



## Making international peace mediation more effective? A closer look at the rise of mediation support structures in regional organizations

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The field of peace mediation has evolved significantly as violent conflicts have become more protracted and difficult to end. In this context, the last fifteen years have witnessed a proliferation of mediation actors and mediation support structures that work, collaborate and compete in today's evermore complex conflicts. This upsurge has gone hand in hand with the recognition of mediation as a specialized activity and the need for expertise in topics ranging from ceasefire monitoring to constitution-making and inclusivity. This briefing provides an overview of existing mediation support infrastructures with a focus on regional organizations. It discusses their main challenges and provides an outlook on their value in addressing the specific regional challenges for peace mediation.

### The professionalization of mediation

While mediation is an age-old conflict resolution tool, the last five decades have witnessed increasing attempts at establishing mediation as a profession, be it at the national level through alternative dispute resolution (especially since the 1970s) or at the international level through peace mediation (especially since the 2000s).

Proponents of framing mediation as a profession highlight the importance of putting forward professional standards and acquiring specialized knowledge in process design coupled with a recognized set of method-based communication techniques (generally referred to as mediation micro-skills). Skeptics raise concerns that generalizing media-

tion experiences risks disregarding context-specific variables as well as the human, trust and intuitive element essential for any meaningful mediation process. The field of mediation is thus characterized by constant tensions between trying to establish fundamentals for mediation while acknowledging the context-specific nature of mediation and thus the difficulty of establishing general guidelines.

### What mediation support structures do

The professionalization of international peace mediation has been accompanied by the institutionalization of mediation support. This term refers to assistance provided to mediators, mediation teams or conflict parties with the aim of



advancing settlement negotiations. Services include providing 1) operational support through process design advice (on various portfolios from power-sharing to transitional justice); 2) institutional capacity-building through trainings, workshops and coachings; 3) knowledge management and research; as well as 4) networking and experience-sharing.<sup>1</sup>

These tasks have been taken up by various types of mediation support structures (MSSs)<sup>2</sup> within state and non-state entities. These structures can take the form of inter-governmental (within international or regional organizations), governmental (within Foreign Ministries or Parliaments), non-governmental (within mediation or peacebuilding NGOs), hybrids (such as cooperation projects between governmental and non-governmental institutions) and networks<sup>3</sup> (like religious, women or youth networks or networks among like-minded organizations).<sup>4</sup> In governmental and non-governmental organizations, MSSs generally constitute standing, in-house staff capacities for the support of peace mediation.

MSSs have developed an increasing number of mediation guidance and lessons-learned material. The “UN Guidance for Effective Mediation”, issued in 2012, constitutes the best-known example. The same year, the African Union (AU) – with the support of the *Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue* – published a set of standard operating procedures for mediation support. Less than two years later, the *Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe* (OSCE) put out its “Reference Guide on Mediation and Dialogue Facilitation”. Since then, several sub-regional organizations have followed suit. The *Intergovernmental*

*Authority on Development* (IGAD) and the *Economic Community of West African States* (ECOWAS) just recently released their own sets of “Mediation Guidelines” as well as “Dialogue and Mediation Training” Curricula.

Despite an upsurge in MSSs, several states have shown initial or continuing resistance to the creation of mediation support capacities as part of intergovernmental organizations as their work is perceived as risking to jeopardize their own diplomatic interests. Resistance also comes from special representatives and envoys themselves, the very beneficiaries of mediation support expertise, who can be averse to bringing in outside experts to support their teams. Additionally, regional desks of intergovernmental organizations and foreign ministries alike have questioned the value added of separate MSSs as they see mediation support as one of their own core tasks.

### The scope of mediation support structures in regional organizations

The establishment of the United Nations’ *Mediation Support Unit* (MSU) in 2006 contributed to a considerable boom in dedicated mediation support sections within regional organizations<sup>5</sup> and a mediation epistemic community made up of a network of mediation professionals from various backgrounds.<sup>6</sup> From the EU to the OSCE, from the AU to IGAD, from the *Organization of Islamic Cooperation* (OIC) to the *Organization of American States* (OAS), regional organizations have put in place different set-ups of mediation support capacities, ranging from mediation focal points to formal units.

<sup>1</sup> Stine Lehmann-Larsen, *Effectively Supporting Mediation: Developments, Challenges and Requirements*, Oslo Forum Papers, 2014, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> David Lanz et al., *Understanding Mediation Support Structures*, Swisspeace, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Christina Stenner, *The Institutionalization of Mediation Support: Are Mediation Support Entities there yet?*, Berghof Foundation, 2017, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> In the German context, the Initiative Mediation Support Deutschland (IMSD), a consortium of five organizations (ZIF, Berghof Foundation, Center for Peace Mediation, CSSP-Berlin Center for Integrative Mediation and Inmedio) works in the field of peace mediation and collaborates with the Foreign Federal Office on developing German mediation capacity. The IMSD combines features of hybrid and network characteristics.

<sup>5</sup> Teresa Whitfield, *Support Mechanisms: Multilateral, Multi-level, and Mushrooming*, Global Peace Operations Review, New York University Center on International Cooperation, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Elodie Convergne, *Learning to Mediate? The Mediation Support Unit and the Production of Expertise by the UN*, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 2016, p. 184.



Institutionalization has advanced differently across space and time. Geographically, the African context has, so far, seen the highest number of nascent mediation support structures. The AU as well as several regional economic communities<sup>7</sup> have established formal mediation units with ECOWAS<sup>8</sup> and IGAD being cited as having advanced the most in institutionalizing their in-house capacities. This stands in contrast to the Asian context, where mediation support structures have so far not taken root due to a profound skepticism towards mediation and multilateralism in a region that has generally seen less regional integration. In the Muslim world, the OIC has set itself the goal of building up its mediation support capacities given that its member states have witnessed a surge in internationalized internal conflicts over the last two decades.<sup>9</sup> In terms of pace, the EU and OSCE proceeded quite quickly after receiving endorsement from member/participating states while it took more time for the AU, IGAD and ECOWAS. The AU, for example, took several years to negotiate the institutional placement of its mediation support unit.<sup>10</sup>

### Contexts, structures, resources

A closer look at the range of existing regional mediation support structures shows that these institutional capacities differ in terms of the conflict contexts that they face, their institutional structures or composition and their resources.

Regional organizations confront distinctive conflict contexts. For example, OAS' *Section for Institutional Strengthening in Dialogue and Mediation* focusses on promoting dialogue around social conflicts negatively impacting on governance in contexts like Honduras or Guatemala. ECOWAS' *Mediation Facilitation Division* has supported

mediation initiatives in armed conflicts such as Mali and in electoral disputes such as in Guinea-Bissau. OIC's *Peace, Security and Conflict Resolution Unit* intends to specialize in the prevention of violent extremism to support mediation efforts in contexts like Somalia.

Regional organizations differ in their mediation mandate,<sup>11</sup> the strength of their Secretariats vis-à-vis affiliated states and the structures that stem from their specific institutional framework, including the place of the mediation support structure within the organization. Consequently, the use and function of MSSs can look quite differently with some primarily working on logistical backstopping or supporting local level processes and others heavily involved in track I processes. In terms of size and composition, staffing numbers vary but are growing (averaging around four positions per unit). Most sections are organized around thematic and regional expertise. In addition to its dozen regular staff members, the UN's MSU recruits a *Standby Team of Senior Mediation Experts*, counting between 8 to 10 experts (who – if required – can be deployed in less than 72 hours), and maintains a roster of experts, including around 200 mediation practitioners. Several regional organizations (such as the EU) have considered establishing their own standby capacities but have so far refrained due to financial restraints and difficulties of maintaining such mechanisms. In terms of expert rosters, IGAD, for instance, has created two rosters of mediators: one with three nationally nominated experts (with at least one woman) from all member states, the other with national technical experts for different thematic areas. OAS has drawn up a roster with 50 to 60 experts, mostly from the Americas and specialized in regional conflict dynamics.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Aeby, *Tracing Trajectories of African Mediation Support Structures: Insights from the AU, ECOWAS and SADC*, Conference Paper, European Conference on African Studies, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Brown Odigie, *The Institutionalisation of Mediation Support within the ECOWAS Commission*, Policy and Practice Brief, ACCORD, Nr. 42, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> SESRIC, *Achieving Peace and Security in a World of Turmoil: An Arduous Challenge for the OIC*, Resilience Building Studies, The Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries, Ankara, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Ndubuisi Christian Ani, Mohamed Diatta, Stephanie Wolters and Lieslo Louw-Vaudran, *The AU's Mediation Support Unit is Slowly Taking Shape*, Peace and Security Council Report, Nr. 107, Institute for Security Studies, 2018, p. 10–11.

<sup>11</sup> Laurie Nathan, *Marching Orders: Exploring the Mediation Mandate*, African Security, 2017.



Like the UN's MSU, the mediation support sections of regional organizations are almost entirely funded through voluntary, extra-budgetary resources. Donors invest differently in mediation support across regions. The donor funding in the African context took several years to take off but has steadily increased. In contrast, the Americas have received less interest and funding. In terms of personnel, the EU and OSCE mediation support teams rely on seconded staff, including from Germany. As for the main donors across the board, Germany features prominently among Finland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey.

### Selected shared challenges

The upsurge in regional MSSs offers new tools in the field of international peace mediation. Since most of these structures are still in the early stages of their mediation support efforts, the next years will show if and how they can make mediation more effective while addressing some of the below challenges.

**Gaining institutional acceptance:** All MSSs face the common challenge of having to negotiate space for mediation support. The UN's MSU took several years to establish itself as the system-wide mediation advisory section and (continues to have to) prove itself to the UN system, including to envoys and mediators themselves. Regional structures face similar challenges leading to an uneven use of mediation support capacities across organizations, conflicts and time. Interviews with mediation support staff indicate that the use and application of the wealth of the guidance material also remains uneven across organizations and mediation practitioners. Awareness-raising among senior leadership about the role and function of MSSs is thus crucial to underscore the added value of specialized mediation support expertise. Regional organizations could also consider establishing thematic in-house knowledge in topics with specific regional relevance, such as

for example, how to integrate issues relating to climate change in peace mediation processes.

**Ensuring regional ownership:** MSSs often emulate the UN's MSU as a model. This has led to the challenge of adequately adopting the mediation support capacities to regional needs and aspirations. Akin to the *African Peace and Security Architecture* (APSA), African MSSs are heavily dependent on external donor funding, most often from European countries. Western donors are criticized for imposing standards and national preferences without consulting with their partners. This kind of external donor dependence raises the challenge of securing regional ownership. IGAD has recently taken a first step to remedy this challenge by announcing a mediation trust fund that its member states have pledged to contribute to with yearly allocations. To further strengthen regional ownership, it will be important to design MSSs more effectively in accordance with regionally and locally embedded mediation practices and to provide for adequate financing mechanisms.

**Enabling long-term planning:** Mediation support efforts are primarily funded by extra-budgetary contributions and thus subject to fluctuations and donor priorities. This makes long-term planning – needed for effective mediation support to build trust relationships – difficult. In addition, the project-based nature of most donor funding coupled with short funding cycles further complicates developing long-term visions for mediation support. It will thus be decisive to create medium- and long-term funding mechanisms that are sensitive to the cumbersome nature of mediation processes.

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