

“Trust, Threats and Tailoring” Taking Stock of Ten Years of Mediation Support

First seminar report

On the 30th of August, the European Institute of Peace's (EIP) Mediation Quality Programme hosted a seminar to take stock of mediation support, attended by key mediation support actors from the UN, the EU, the OSCE, national governments and NGOs such as swisspeace, Inclusive Peace & Transition Initiative, and Crisis Management Initiative. The purpose was to start a process of self-reflection on behalf of the mediation support providers by looking at how their services to mediators can improve. It illuminated the complex challenges that hamper increased engagement between the two types of actors, and made clear that the practitioners' perspective is necessary to move the process forward. Through this initiative, the EIP aims to support the evolution towards strengthened and durable peace processes.

Ten years of mediation support

After ten years of professionalisation efforts, it may seem as if mediation support has hit a wall. It became an important feature of international conflict mediation a decade ago with the creation of mediation support units first in the UN then later in the EU, OSCE, ECOWAS etc, in foreign ministries of governments, as well as the rapid growth of non-governmental mediation support actors. Nonetheless, too many mediation and dialogue processes are organised and managed without expert support and in ways that neglect a hard-earned set of best practices. The reasons are complicated, but are reflected in a disconnect between the kind of support offered and the requirements of particular mediation processes. Knowledge management products, aimed to inform, guide, and strengthen mediators and their teams, have unsatisfactory impact. And mediators themselves are often reluctant to seek, or accept when offered, expert assistance, even from those organisations engaging them to mediate a conflict.

In light of these challenges, the EIP set out to ask the world's leading mediation support experts: What do mediators really need? How can mediation support be refined to fit these needs? And how can the demand for mediation support be stimulated?

Creating and balancing supply and demand for mediation support

The challenge of "balancing supply and demand" can effectively be framed as managing the relationship between the mediator and the support provider. This is a tricky task, as mediators are often reluctant to bring in outsiders. In practice, relationships commonly take precedence over expertise. Building a trusting relationship with the mediator, and doing this in a consciously risk-taking and innovative way, is thus essential. Entry-points can be made smoother, by raising mediators' comfort level through prior introductions and displaying loyalty and discretion that awards the mediator with confidential and unique access to relevant people and experience.

The lack of a common understanding of mediation support, both among mediation support providers themselves and recipients, poses another set of obstacles. Even though mediation support has now been around for some time, for many it is still unclear what it entails. Convincing people who are linked to the mediator or the process of its added value and importance therefore remains difficult. The blurred lines between mediation support and mediation do not help the discrepancy between supply and demand.

The lack of a common understanding of mediation support makes it even more important that experts improve coordination and cooperation and avoid an oversupply of thematic support on particular topics while neglecting others. By diversifying and offering a wider palette of support, methodologies and approaches, issues related to overcrowding such as unhealthy competition can be counteracted. This also holds true regionally: mediation support can diversify context-specific attention and thus stimulate action in forgotten conflicts.

Institutions have an important role in stimulating and responding to the demand for mediation support through their rapid deployment mechanisms. This ensures the correct response to mediator requirements for immediate assistance. Yet, the bureaucracy they bring can also be perceived as an obstacle. And short-term deployments, as well as a lack of continuity in the processes experts work on, too often cause mediation support experts to arrive unprepared and without clear instructions. Making sure they are properly prepared is thus essential in order for them to know what type of support is expected as well as needed. It is moreover critical to effectively impact practitioners' behaviour.

The policy and practice gap

Although the objective of mediation support is to provide timely and appropriate knowledge to the mediator, it is not clear that mediation support providers understand the information needs of mediators, or how to address those needs. Mediators are faced with a variety of complex issues, so capturing their attention comes first, the details come later. But knowledge providers must hold an understanding both of what each situation needs and of the mediators' constraints and preferences in terms of time and political pressure. For example, lengthy documents are ineffective and should be replaced with one/two-page papers. Though, because of this pressure mediation support actors can be hurried into providing expertise immediately, which can cause important questions or details to be overlooked.

The production of handbooks and guidelines has become almost excessive, but are mediators' interests accurately reflected in them? Although there is extensive relevant knowledge in academia, when expertise is turned into recommendations it is often generalised to such an extent that it loses its relevance. The other extreme of the challenge is that practitioners are often provided with *death by context*: they are overloaded with information from other cases without knowing how it relates to the case at hand. This points to a lack of tailoring to the audience both generally and in specific cases. The co-production of written output and deepened communication between the knowledge providers and the recipients could remedy this as well as the poor interaction between researchers and their audiences in the field. The challenge lies in making knowledge support user-friendly and digestible, drawing out comparisons meaningfully, and avoiding generalisation.

It is also vital to manage the expectations of what mediation and mediation support can realistically achieve. Although mediators can be agents for normative change, the aim is to make peace, and a normatively anchored approach is one way – best practice would suggest the best way – to reach that end. Both academic actors and mediators need to know that mediation support actors are not advocates or campaigners, but experts using the best available knowledge, experience, and research.

The 'policy and practice gap' may also stem from mediators' reluctance to apply the work of researchers out of fear of it getting in the way of their decision-making and for feeling constrained in their actions. At worst, support experts can then be seen as a threat and at best as a brake on progress. Moreover, experts' analyses may not always fit mediators' understanding of the context, causing the tension to increase. Tensions between simplicity (of the information the mediator wants to receive) and complexity (of the conflict), and between openness and confidentiality also

present obstacles in getting the knowledge across. Researchers need to be aware of their audiences and how to reach them in order to have impact in the field. Focussing on effective dissemination can be a vital way to achieve this.

Closing the gap between policy and practice cannot happen quickly, and will require careful reflection and changes in behaviour, of mediators, the organisations selecting them and mediation support actors. The challenges relate to a third issue: understanding what triggers behavioural change in senior mediators.

Behavioural change in senior professionals

An expert on the cognitive and emotional issues common in mediation processes was invited to discuss how psychological approaches and behaviour modification practices can be used to develop effective working relationships with mediators. The role of cognitive psychology adds to the complexity of mediation support, but *mediation psychology* can be introduced without forcing everyone to become a therapist (or patient!). Many support experts already use cognitive methods in their line of work, without necessarily framing it as such. They do this by systematically trying to understand the personality and motivating drivers of the mediator or negotiating parties. It is key to understand personality differences, and to tailor the support accordingly. Practitioners are most likely to accept new approaches from people they know and trust, and they are more open to learn in an environment in which they feel comfortable.

In order to impact practitioners it is most important that mediation support actors recognise the various factors that influence behaviour, and be careful not to assume mediators are at fault when refusing to accept advice from an expert. For example, prestige can prevent mediators from acknowledging mistakes or from taking on advice and can impact the methods through which mediators tend to be willing or able to learn. Mediators may feel empowered, overconfident, or insecure. It is important to stay critical and open-minded about the channels of communication. If we want to change other people's behaviour, sometimes we need to start with changing our own. This is part of an important aspect of cognitive awareness: accepting that everyone acts with multiple biases and trying to work within this framework instead of insisting that it is possible to conduct third party mediation in a bias-free atmosphere.

These insights also hold true for the practice of mediation itself. However, despite the fact that cognitive and emotional triggers are highly relevant for complicated mediation processes, empathy, psychology and emotional drivers tend to be seen – and treated – by practitioners as either of marginal importance or as inappropriate to the subject matter. This only complicates the provision of support and the ability to change behaviour, especially if mediation support experts view emotions and psychology through a similar lens or refrain from discussing them out of fear of being shut down by practitioners. These biases are a challenge that can be overcome, however, as can be seen in the case of gender perspectives – a topic now overall accepted and generally welcomed within the mediation field. To change practitioners' behaviour, however, not only their unwillingness to use these approaches need to be overcome but mediation support actors also need to better understand how to use and frame them.

Conclusion

The three sessions of the seminar each pointed to their own set of challenges, yet the issues of trust, 'threats', and tailoring stood out throughout all sessions. Trust is a key component in mediation support that underlies all of its tenets. It ensures meaningful field access and engagement, leads mediators to employ certain people over others, and is a main, if not *the* main, requirement to achieve behavioural change. Yet the need to build trust in the fast paced and stressful environment

of peace processes can severely inhibit the ability of mediation support providers to do their work effectively.

Secondly, from the viewpoint of mediation support experts, mediation support is quickly and commonly perceived as a threat rather than a strategic resource. Being viewed by mediators as trying to impose their expertise, mediation support providers are seen as inhibitors to practitioners' range of motion. Mediation support experts are not there to give practitioners well-intentioned but unasked-for advice. Instead, they bring in unparalleled knowledge and thinking that support and increase mediators' efforts. Poor understanding of what mediation support providers can bring to the table - as an added value rather than a threat - can seriously strain the relationship between practitioners and experts.

Finally, the challenge of tailoring was emphasised time and time again. Whether it be the research community, policy makers or mediation support experts, assistance needs to be tailored to context and personality. In addition, the manner in which knowledge is transferred and expectations are managed requires proper tailoring as well. Although participants suggested a number of ways to address each of these challenges, it will be difficult to implement many of them without the cooperation of the mediators themselves.

Next steps

The above points highlight some of the core issues – and potential solutions – from the vantage point of mediation support, and can be used as a stepping stone in bridging the divide between mediation support and mediation practitioners. The seminar made it clear that mediation support experts must keep adapting, learning and innovating in order to effectively support peace processes. It is crucial for them to understand the context and the mediator intimately in order to be useful. This opened for some interesting self-reflection on the part of practitioners themselves.

The EIP will therefore take the discussion forward to enable better and more tailored support services. Particularly, senior practitioners will be approached with the challenges to tailoring, trust-building and threat mitigation based on the outcomes of the stocktaking seminar. While the discussions will be initiated from these angles, the working groups will also be open-ended to the perspectives of the practitioners themselves. The discussions will be conducted in small working groups of 4-5 practitioners, designed to tease out exactly what is required to ensure a practitioner's interest in mediation support.

The added value of this approach is to draw on the practitioners' own experience of what is working, and what needs to be improved – providing the mediation (support) community with unique insights. The findings of these working groups will subsequently be brought back to the mediation support experts, for further analysis and discussion of how to put these insights to use. Concrete recommendations will be developed on the basis of these deliberations.

Looking at both sides of the coin should help paint a clearer picture on where mediation support stands, where it should be going, and how it can be better linked to mediators. By analysing current challenges and providing concrete ideas on how to best support mediators, the mediation support community is moving one step closer to strengthening the engagement between mediation support and mediators and – hopefully – to improving the practice of mediation in the field.