
Introduction to the Research Brief Series

Improving Mediation Effectiveness

Background to the series

This research brief series on how to improve mediation effectiveness, jointly produced by the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) and the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD), is part of a larger initiative on mediation effectiveness organized by FBA. The motivation behind the initiative is the recognition that mediation, viewed globally and in aggregate, has a decidedly mixed track-record. By its very nature, mediation is challenging. It involves, for example, having to build relations of trust and confidence between parties who view each other with a great deal of scepticism if not outright hostility. Likewise, the geopolitical context of any given mediation effort might make the task well-nigh impossible. There is indeed a concern that prevailing approaches to mediation are out-of-step with the complexity of modern conflicts. Given such constraints, to expect a high success rate in mediation would be naïve, but there is nonetheless need for improvement.

To address this need, FBA began a series of Research-Practice Dialogues (RPDs) on how to improve mediation effectiveness in late 2021, featuring multiple in-person and virtual dialogues of various size between academic researchers, mediation and mediation support practitioners. This brief series is one of the results of these dialogues and is intended to provide practitioners, policymakers and decisionmakers with recommendations anchored in the latest research. At the same time, the themes this series covers are outcomes of a continuing research-practitioner dialogue, and each individual brief has been subject to extensive review by both scholars and practitioners. The topics of the briefs were developed out of an RPD held by FBA in New York in April 2022, and attended by stakeholders from the United Nations, FBA, academia, mediation organisations and negotiation teams. Based on this discussion identifying concrete needs of practitioners and policymakers, it was decided that there should be a focus on inclusion of civil society in mediation and conceptual challenges that affect the practice of mediation, among other topics. A follow-up meeting held in Monrovia in November 2022 further shaped the brief series in that the Monrovia-dialogue emphasized the general applicability of these themes in a range of contexts (participants in Monrovia were drawn from local civil society and government actors, international organizations, and scholars from Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America). ACCORD was brought on as a co-publisher partner after the Monrovia meeting to share their significant scholarly and practitioner expertise on mediation.

The briefs have undergone multiple concurrent scholarly and practitioner review processes. Researchers with advanced degrees and academic experience at both FBA and ACCORD have reviewed each brief at least once. Each brief has also been discussed and reviewed by practitioners and researchers at the meeting of the global Mediation Support Network in Accra in April 2023. The final round of pre-production edits was carried out by FBA research staff. All analysis and conclusions, however, are from the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions of FBA or ACCORD.

The briefs

The briefs in the series address two overarching themes in effective mediation: the need for conceptual clarity and the inclusion of civil society. These themes are interrelated, as is shown by the various authors. Each theme also has both a potential upside and a potential downside; indeed, the ambivalence around these themes is all the more reason why they merit considered attention.

[The brief by Govinda Clayton, Allard Duursma, and Simon Mason](#) examines differences in the definition of mediation between and within scholarly and practitioner communities. Their conclusion is that there is considerable ambiguity in how the term mediation is used and what processes or actors are included in the usage. The problem with ambiguity, they contend, is that it can lead to a loss of credibility due to divergent expectations, particularly around issues of consent from all involved parties. To mitigate this risk, they have several recommendations for policymakers, including to ensure explicitly clarity of purpose early on in any mediation process.

[The brief by Marie-Joëlle Zahar](#) similarly addresses the conceptual aspect of mediation but focuses on the key principles of coherence, coordination, and complementarity (as stipulated by the UN Guidance for Effective Mediation) in multi-track mediation initiatives. Zahar shows that coherence, coordination, and complementarity are easier said than done and flags the importance of addressing potential concerns over ownership of the process. To address such concerns, Zahar suggests three mechanisms to include in any mediation process: joint conflict analysis (to establish a shared frame of reference), continual information sharing, and consideration of double-hatting accompanied by a high level of transparency.

The next two briefs address the connection between mediation and civil society. [The brief by Desirée Nilsson, Isak Svensson, and Utami Sandhyarani](#) shows that a non-violent civil society can help shape an inclusive peace process and that civil society actors need to be engaged during the entire mediation process. Such inclusion requires careful planning from the beginning; civil society cannot simply be tucked into a process once it is underway. Furthermore, civil society is not a monolith and different kinds of civil society organizations have different predictions and constraints when it comes to engaging in peace processes. For example, the brief shows that, overall, youth actors are less frequently involved in mediation than other types of civil society actors, so their inclusion requires more directed, targeted, efforts.

[Tetiana Kyselova takes a different approach](#) to the question of civil society inclusion, using a single case study: the Minsk negotiations that unsuccessfully sought to end the Donbas conflict in eastern Ukraine that started in 2014. Kyselova shows that this mediation process had several dysfunctions, including profound disagreements over who the parties to the conflict were, that prevented genuine civil society inclusion. Instead, the very discussion of civil society inclusion turned into an extension of the battlefield, with conflict parties seeking to put forth their representatives, regardless of popular legitimacy, to bolster their positions. Kyselova thus argues for careful consideration in pushing for civil society inclusion, especially where the civil society concerned is not free to organise and coordinate with its peers.

Concluding remarks

The contemporary global conflict landscape necessitates more effective approaches to mediation. The transnationality of conflicts, the multitude of actors involved in the theatre of war and the human and economic costs thereof, have all contributed to the complexities of conflict. It is in this context that the discussions around the need for conceptual clarity and the meaningful inclusion of civil society present relevant perspectives. These perspectives not only reassert the value of dialogue and inclusion, but also speak to the sustainability of mediation processes. It is hoped that these research briefs will add value to the conceptual debates on mediation for both researchers and practitioners. In addition, we anticipate that the reader will find the discussion of civil society interesting insofar as it presents an important opportunity to explore the dynamics between national and local peace actors in mediation.

As researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and those with a vested interest in effective mediation, we hope that you find these analyses with their specific recommendations useful.

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