarity and coordination across these efforts?



Linkages

- Are there early signs of political, reputational and other emerging dynamics that may threaten nascent or ongoing national-level process and that would require mitigation?
- Could the UN role be crafted in a way to distil insights and lessons from existing local processes or conflict dynamics, to help inform the inclusive design or implementation of a national-level political effort?
- Has the UN considered interconnections in the conflict dynamics across communities and localities? Has it assessed the potential impact that changes in the dynamics of one area might have on others?



Gender and inclusion

- Are the dynamics of local processes and conflicts being monitored through a gender lens, to allow for the identification of obstacles to the meaningful participation of women and analysis of the varied gendered impacts of the conflict?
- Can the UN adapt its approach to advance women, peace and security and youth, peace and security considerations that could be helpful to the effectiveness of political processes?
- What concrete measures can be taken to ensure that women are meaningfully included and that peace-making is gender-responsive and sensitive to local dynamics (such as through bold targets, inclusive selection measures and independent delegations)?
- Have women, youth groups, and traditional and customary actors been included in efforts to identify appropriate constituencies with whom to build relationships?
- Have steps been taken to include other informal groups, such as women's rights constituencies, local associations, social institutions and cultural bodies?



Risks

- Has the UN considered whether and how an adaptation of its approach would influence its reputation among the local population? Have local voices been included in the process leading to the reshaping of UN involvement?
- What are the risks of undermining or weakening existing local systems, structures and capacities by repositioning or adapting the UN presence?
- What risks could arise by inadvertently endowing a sense of legitimacy on certain actors as a result of liaising and connecting with them (as opposed to others)?

