

Parallel Tracks or Connected Pieces? UN Peace Operations, Local Mediation, and Peace Processes

ARTHUR BOUTELLIS, DELPHINE MECHOULAN, AND MARIE-JOËLLE ZAHAR



Cover Photo: The civil affairs division of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) leads a conflict-resolution roundtable discussion at the Gun cattle camp in Marial-bek with support from the UNMISS Lakes state coordinator's office; relief, reintegration, and protection office; human rights division; public information office; and Nepalese battalion, who provided force protection. April 21, 2015. UNMISS/JC McIlwaine.

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CONTENTS

Abbreviations	iii
Executive Summary	v
Introduction.....	1
Contemporary Armed Conflicts and Challenges to Mediation	2
The “Glocalization” of Conflict.....	3
The Proliferation of Violent Extremist Groups.....	3
The Multiplication and Fragmentation of Conflict Actors.....	4
Challenges to Civilian Protection	4
A Complex Mediation Landscape	5
Types of Local Mediation Initiatives	5
Stand-Alone Local Mediation Efforts.....	6
Efforts Complementary to or Integrated with Track-1 Processes.....	9
A Complex Web of Actors.....	12
Insider Mediators: Leveraging Local Knowledge, Legitimacy, and Interests in the Service of Local Peace	12
States: Insider Mediators Unlike Any Others.....	15
Nongovernmental Organizations: Leveraging Expertise and Resources	16
The UN Experience with Local Mediation	16
Key Considerations for UN Peace Operations’ Engagement in Local Peace Processes.....	18
The What: Are Local Processes Strategic?	18
The Who: Helping Others Help Themselves?	21
The How: Organizational Considerations	23
The How: Designing and Linking Local Processes	27

Conclusion and Recommendations.	29
Recommendations for UN Headquarters and Member States.	29
Recommendations for UN Peace Operations	30

ABBREVIATIONS

AU	African Union
CAR	Central African Republic
DDR	Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
DSRSG	Deputy special representative of the secretary-general
FPRC	Popular Front for the Rebirth of Central Africa
HD	Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue
MINUSCA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR
MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MSU	Mediation Support Unit
UNAMA	UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNAMID	AU-UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur
UNDP	UN Development Programme
UNMHA	UN Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement
UNMISS	UN Mission in South Sudan
UNSMIL	UN Support Mission in Libya
UPC	Union for Peace in CAR

Executive Summary

Local mediation has increasingly been a focus for the UN, including for UN peace operations. This is in part because of the failure of recent UN efforts to mediate national-level peace agreements in places like Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Even where such agreements have been signed, as in the Central African Republic and Mali, where the UN was not in the lead on mediation efforts, they have proven fragile. These difficulties are a function of the increasing regionalization and internationalization of conflict, the growing number of violent extremist groups, the multiplication and fragmentation of conflict actors, and widespread violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. They also reflect the increasingly complex array of actors engaged in mediation, including “insider mediators,” state structures and representatives, international NGOs, and the United Nations.

Considering the difficulties facing track-1 peace processes, UN peace operations can play an important role in supporting local mediation initiatives, whether these initiatives are separate from, complementary to, or integrated into national processes. In deciding whether and how to engage in these processes, peace operations need to consider four overarching questions.

First, what are local peace processes meant to achieve? Answering this question is critical to determining whether local peace processes will push the overall political process in the right direction. This can allow peace processes to ensure that they are not undermining track-1 processes, wasting resources, or displacing problems elsewhere. Peace operations must also determine whether there is space for them to engage as facilitators or supporters of mediation. This often depends on the nature of their presence in a country, including their mandate and size.

Second, who is or ought to be involved in local mediation processes? The UN needs to assess the benefits of working with local “insider mediators,” which often have more local knowledge and legitimacy than the UN but do not always lead more inclusive processes. The UN also needs to determine if and how to involve the state. While bringing the state into local mediation processes

can be complicated when the government is part of the problem, it is generally better for UN missions to work with existing state institutions rather than to risk marginalizing or weakening them.

Third, how should the UN organize itself to meaningfully engage in or with local processes? Peace operations should base the role they play on their comparative advantages, including their logistical and technical capacity and access to the highest circles of national and international decision making. They should also coordinate more with other UN actors. This requires UN peace operations and country teams to improve information sharing and integration, missions to better leverage their military components in service of local mediation efforts, and the UN Security Council to use tools such as sanctions in a more politically coherent way. Outside the UN, peace operations need to partner with other external actors, including NGOs. These partnerships can be particularly useful when UN missions’ geographic reach is limited or when the process involves politically sensitive actors or cannot involve the host state.

Fourth, how should these local mediation processes be designed, and what implications does this have for how they are—or are not—linked to broader processes? Unlike track-1 processes, local peace processes are often bottom-up and informal. Nonetheless, it is essential for UN missions to attempt to link local and national processes. This requires missions to demonstrate the relevance of local mediation to broader processes, determine whether these processes are “ripe” for resolution, navigate timelines that often do not line up, and consider the impact of each level on the other every step of the way.

While this paper does not advocate for UN peace operations to engage more or less in local mediation processes, missions ought to assess whether, when, and how short-term investments in local mediation can contribute to longer-term, sustainable conflict resolution. In each case, they should tailor their role based on informed strategic decisions and appropriate partnerships and as part of a broader effort to strengthen and foster greater coherence in national peace processes.

Introduction

While continuing to wrestle with the internationalization and regionalization of conflicts, the international peace mediation community has become more aware that the “local” matters. From Syria to the Central African Republic (CAR), the fragmentation and localization of conflict pose challenges to track-1 peace mediation.¹ In many contexts, national and local conflict dynamics influence each other: actors at the local level use national-level conflicts to amplify or reframe their own struggles, and national-level actors strike alliances with local actors and instrumentalize local conflicts as part of national struggles. In other contexts, particularly where the state is absent and traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms have been weakened or overwhelmed, intra- and intercommunity conflicts can develop in isolation from national political dynamics and without the involvement of organized armed actors. Whether or not they are linked to national- or regional-level competition for power and resources, local conflicts within or between communities have a deleterious impact on civilian security while carrying the risk of destabilizing national-level peace processes or being instrumentalized by transnational groups.

Increasingly, traditional mediation processes struggle to deliver comprehensive agreements that address fragmented conflict dynamics at the subnational level and include local communities’ needs. In countries like CAR, Libya, and Somalia, peace mediation strategies must address the diversity of armed actors and their distinct agendas and varying levels of legitimacy, as well as the

Mediation teams must think strategically about whether, how, when, and why to link local consultations and dialogues to formal, national-level peace processes.

complex interplay between national and local politics. To this end, mediation teams can link local consultations and dialogues to formal, national-level processes, either formally or informally. They can also work with partners to convene and facilitate subnational consultations that feed into activities at the formal mediation table. At the same time, mediation teams must think strategically about whether, how, when, and why to do this. Local mediation means different things to different people.² The term has been used variously to refer to intra- and intercommunity dialogues and reconciliation efforts, local cease-fires, humanitarian pauses, or confidence-building measures between parties to a conflict.³ It can be informal,

formal, or semi-formal, depending on the context and the local, national, and external actors involved.

While local mediation has mostly been supported and facilitated by civil society

actors and NGOs, it has increasingly been a focus for the UN. For example, the UN’s 2012 “Guidance for Effective Mediation” calls for inclusive processes that ensure the participation of local and community-based actors.⁴ The UN has provided training or strategic advice to UN field staff supporting local mediation efforts and established networks to better connect NGOs.⁵ Moreover, UN peacekeeping operations and special political missions have increasingly been directly engaged in such efforts. Secretary-General António Guterres has sharpened the focus on this engagement in local mediation. On assuming office in 2017, he called for enhancing the UN’s capacity to support national and local mediation efforts. Later that year, the secretary-general’s Executive Committee decided to strengthen the UN’s mediation

1 The notion of tracks comes from the world of diplomacy. Track-1 mediation usually refers to formal mediation involving the main political and military conflict actors. For a discussion of mediation and negotiation tracks, see: John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 1997).

2 In this report, we do not wish to impose a single definition of local mediation. However, mediation is commonly understood as a process in which a third party assists the disputing parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage, or resolve a dispute. See: Jonas Baumann and Govinda Clayton, “Mediation in Violent Conflict,” Center for Security Studies, June 2017.

3 Mediation can be used in different contexts: to prevent the escalation of a dispute or to manage violence stemming from a dispute; to address political, economic, or societal conflicts; and to resolve disputes at various stages of the conflict cycle. While mediation and peacebuilding are not synonymous, it is possible to resort to mediation to iron out disagreements related to difficulties with the implementation of peace agreements. Similarly, mediation efforts can be deployed in the context of a peacekeeping mission.

4 UN Department of Political Affairs, “United Nations Guidance for Effective Mediation,” 2012.

5 These include the Mediation Support Network and the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers. The Mediation Support Network, established in 2008, provides the opportunity for mediation NGOs to promote and improve mediation practices, processes, and standards to address political tensions and armed conflict. The UN is a member of this network, indicating that its interest and engagement in local mediation go back at least a decade, if not more.

capacity.⁶ As part of its ongoing efforts to further conceptualize local and subnational mediation and reflect upon the UN's role and added value, the Mediation Support Unit (MSU) conducted five case studies of local and subnational mediation efforts in Afghanistan, CAR, Myanmar, the Philippines, and South Sudan in 2019.⁷

There are a number of good reasons the UN may prioritize the resolution of local and subnational conflicts. These conflicts contribute to high casualties and human suffering, obstruct the delivery of humanitarian aid, and complicate or stand in the way of the ability of UN missions to fulfill their protection of civilians mandates. They pose risks to comprehensive national peace processes and the sustainability of peace agreements. If left unaddressed, these conflicts can also contribute to the emergence of more organized armed actors, making it more difficult for peace operations to implement mandates to extend state authority. In addition, when national political processes have stalled or when other actors are leading track-1 mediation efforts, "the local" may be the only level at which the UN can contribute to peace and stability.⁸

Engagement in local mediation is not without risks, however. In the absence of an overall peace strategy, it may fragment conflict-resolution efforts, especially if different local-level efforts are not linked with each other. It could reinforce harmful power dynamics at the local level or legitimize illegitimate actors. It may also generate incentives that exacerbate the fragmentation of armed groups and tensions both among armed groups and between these groups and communities.

This paper seeks to contribute to the discussion on the potential of local mediation as a tool in the conflict-resolution toolbox of UN peace operations. It considers how local mediation fits into the broader political strategies of UN peace

operations. It also builds on a series of country case studies published by IPI between 2014 and 2018 covering conflict-resolution efforts in CAR, Colombia, Libya, Mali, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, as well as case studies conducted and published by the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs' (DPPA) Mediation Support Unit (MSU) in 2019 and 2020. This paper draws upon diverse instances of UN engagement in local mediation to provide preliminary answers to whether, when, where, and how the UN can engage in such efforts. It explores what capacities the UN would need to increase its engagement in local mediation, what role it can play, and how it could better configure itself and engage in partnerships.

Contemporary Armed Conflicts and Challenges to Mediation

Recent UN efforts have not succeeded in ending protracted conflicts, including in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Where peace processes have led to peace agreements, as in CAR and Mali—two countries where the UN was involved but not in the lead—the agreements have proven fragile.⁹ Amid deep mistrust and renewed competition at the UN Security Council, and at a time when the complexity of today's conflicts is laid bare, the ability of the UN to mediate an end to internationalized civil wars seems increasingly limited.

These difficulties are in no small part a function of the characteristics of contemporary armed struggles. As summarized in a 2015 report from the secretary-general, these include: (1) the increasing regionalization and internationalization of conflict; (2) a rise in the number of violent extremist groups; (3) the multiplication and fragmentation of conflict actors; and (4) widespread violations of international humanitarian and human rights law.¹⁰

6 UN Executive Board Decision No. 2017/41.

7 UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Mediation Support Unit, "UN Support to Local Mediation: Challenges and Opportunities," November 2020.

8 It is important to acknowledge that the UN has also provided support to a number of track-1 processes in which it did not lead conflict-resolution efforts.

9 See: Arthur Boutellis and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, "A Process in Search of Peace: Lessons from the Inter-Malian Agreement," International Peace Institute, June 2017; and Marie-Joëlle Zahar and Delphine Mechoulan, "Peace by Pieces? Local Mediation and Sustainable Peace in the Central African Republic," International Peace Institute, November 2017.

10 UN General Assembly, *Cooperation between the United Nations and Regional and Subregional Organizations on Mediation—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. A/70/328, August 19, 2015.

The “Glocalization” of Conflict

The traditional distinction between interstate and civil wars has become increasingly irrelevant to understanding contemporary conflicts, many of which are best described as internationalized civil wars: conflicts “involving organized violence on two or more sides within a sovereign state, in which foreign elements play a role in instigating, prolonging, or exacerbating the struggle.”¹¹ This can be seen in the wars in Syria and Yemen, which have become entangled with regional competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia and a growing rift between Russia and Western powers, especially the United States but also the United Kingdom and France. Beyond the Middle East, this phenomenon has also been illustrated by Russia’s involvement in Ukraine and the longstanding involvement of Chad and Sudan in CAR.

National solutions often do not address local drivers of conflict and thus fail to end armed conflict at the local level.

This internationalization of armed conflict complicates efforts to negotiate solutions. External military support provides local actors military resources and diplomatic lifelines that prolong their ability to continue fighting.¹² External support can also lower the parties’ perceptions of the costs of war, leading them to seek military solutions rather than negotiate peace.¹³ The enmeshment of local, national, regional, and international issues further complicates the search for solutions. Divisions in the UN Security Council, most visible in its ineffective management of the Syrian conflict, can complicate the work of UN mediators. These divisions not only deny mediators the ability to leverage the unity of the council but can also result in competing mediation tracks or partisan interventions by regional or international powers that undermine their efforts.

Conflicts are also increasingly localized. Many local manifestations of violence are unrelated to a

country’s main conflict divide, as when local actors take advantage of a collapse of state power to arm themselves in the pursuit of their own objectives. In CAR, for example, several armed groups are motivated by local interests and dynamics rather than by national political objectives. Malian armed groups include insurgents with a secessionist agenda, narcotraffickers, and transnational Islamists alike. In South Sudan, armed violence between pastoralists and herders cannot be reduced to a mere extension of the struggle between Salva Kiir and Riek Machar; in fact, this violence predates the national conflict and has been both influenced and shaped by it.

National political solutions hammered out between the main conflict parties tend to neglect the reasons local actors have taken up weapons. Thus, national solutions often do not address local drivers of conflict and fail to end armed conflict at the local level. Local

actors who refuse to lay down their weapons can then spoil broader processes and continue to harm civilians.

The Proliferation of Violent Extremist Groups

Instability and violence create a fertile breeding ground for extremist movements such as ISIS, Boko Haram, the Taliban, and al-Shabab. To quote Arthur Boutellis and Naureen Chowdhury Fink, “Most of these groups have a transnational dimension. They can recruit, fundraise, and perpetrate attacks in places as different as Baghdad, Beirut, Dhaka, Munich, Nice, and Ouagadougou.” They are decentralized and “can leverage the actions of ‘self-starter’ or ‘lone-wolf’ actors without a clear chain of command or connection to a centralized authority.”¹⁴ The presence of extremist movements often overlaps with a national conflict as illustrated by the fact that, of the eleven countries

11 Erin K. Jenne and Milos Popovic, “Managing Internationalized Civil Wars,” Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics (March 2018).

12 See: Michael E. Brown, *International Dimensions of Internal Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996); Lotta Harbom and Peter Wallensteen, “Armed Conflict and Its International Dimensions, 1946–2004,” *Journal of Peace Research* 42, no. 5 (2005); Patrick M. Regan, “Third-Party Interventions and the Duration of Intrastate Conflicts,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 1, (2002); and Stephen M. Saideman, “Explaining the International Relations of Secessionist Conflicts: Vulnerability Versus Ethnic Ties,” *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997).

13 I. William Zartman, “The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments,” *Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 1, no. 1 (2001).

14 Arthur Boutellis and Naureen Chowdhury Fink, “Waging Peace: UN Peace Operations Confronting Terrorism and Violent Extremism,” International Peace Institute, October 2016, pp. 5–6.

most affected by terrorism globally, seven currently host UN peace operations.¹⁵ At the same time, violent extremist groups often contribute to the localization of conflicts through the connections they establish with local conflict actors. In the Sahel, for instance, jihadist militants have begun to capitalize on local conflicts and the absence of the state in rural areas to secure safe havens and new recruits.¹⁶ In so doing, they have increased tensions between communities and stoked local conflicts.

Extremist actors pose a particular challenge for UN mediators. The UN's 2012 "Guidance for Effective Mediation" argues that engaging these groups in mediation processes is necessary. However, it also encourages mediators to adhere to legal and normative frameworks, many of which are violated by extremist groups that inflict horrendous violence on civilians.¹⁷ UN member states that favor the proscription of extremist groups cite these violations and the resulting humanitarian crises to justify their stance. Yet other member states argue that engagement is necessary, particularly in light of the lessons learned in Afghanistan and Somalia, where robust action has failed to prevent extremists from acting as spoilers. Another challenge to engagement with extremist groups is that they often play the role of the state in areas where the state has retreated or is incapable of providing basic services. The pressure in favor of proscription and the transnational nature of extremist movements suggest that any dialogue with such groups will likely require mediators to change their approaches and be prepared for longer-term, more strategic forms of engagement.

The Multiplication and Fragmentation of Conflict Actors

Never has the fragmentation of conflict actors been as great as it is today. In a 2013 report, International Crisis Group identified five coalitions of Syrian opposition forces, none of which could

agree on a solution to the crisis.¹⁸ At the same time, the Carter Center documented "the creation of approximately 4,390 armed units and military councils, representing between 68,639 and 85,150 fighters across the country."¹⁹ Although Syria may be an extreme case, it is far from the only country where such fragmentation has been observed. In Mali, for example, despite the fragile peace agreement negotiated in early 2015, the fragmentation, shifting composition, and unstable alliances of northern anti-government forces remain one of the main obstacles to achieving a sustainable peace.²⁰

The fragmentation of conflict actors has also multiplied the number of agendas at stake, creating additional challenges for mediators. Mediators are faced with a complicated mix of local grievances, proxy interests, ideological or religious fissures, business interests, and criminal incentives—all in an environment where the state has lost legitimacy. Furthermore, leaders seldom have sufficient command and control to speak for their groups at the negotiating table, let alone commit their groups to implementing negotiated outcomes in good faith. Against this background, peace negotiations are increasingly difficult, and their outcomes are fragile and contested.

Challenges to Civilian Protection

In a 2019 report, UN Secretary-General Guterres emphasized that civilians continue to account for the vast majority of casualties in conflict. Furthermore, civilians bear the brunt of the short- and long-term consequences of conflict. The reason for this "lies in part in the nature of contemporary conflicts," as described above.²¹ While not directly affecting the prospects of mediation, the human and humanitarian consequences of recent conflicts bring additional pressure to bear on mediators to hammer out negotiated solutions to silence the guns.

15 Olga Abilova and Arthur Boutellis, "UN Operations in Violent and Asymmetric Threat Environments," International Peace Institute, March 2016.

16 International Crisis Group, "Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?" July 6, 2016.

17 UN Department of Political Affairs, "United Nations Guidance for Effective Mediation," 2012.

18 International Crisis Group, "Anything but Politics: The State of Syria's Political Opposition," October 17, 2013.

19 Carter Center, "Syria Countrywide Conflict Report #1," August 2013, p. 4.

20 Boutellis and Zahar, "A Process in Search of Peace: Lessons from the Inter-Malian Agreement."

21 UN Security Council, *Protection of Civilians in Conflict—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2019/373, May 7, 2019, pp. 6–7. This assessment is shared by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program.

A Complex Mediation Landscape

To make things even more complicated for UN mediators, a number of other actors are now claiming the mantle of mediation. While the UN “Guidance for Effective Mediation” identifies coordination and collaboration as one of the essential principles to achieving sustainable peace, the multiplication of mediation actors has led to more competition than collaboration.²² Regional powers have increasingly announced initiatives to end conflicts in neighboring countries. For example, Egypt, Russia, and Saudi Arabia have each launched mediation initiatives to resolve the war in Syria. Algeria also launched a mediation process in Mali and has made little secret of its ambition to one day mediate an end to the crisis in Libya.

Regional organizations have also increasingly taken the lead in mediating peace agreements. For example, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has led the peace process in South Sudan, and the African Union (AU) led the 2019 peace process in CAR. In these and other instances, the hidden—or not so hidden—interests of regional mediators and their reluctance to accept UN support have posed challenges to the UN. Moreover, because the UN has peace operations in these theaters, it often finds itself in charge of implementing agreements that it only partially shaped. For instance, with its 12,000 peacekeeping troops and expertise in security sector reform and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), the UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA) found itself playing a lead role in supporting the implementation of the vaguely drafted security provisions in Mali’s 2015 peace agreement.

In addition to governments and regional organizations, international mediation NGOs have stepped into the fray, taking advantage of their greater room to maneuver as non-state actors, which allows them to open channels of communications with proscribed groups.²³ Local, or “insider,” mediators have also played a growing role, and

local civil society increasingly demands to be included in mediation processes.

As they look at this picture, some mediation actors have proclaimed the end of “grand bargains.”²⁴ Others, while not going that far, have acknowledged that the nature of contemporary armed conflict creates serious challenges for traditional mediation efforts. It is against this complex backdrop, with changes both in the nature of armed conflict and in the field of mediation, that UN peace operations have increasingly engaged in local mediation. But what is local mediation? When should the UN engage in it, and in what capacity? And how does it—or should it—link to track-1 mediation efforts?

In the following two sections, we offer a typology of local mediation initiatives, as well as an overview of the types of mediation actors involved. We then offer key considerations for analyzing and assessing these initiatives and address the linkages between local mediation and national peace processes. We also address the implications this has for whether and how the UN decides whether or not to support such initiatives, how it prioritizes such engagement, and what resources it allocates for it.

Types of Local Mediation Initiatives

Local mediation means different things to different people. It can range from intra- or intercommunity dialogues and reconciliation efforts to local cease-fires, humanitarian pauses, and confidence-building measures between conflict parties. Local mediation can be informal, formal, or semi-formal, depending on the context and the local, national, and external actors that are at the table or involved in facilitating or mediating. In many cases, local mediation efforts are ad hoc, short-term, and aimed at alleviating the suffering of people by managing, and hopefully deescalating, local tensions and violence. But they can also help prevent electoral violence, agro-pastoralist conflicts, or conflict over natural resources. Even

22 UN Department of Political Affairs, “United Nations Guidance for Effective Mediation,” 2012.

23 Among the most well-known are the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), Swisspeace, and the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI).

24 Meredith Preston McGhie, “Pluralism and Peace in a Fragmenting World: What Is Canada’s Role?,” Global Centre for Pluralism, October 27, 2016.

when focused on resolving rather than preventing conflict, they can help reduce the fragmentation of warring parties and support, complement, or foster inclusivity in formal track-1 negotiation processes or the implementation of peace agreements. In a few cases, they have even engaged proscribed or criminal groups that were not part of the formal peace process.²⁵

This report categorizes local mediation initiatives based on two factors: (1) their primary objective, whether to prevent, manage, or resolve local violence; and (2) their relationship to track-1 processes, whether they complement these processes (either informally or by being formally “integrated” into the track-1 process) or are parallel or standalone processes dealing with issues that cannot be addressed as part of formal mediation efforts or with local manifestations of violence that are not linked to the broader conflict. This classification thus situates local mediation efforts along two dimensions.

These are captured in Figure 1, which uses circular quadrants to indicate whether these efforts aim to prevent, manage, or resolve violence and a set of concentric circles to indicate their relationship to the formal track-1 processes UN peace operations are generally most directly involved in.

Stand-Alone Local Mediation Efforts

Local mediation does not simply deal with the local reverberations of national issues. With the increasing localization of conflict, many mediation efforts address local issues that may have little to do with the broader conflict and are not linked to formal track-1 processes. These efforts may be aimed at preventing foreseeable or cyclical violence such as violence erupting around contested

elections or agro-pastoralist conflicts. More often, however, these efforts are geared toward managing violence, creating pockets of stability to protect communities from a conflict happening at the national level, or alleviating the suffering of populations. These efforts usually result in short-term, ad hoc deals (local cease-fires, humanitarian pauses, etc.), but in some cases they have helped build confidence beyond the local level and opened space for political dialogue at the national level.

Cattle Conferences in South Sudan²⁶

In South Sudan, cattle are increasingly a source of conflict, particularly in the center of the country, where conflicts that “used to be solved with fistfights” now feed into the national-level conflict between Dinka and Nuer communities.²⁷ To address these conflicts, the UN mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has sought to learn from the local conflict-resolution efforts of communities on the border between Sudan and South Sudan. These communities developed an agreement over transhumance routes that evolved into a border-monitoring committee when South Sudan became independent.

At the initiative of UNMISS’s civil affairs section, a group of national parliamentarians, youth leaders, and other community leaders from the affected states were sent to Aweil state in the Bahr el-Ghazal region to learn about the border-monitoring committee. This was the first of five conferences in the Bahr el-Ghazal and Equatoria regions that brought together stakeholders to discuss the issues, jointly plan migration routes, and thereby lessen the risk of conflict and violence. The decision to hold conferences in different locations across the area affected by the conflict was intended to disseminate information about the process and get community buy-in. Led by communities and supported by

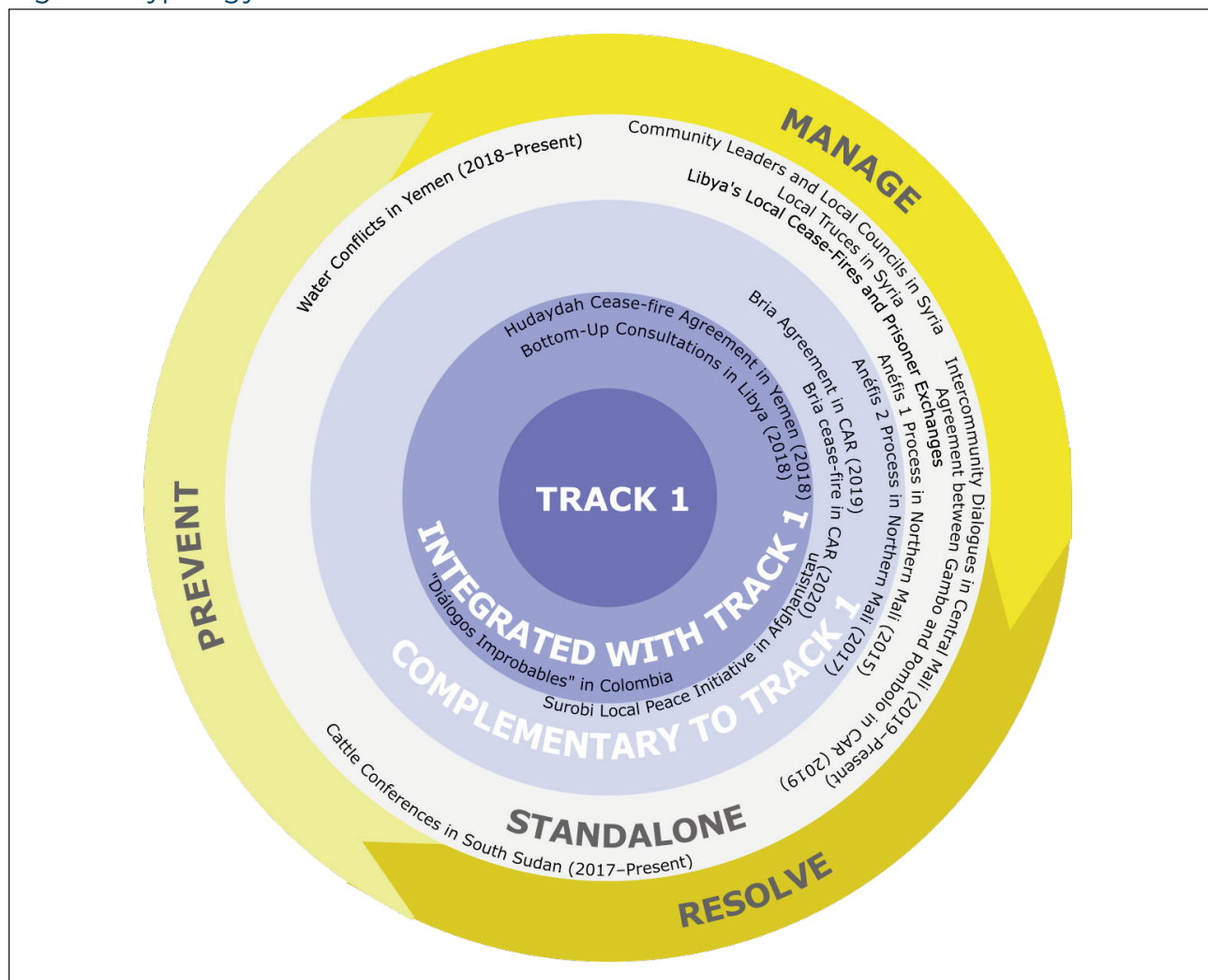
Local mediation does not simply deal with the local reverberations of national issues. Many mediation efforts address local issues that have little to do with the broader conflict.

²⁵ We take an agnostic position regarding what constitutes success. This issue is hotly debated among practitioners, with some arguing that as long as local mediation stops violence, even if only in the short term, it ought to be considered a success. Others argue that local processes are only “successful” to the extent that they “add up” and contribute to broader conflict-resolution dynamics at the national level. Others still contest this position, arguing that most track-1 processes lack credibility and legitimacy and that connecting local processes to such flawed national processes ought not to be considered a success. At the end of the report, we come back to the issue of success, underlining the difficulties caused by the lack of agreement on a common definition and metrics.

²⁶ This builds upon a case study developed by DPPA/MSU conducted in 2019 and presented at a workshop on UN experiences with local mediation at UN headquarters in June 2019. An abbreviated version of this case study is included in DPPA/MSU’s publication “UN Support to Local Mediation: Challenges and Opportunities.”

²⁷ It must be noted that the Dinka and Nuer have been mobilized by what began as a political struggle between President Salva Kiir and then Vice-President Riek Machar, which has engulfed the country in violence.

Figure 1. Typology of local mediation efforts



governors, this process built on provisions in the South Sudanese transitional constitution of 2011 that recognize customs and traditions as a source of legislation and recognize the role of traditional authorities in dispute resolution.

UNMISS has played a support role in the process. It has provided transport to participants, helped set the agenda, and assisted with troubleshooting. Partnerships with other international actors have also been key to the success of the process. The US Agency for International Development's (USAID) VISTAS program (Viable Support to Transition and Stability) and the UN Development

Programme (UNDP) have trained participants. UNMISS and USAID also provided the maps that allowed conference participants to plan cattle migration routes.

Water Conflicts in Yemen²⁸

In 2018, in Al-Haymatain, a remote area of Yemen's Taiz governorate, two communities were threatening each other over access to water.²⁹ Muna Luqman, a peace activist, sent in a team of engineers to try to prevent the conflict from escalating. Luqman, the founder of Food4Humanity, a women-led civil society organi-

²⁸ Kira Walker, "On the Frontline of War, Yemeni Women Are Building Peace," *Equal Times*, April 27, 2020.

²⁹ Taiz is a strategic governorate in the ongoing conflict between the government of Yemen, supported by a Saudi-led coalition, and the Houthi rebels. While the conflict over water was not directly related to the larger political struggle, its aim was to prevent further violent dynamics from tearing apart a region and communities already affected by war.

zation that provides emergency relief, training, and livelihood programs, launched a mediation process as a result of which sixteen community representatives signed a local peace agreement and formed a council to prevent future water conflicts. Food4Humanity used funds raised by Yemeni women from the diaspora to repair the local water station. At the end of March 2020, Luqman mediated a similar water conflict in another part of Taiz governorate. Luqman's experience mediating such conflicts made her realize that water could be an entry point for peace. As a result, Food4Humanity launched Water4Peace, an initiative to empower women and youth to improve access to water, raise awareness, and launch income-generating projects as a way to prevent violence and build peace.

Syria's Community Leaders and Local Councils³⁰

In Syria, community leaders have played an important role in deescalating localized conflicts in places like Daraa and Sweida. In Idlib and Aleppo, they were involved in negotiating the release of detained and abducted persons and in mediating between armed factions. Typically, the community leaders involved in such efforts are traditional notables—clan patriarchs and members of powerful local families, well-regarded professionals such as lawyers and doctors, and persons associated or in good standing with the various brigades.

In areas outside of the Syrian government's control, local councils established to run daily community affairs have also played an active role in resolving conflicts, mostly related to localized social infractions and tensions, including in Aleppo. However, most of the local deals in Syria constitute "rather small islands of temporary stability and are extremely vulnerable and insufficiently connected to each other and to internal as well as external support networks."³¹

Syria's Local Truces

Since 2014, the Syrian Ministry of Reconciliation has pursued local truces ("hudnas") in the Damascus suburbs, Homs, Aleppo, and Ras al-Ayn.³² Often prompted by a deterioration in local living conditions due to long sieges and restrictions on access to basic foodstuffs and essential medication, these truces have often collapsed shortly after being negotiated. When they have held, the Syrian government has failed to implement key elements of the deals.³³ The local cease-fires have thus come to be equated with terms of surrender in opposition circles. External actors involved (or perceived to be involved) in facilitating such deals have faced reputational risks. UN Envoy Staffan de Mistura learned this the hard way when, following his attempt to negotiate a conflict freeze in Aleppo, his legitimacy and credibility as an impartial mediator was questioned by a number of opposition armed factions in the lead-up to consultations in Geneva.

Libya's Local Cease-Fires and Prisoner Exchanges

In Libya, as a political and military stalemate between the two camps emerged in 2015, civil society leaders, influential elders, and notables, as well as some local commanders, played a key role in negotiating local cease-fires, prisoner exchanges, and the reopening of communication channels. Conducted independently of the political process led by the UN special political mission (UNSMIL), these efforts met varying degrees of success. For example, "in the Nafusa Mountains, where traditions and experiences of local mediation and conflict-resolution in factional conflicts are well-anchored, the initiatives proved somewhat successful, confirming the widely-held view that any solution to the Libyan crisis has to involve local actors."³⁴ However, in southern Libya, where competition over natural resources is greater, local mediation has proven more challenging.

30 Swisspeace, Conflict Dynamics International, and FarikBeirut.net, "Inside Syria: What Local Actors Are Doing For Peace," January 2016.

31 Ibid.

32 See, for example: Hassan Hassan, "Hope Springs in Syria? How Local Ceasefires Have Brought Some Respite to Damascus," *Foreign Affairs*, January 22, 2014; and Rim Turkmani, Mary Kaldor, Wisam Elhamwi, Joan Ayo, and Nael Hariri, *Hungry for Peace: Positives and Pitfalls of Local Truces and Ceasefires in Syria* (London: London School of Economics and Politics, 2014).

33 Ibid. See also: Nadim Houry, "Making Local Ceasefires Work in Syria," Open Democracy, December 13, 2014; "Ceasefires in Syria: Oases and Mirages," *The Economist*, March 14, 2014.

34 Virginie Collombier, "Dialogue, Mediation and Reconciliation in Libya's Local Conflicts," in *Inside Wars: Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya*, Luigi Narbone, Agnès Favier, and Virginie Collombier, eds. (Florence: European University Institute, 2016).

In the beginning, local mediation was not high on the agenda of UNSMIL, even though the mission did engage with local notables and community leaders in the context of efforts to kickstart a broad-based national dialogue (see below). But the mission's role in local mediation has grown as it has sought to capitalize on local initiatives. While UNSMIL has sometimes focused on mediating or supporting short-term solutions to local-level conflicts, such as cease-fire agreements, it has also launched more comprehensive reconciliation processes in search of long-term solutions.³⁵

Intercommunity Dialogues in Central Mali

From 2013 to 2016, while national and international attention focused on the conflict in northern Mali, instability and armed violence spread in central Mali, resulting in deadly intercommunity clashes. In response, in 2017, the government of Mali launched a plan to support national and subnational reconciliation support teams. In the face of persisting violence, in 2019, the government set up a "Concertation Framework" at both the national level (Bamako) and the subnational level (Mopti) that brought together various national and international stakeholders active in central Mali. However, these efforts did not represent all relevant communities or adequately address local land conflicts, which the state had lost its capacity to regulate in a peaceful way that was acceptable to all.³⁶ Furthermore, although the state has often promoted intercommunity dialogues over the years, it has failed to translate the outcomes of these dialogues into a political process or to address its own structural shortcomings.³⁷ The August 2020 coup that followed months of civil protests and was led by military officers, many of whom had served in central Mali, and the current transition period could further delay prospects for a political process in central Mali.

Meanwhile, facilitating the implementation of a comprehensive, politically led strategy in central Mali was added as a new strategic priority for MINUSMA in 2019. This gave new life to the mission's mandate "to exercise good offices, confidence-building and facilitation at the national and local levels" and "to support efforts to reduce intercommunal tensions."³⁸ MINUSMA has increased its programmatic engagement on pastoralism-related insecurity through the creation of early-warning systems and the deployment of peacekeepers to protect wells and marketplaces. It has also supported the government's dialogue and reconciliation initiatives, including by directly supporting intercommunity dialogues, as in the villages of Somadougou and Ogossogou in the Mopti region in the first half of 2020, where local peace deals paved the way for the return of 500 displaced persons to the town of Djenné. However, without a formal political process to resolve the violence in central Mali, without a functioning state at the local level, and given the lack of clarity on who the belligerents are, these efforts have focused on managing rather than resolving the conflict.³⁹

Efforts Complementary to or Integrated with Track-1 Processes

Local mediation processes can also complement a formal track-1 peace process, either informally or by being formally integrated into it. Complementary local processes can serve to open political space, overcome sticking points, or foster inclusiveness in formal negotiations. Following the signing of a national peace agreement, they can also support the agreement's implementation, foster broader community buy-in, and reinforce national and local institutions that provide basic services. However, linkages between local and national processes are no guarantee against renewed violence.

35 José S. Vericat and Mosadek Hobrara, "From the Ground Up: UN Support to Local Mediation in Libya," International Peace Institute, June 2018.

36 International Crisis Group, "Central Mali: Putting a Stop to Ethnic Cleansing," March 25, 2019.

37 Ferdaous Bouhrel, "Les rencontres intercommunautaires comme outil de 'pacification par le bas' au Mali: Croyances, usages et limites d'une politique de substitution (1990–2019)," *Afrique contemporaine* 3–4, nos. 267–68 (2018).

38 UN Security Council Resolution 2480 (June 28, 2019), UN Doc. S/RES/2480, paras. 28(d)(i)–(ii).

39 UN Security Council, *The Situation in Mali—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2020/223, March 20, 2020, para. 25; and UN Doc. S/2020/952, September 29, 2020, para. 36.

Yemen's Hudaydah Agreement

The UN Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement (UNMHA) was deployed to implement the 2018 Stockholm Agreement's provisions on the city of Hudaydah and the ports of Hudaydah, Salif, and Ras Issa. It was led by a general who also chaired the Redeployment Coordination Committee comprised of the UN, the Yemeni government, and Houthi representatives. The mission was intended to shore up the fragile agreement between local military actors in Hudaydah in the hope that this would serve as a stepping-stone toward a larger peace process in Yemen.

A UN review of UNMHA concluded that the mission has impartially monitored conditions on the ground and provided useful political, mediation, and operational support to the Redeployment Coordination Committee. This has helped the local cease-fire hold despite the lack of progress on the broader Yemeni peace process and increasing tensions and distrust between the parties. The report concluded that "implementation of the Hudaydah Agreement, although slow, is a litmus test for the readiness of the parties to further engage pragmatically to achieve a negotiated political solution to end the conflict."⁴⁰ But the Hudaydah Agreement was also "both a distraction from the core conflict, and perilous: success rested on negotiations between military actors with great potential to spoil the outcome, and its travails held progress on the larger political process hostage."⁴¹

Complementary local peace processes can serve to open political space, overcome sticking points, foster inclusiveness in formal negotiations, or support the implementation of a national peace agreement.

Bottom-Up Consultations in Libya

In early 2018, in a renewed attempt to ensure buy-in for negotiations between Libya's rival governments, the head of UNSMIL, Ghassan Salamé,

mandated the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) to carry out countrywide consultations to prepare for a National Conference.⁴² Although it did not achieve its objective, the 2018 initiative was a bottom-up, broad-based, nationwide dialogue process aimed at breaking the political paralysis that had been exploited by armed groups and others, weakening the grip of entrenched elites, and limiting the space for external meddling. It also aimed at finding points of consensus in Libya's fragmented political landscape on issues related to the conflict and the future of the Libyan state. The consultations involved local institutions, municipalities, universities, student unions, civil society organizations, community leaders, and local security and military figures, and they resulted in a report summarizing the main recommendations.⁴³ In his July 2018 briefing to the UN Security Council, Salamé described the initiative as an integral part of the UN Action Plan for Libya that "puts the Libyan people at the heart of the political process, wherever or wherever they may be. For many communities, this was the first time they had been actively engaged in the political process and consulted on the future of their nation."⁴⁴

Colombia's "Diálogos Improbables"⁴⁵

In Colombia, local peace initiatives have tried to reinforce the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement by locking in gains and preventing a slide back into conflict. One example is the "Diálogos Improbables" ("Unlikely Dialogues"), which began in the north of Cesar department soon after the signing of the agreement with support and funding from the government, including the provision of a facilitator from the Colombian presidency. The dialogues were an attempt to bring powerful local elites on board with the peace

40 UN Security Council, *Letter Dated 10 June 2019 from the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2019/485, June 12, 2019.

41 Teresa Whitfield, "Oslo Forum Background Paper: Mediating in a Complex World," Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), 2019.

42 The UN supported a similar effort in 2014 as it engaged with a group of seventy local notables, tribal leaders, businessmen, and political party and civil society representatives who had been selected to form the Preparatory Committee for the Libyan National Dialogue.

43 HD, "The Libyan National Conference Process: Final Report," November 2018.

44 Ghassan Salamé, "Remarks to the United Nations Security Council on the Situation in Libya," New York, July 16, 2018.

45 The authors are indebted to Anna Pont, head of the UN Verification Mission in Colombia's regional office of Valledupar, for the details of this example.

agreement and counter the rhetoric of national politicians who opposed it.⁴⁶ The dialogues brought together some thirty influential individuals from various segments of society with diverging views, including politicians, business actors, representatives of women's groups, representatives of indigenous people, and relatives of members of the FARC rebel group and pro-government paramilitary groups. Participants discussed the transformations needed for regional development and peaceful coexistence, particularly land issues, which were core to the conflict and needed to be addressed at the local level, even though the peace agreement provided a general framework for agrarian reform.

After the government pulled back its support for the dialogues following a change in administration in 2018, they took on a new life of their own. The facilitator from Bogotá remained involved in his personal capacity, and support instead came from foreign donors such as Sweden. The American academic John Paul Lederach, whose work inspired the dialogues, also provided advice on the methodology. The UN Mission in Colombia, conscious that some local actors perceive it as close to the FARC due to its mandate, has been mindful to "not destroy something that was working well" by getting too involved (it would occasionally provide a conference room but would not force itself into the conversations). The UN mission's regional office nonetheless played an important low-key facilitation role by helping bring the local elites participating in the dialogues into direct contact with ex-FARC commanders, thereby contributing to local-level reconciliation.

CAR's Bria Agreement

In April 2019, six Central African armed groups signed a peace agreement in Bria.⁴⁷ Resulting from talks convened by HD, the agreement sought to diminish tensions and violence between the

Popular Front for the Rebirth of Central Africa (FPRC), and the local anti-Balaka faction. Unlike previous local agreements, it included armed groups with a light presence in the area and no direct role in the violence that prompted the effort.

The Bria agreement explicitly refers to and builds upon the national peace accord signed in February 2019 between the government and fourteen armed groups, including the six signatories of the Bria agreement. While this was intended to signal complementarity with the national process and to provide the local deal additional legitimacy, armed groups have instead used their participation in the national agreement to gain legitimacy as participants in the local process while continuing to violate both agreements.

Afghanistan's Surobi Local Peace Initiative⁴⁸

In the Uzbin Valley in Afghanistan's Surobi district, the UN special political mission (UNAMA) supported a local peace initiative (LPI) between the villages of Chenar and Hussein Kheil following a land dispute that led to a violent clash.⁴⁹ Because the Uzbin Valley is off-limits to UNAMA staff for security reasons, it supported the governor's efforts to address the conflict by establishing three conflict-resolution structures. The first was the core working group comprised of sixteen respected individuals who do not originate from the affected communities and function like a traditional shura. Following considerable negotiation and encouragement, both villages agreed to let the working group arbitrate a settlement. The second was a women's working group, whose members visit tribal elders and victims' families to urge them to resolve the conflict. Over the last year, the women's working group has formalized itself as a shura and grown to twenty-five members. It has been active on many subjects beyond this specific

46 See: Plataforma Diálogos Improbables, "Diálogos Improbables en el Cesar," November 1, 2018, video, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARS-HIJfu3o&feature=youtu.be>; and Diego Bautista, "Diálogos Improbables," *La Silla Llena*, November 10, 2018, available at <https://lasillavacia.com/silla-llena/red-de-la-paz/historia/dialogos-improbables-68791>.

47 The six groups were the Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (UPC), the Patriotic Movement for the Central African Republic (MPC), the Patriotic Rally for the Renaissance of the Central African Republic (RPRC), the Movement of Central African Liberators for Justice (MLCJ), the Anti-Balaka (Mokom faction), and the Popular Front for the Renaissance of the Central African Republic (FPRC). See HD, "Central African Republic: Six Armed Groups Sign Peace Agreement in Bria," April 11, 2019.

48 This builds upon a case study developed DPPA/MSU conducted in 2019 and presented at a workshop on the UN's experiences with local mediation at UN headquarters in June 2019. An abbreviated version of this case study is included in DPPA/MSU's publication "UN Support to Local Mediation: Challenges and Opportunities," presented at the MSU workshop on local mediation at UN headquarters in June 2019.

49 Overlaying these immediate sources of anger is the impact of the national conflict on intercommunity relations. Chenar is perceived as supporting the Taliban, while Hussein Kheil is close to the government and national army.

conflict and committed to remain engaged in the long term. Lastly, two youth committees have brought together smaller preexisting youth committees in Surobi to ease the tensions between youth in the two villages and persuade local youths not to resort to violence.

UNAMA's support to these conflict-resolution structures has consisted of: (1) leading conflict-resolution workshops and trainings for the core working group; (2) meeting with local officials and others to understand and explore avenues for resolution of the conflict; (3) producing radio programs to build broader community buy-in; (4) meeting with local youth groups to encourage them to collaborate and to create a youth-led mediation track; and (5) supporting the women's working group and various other efforts. The direct costs of the project are covered through a grant from the Salaam Support Group project, managed by UNAMA's peace and reconciliation office.

The Anéfis 1 and 2 Processes in Northern Mali

Despite the signing of the June 2015 peace agreement in Mali, unresolved issues, including intercommunal and intergroup rivalries and competition over trafficking, continued to be a major source of violence between armed groups. Although cognizant of the destabilizing impact of organized crime in Mali, the international mediation team led by Algeria that had mediated the peace agreement had been reluctant to tackle the issue officially, despite several attempts to mediate between traffickers informally on the margins of the track-1 process. Instead, conflict parties initiated the Anéfis process in October 2015 as a first attempt at what the International Crisis Group called "peace from below"—efforts to complement a top-down peace agreement with a bottom-up process by addressing power-sharing and intercommunal rivalries and facilitating the free movement of people and goods in northern Mali. At the time, the international community largely saw the process as a business deal between traffickers that had the potential to undermine, not complement, the formal peace process.

Following a new round of clashes between armed groups in summer 2017 and an escalation of intercommunal violence against civilians, the head of MINUSMA initiated discreet bilateral discussions that would result in an Anéfis 2 process from September to November 2017. Unlike the first process, Anéfis 2 benefited from greater facilitation and financing by the UN mission and the government of Mali. It also resulted in a "commitments" document signed by the government, with the international community, including MINUSMA and Algeria, serving as guarantors of the peace agreement, as well as a roadmap for implementation signed in the capital, Bamako. The agreement was intended to help address underlying tensions between communities and armed groups that were not dealt with in the formal process and to help manage tensions between traffickers.⁵⁰

A Complex Web of Actors

As illustrated in the preceding section, over the last decade, the actors involved in peace mediation and conflict resolution have evolved into a dense web of experts operating at different levels and communicating with a variety of societal, military, and political actors. The main mediation actors at the local level fall into four categories: "insider mediators," state structures and representatives, international NGOs, and the United Nations. This section highlights the added value of each of these mediation actors to better understand their contributions and roles in local peace initiatives.

Insider Mediators: Leveraging Local Knowledge, Legitimacy, and Interests in the Service of Local Peace

An array of local actors, often referred to as "insider mediators," play a role in preventing, managing, and resolving conflict. UNDP defines an insider mediator as "an individual or group of individuals who derive their legitimacy, credibility and influence from a socio-cultural and/or religious—and, indeed, personal—closeness to the parties of

⁵⁰ See: International Crisis Group, "Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali," December 13, 2018, p. 17.

Box 1. Talking to “bad guys”

While not well documented, if documented at all, due to their sensitive nature, many local peace processes have involved members of proscribed groups, including self-proclaimed jihadist groups. The expressed maximalist goals and the use of extreme violence by local affiliates of ISIS and al-Qaida have generally been thought to limit the possibility of mediation. These groups have instead generally been met with counterterrorism legislation and military and law enforcement responses that have narrowed the space for negotiated political solutions.

That said, the grievances of ISIS and al-Qaida affiliates are mostly local, and some governments have sought to establish secret contacts with these groups, although they may not publicly acknowledge it. As with other non-state armed groups, local cease-fires, prisoner exchanges, and humanitarian truces can sometimes pave the way for more substantive local deals. Most importantly, these channels keep communication lines open for the groups to rejoin a peace process if this becomes more acceptable to the government or international community or if the groups distance themselves from transnational agendas and franchises.

In Syria, several local humanitarian truces have been attempted with elements of ISIS, and a few have had some success in the north and around Damascus.⁵¹ In 2014, in Libya, the UN mediated between the Benghazi Revolutionary Shura Council—a military coalition composed of Islamist and jihadist militias, including Ansar al-Sharia, Libya Shield, and several other groups—and the Libyan National Army.⁵² In Afghanistan, a local peace Initiative supported by UNAMA to deal with a land dispute between Taliban-aligned and government-aligned families provided a potentially useful entry point. The UN secretary-general himself acknowledged that discreet engagement with the Taliban, “away from the glare of publicity, has allowed positions to be clarified, while broader work with non-governmental organizations—which often have greater freedom to establish contacts and foster dialogue with armed groups—has been instrumental to success.”⁵³

the conflict, endowing them with strong bonds of trust that help foster the necessary attitudinal changes amongst key protagonists which, over time, prevent conflict and contribute to sustaining peace.”⁵⁴ Insider mediators have a number of comparative advantages but are often overlooked. Speaking to the case of Ituri in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Sara Helmüller notes that “it is often forgotten that these actors conduct mediations on a daily basis.”⁵⁵ The same can be said of insider mediators in Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere.

One comparative advantage of insider mediators is

Insider mediators are often more attuned to the local context and enjoy legitimacy and respect in the eyes of their constituents.

that they are often more attuned to the local context, particularly where international actors do not have a regular presence or even lack access. Unlike outsiders who tend to view conflicts through the main national political cleavages, local actors have a better understanding of the complex web of local grievances, whether about access to markets, land, or cattle, which are the hallmark of localized conflict. They speak the local language and are able to leverage local traditions of mediation, reconciliation, and conflict resolution. They are also best positioned to identify the most relevant actors, which is particularly important in contexts where armed groups are fragmented and

51 See, for instance, Turkmani et al., *Hungry for Peace*.

52 Vericat and Mosadek, “From the Ground Up,” p. 9.

53 UN Security Council 8334th Meeting, “United Nations Must Be ‘Bold and Creative’ in Using Mediation to Broker Peace, Secretary-General Tells Security Council,” UN Doc. SC/13475, August 29, 2018.

54 UNDP, “Engaging with Insider Mediators: Sustaining Peace in an Age of Turbulence,” April 2020.

55 Sara Helmüller, “International and Local Actors in Peacebuilding: Why Don’t They Cooperate?” *Swisspeace*, 2014, p. 16.

leaders have little command or control.⁵⁶ In CAR, for example, “[local peace committees]—more than any other actor—can spot events on the ground, identify strangers in the midst of the community, and monitor changes before these get on the radar of international actors such as MINUSCA.”⁵⁷

Despite risks of partiality, local notables, business-people, or traditional and other community leaders often enjoy legitimacy and respect in the eyes of their constituents.⁵⁸ This allows them not only to mobilize these constituents effectively but also to understand the causes of conflict and the needs of communities. In the Nafusa mountains in Libya, for example, “where traditions and experiences of local mediation and conflict resolution in factional conflicts are well-anchored..., the involvement of influential figures from local civil society (elders and notables in particular) proved key to the conclusion of local ceasefires, prisoner exchanges and the reopening of the region’s main communication axes for people and goods.”⁵⁹ In Somalia, many successful mediation initiatives between communities have been led by prominent personalities, and “in at least a few instances, Somali communities have sought out mediation or even arbitration by a respected, neutral Somali eminent person—typically a well-known elder or sheikh.”⁶⁰

Local religious leaders can often be called upon to act as insider mediators or representatives of local communities. In CAR, religious leaders played central roles in local mediation initiatives. At the outset of the conflict in 2014, a priest from Bangassou set up a network of local mediation initiatives intended to spare the town the brunt of the violence. In 2015 and 2016, another local priest coordinated a successful dialogue process between the communities of PK-5 and Boeing, leading to a nonaggression pact. In 2016 and 2017, the bishop

of Bossangoa participated in local mediation efforts that led to the signature of pacts and the reduction of violence.⁶¹ Religious and traditional leaders can also sometimes help address extremism. As Antti Pentikäinen describes, “They have exceptional connections with local communities and they can act as middlemen in dialogue with radical movements, but above all they have a key role in local peace mediation. Local peace mediation can direct local communities away from the influence of radical movements and pave the way to wider reconciliation.”⁶²

Local actors often become engaged in local peace efforts because of the direct impact the conflict has had on their lives and their personal, economic, or political agendas. In response to immediate individual or community needs, local NGOs, individuals, and community structures may provide early warning, facilitate interactions between conflict parties, serve as go-betweens, or negotiate local agreements. In Syria, for example, communities negotiated thirty-five local cease-fires between 2011 and 2014, yielding some results in terms of improved security. According to Achim Wennmann, “These local responses to a whole set of challenges were ultimately overpowered by escalation of violence, yet they show the resolve of local actors to work towards arrangements for their own survival, services, and security.”⁶³ In Libya’s Nafusa Mountains, the reemergence of old factional conflicts led local communities to realize that they “had to protect their own specific interests, irrespective of their alliances with one faction or the other.”⁶⁴ Communities proceeded to push local leaders who could be seen as neutral third parties to start mediating between the warring factions.

Business actors, a less studied category of local

56 See, for example: Juan Garrigues, “The Case for Contact: Overcoming the Challenges and Dilemmas of Official and Non-official Mediation with Armed Groups,” Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution, June 2015. This is increasingly true as armed groups and parties become more and more fragmented.

57 Zahar and Mechoulan, “Peace by Pieces?,” p. 21. MINUSCA also employs seventy-eight national community liaison assistants supported by international staff in its twelve field offices.

58 Josie Lianna Kaye, “The Business of Peace and the Politics of Inclusion: What Role for Local Licit and Illicit Business Actors in Peace Mediation?” (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2020).

59 Collombier, “Dialogue, Mediation and Reconciliation in Libya’s Local Conflicts,” p. 31.

60 Ken Menkhaus, “Mediation Efforts in Somalia,” *Africa Mediators’ Retreat*, 2007, p. 42.

61 For more information, see: Zahar and Mechoulan, “Peace by Pieces?”

62 Antti Pentikäinen, “Reforming UN Mediation through Inclusion of Traditional Peacemakers,” *Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers*, 2015, p. 72.

63 This is true despite a lack of organized civil society organizations in Syria prior to the start of the conflict in 2011. For more detail, see: Achim Wennmann, “Crossing the New Frontier: Peace Mediation in the City,” HD, 2018, p. 6.

64 Collombier, “Dialogue, Mediation and Reconciliation in Libya’s Local Conflicts,” p. 31.

mediators, often have both local influence and a direct stake in resolving the conflict. As documented by Josie Lianna Kaye, business actors represent an “untapped and unique resource” for peace mediation that, thanks to their vertical and horizontal societal linkages, are well-positioned either to mediate or to undermine mediation efforts if not sufficiently involved. In Yemen, business actors have served as benefactors, profiteers, intermediaries, and agitators. In 2011, for example, a group of leading business actors formed a behind-the-scenes mediation committee to explore options for a constructive exit for President Ali Abdullah Saleh.⁶⁵ In Mali’s Anéfis 1 and 2 processes, and in a break with past practice, local mediators were “less ‘traditional’ community leaders than politico-military leaders and businessmen at the head of armed groups.”⁶⁶

States: Insider Mediators Unlike Any Others

Due to their presence on the ground, knowledge of local actors, and links to the national level, local state infrastructures and representatives can also play a role in local mediation. Their level of involvement is generally a function both of their presence at the local level and of their legitimacy and is therefore context-specific and often personality-driven. State involvement in local mediation can be top-down, as in Mali, where state agencies and representatives have directly engaged in local mediation efforts, or bottom-up, as in Libya, where some mayors have led local mediation efforts.⁶⁷

The involvement of the state can help ensure sustained technical and financial support for implementing local deals, including through local peace infrastructures. However, state support does not mean that local state representatives need to be facilitating the talks; in some instances, they may be

more effective at “sealing the deal” after it is brokered. A good example is the role played by the prefect of Mbomou and sub-prefect of Bangassou in CAR during UN-facilitated shuttle diplomacy between the towns of Gambo and Pombolo in late 2018 and 2019. In this instance, it was regional state representatives who facilitated engagement between the communities and their mayors. This led to a peace and reconciliation agreement in March 2019 and the establishment of three local peace committees. This example also highlights the role local state representatives can play with the support of their regional or national counterparts.

However, when the state is a party to the conflict or lacks legitimacy at the local level, its local structures and representatives may be perceived as partial and thus not be well-placed to play a role in local mediation efforts. In the town of Birao in CAR, for example, deputies from Vakaga prefecture based in the capital attempted to mediate following clashes that erupted in September 2019 despite not being perceived as legitimate by the population. Because they were perceived as pushing a state agenda, other national and international mediation actors were wary of engaging with them and ultimately pushed them out of the mediation efforts.

In some contexts, “third-party” states may also get involved in local mediation, as when Chad and Qatar attempted to mediate between the Tuareg and Tubu tribes in Ubari, Libya. Such attempts are often driven by the national interest of these states, including to prevent conflict from spilling over into their territory, to project influence beyond their borders, to create a foothold for financial investment in rebuilding efforts, or to bring international exposure. Nonetheless, these third-party initiatives can bring peace dividends and be attractive to local conflict parties.

⁶⁵ Josie Lianna Kaye, “The Business of Peace and the Politics of Inclusion: What Role for Local Business Actors in Peace Mediation? The Case of Yemen (2011–2016),” in *Rethinking Peace Mediation: Critical Approaches to International Peace Making*, Catherine Turner and Martin Wählisch, eds. (Bristol: Polity Press, forthcoming 2021).

⁶⁶ Despite community and ethnic rivalries being an inherent part of the cyclical conflict, they were little discussed in the inter-Malian negotiations and were not included in the 2015 peace agreement. International Crisis Group, “Mali: Peace from Below?” December 14, 2015.

⁶⁷ See: Jean-Louis Romanet-Perroux, “Libyan Local Governance Case Studies,” EU Delegation to Libya, July 2017. A poll conducted in late 2016 testifies to the “high confidence in the legitimacy of local councils.” International Republican Institute, “Libya Poll: High Confidence in Legitimacy of Local Councils, Despite Poor Outreach by Local Governments,” November 9, 2016.

Nongovernmental Organizations: Leveraging Expertise and Resources

Several international NGOs have made local and national mediation their business.⁶⁸ In addition, myriad local NGOs, which vary greatly in terms of resources, capacity, and expertise, have extensive experience mediating local conflicts. In a crowded mediation field, many of these NGOs have tried to find a specific area of focus. HD, one of the largest and best known, has supported community dialogues on land issues and mediated between herders and farmers.⁶⁹ It has also developed expertise opening channels to proscribed armed groups with which states and international organizations have been more reluctant to engage. The Berghof Foundation has similarly focused on supporting insider mediators and has also provided support to non-state armed actors during negotiations. Interpeace has developed a “track-6” approach (a cumulation of tracks 1, 2, and 3) to “connect local communities, civil society, governments and the international community.”⁷⁰ Many of these organizations have also developed learning tools and held trainings for would-be mediators.

Other NGOs work on issues relating to social cohesion, reconciliation, and peacebuilding more broadly but have also supported mediation at the local level.⁷¹ In CAR, for example, some of these NGOs “have been involved in the development and implementation of social cohesion programs based on the principle of building trust between communities by bringing them together in joint activities of common interest.”⁷² Rather than directly engaging as mediators, these NGOs use their expertise in mediation to provide training and resources, often in collaboration with local partners or individuals.

NGOs bring expertise within their areas of focus,

and their reach and sustained presence allow them to build trust with and talk to proscribed actors. When they are focused on one conflict, as Sant’Egidio was in CAR or Mozambique, they also tend to have lower staff turnover rates and to be nimbler and more flexible than UN missions. As a consequence, they are better positioned to gain granular knowledge of the conflict and its actors and to build trust. However, as the number of mediation NGOs increases, so does the danger of competition. Several NGOs operate in the same theater in countries like Afghanistan, CAR, or Mali. Many of them also suffer from a culture of secrecy, macho leadership, or the need to demonstrate their relevance in order to secure resources, further fueling the competitive dynamics.

The UN Experience with Local Mediation

The United Nations has been involved in a variety of local mediation initiatives. UNDP has long supported insider mediator initiatives, including through a partnership with the Department of Political Affairs (now the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs) since 2004 on “Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention.” Historically, UN peace operations were not explicitly mandated to address local conflicts and lacked skilled staff and programmatic resources to do so. When they have supported local mediation, it has been as part of another mandate “rather than because [local conflicts] are understood as an integral part of the larger and complex conflict landscape that peace operations are mandated to tackle.”⁷³

UN missions’ civil affairs units have engaged in local mediation as part of their efforts to extend state authority, restore governance, and promote social cohesion. In Kosovo, for instance, the UN mission’s regional office in Mitrovica has

68 These include the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), the Berghof Foundation, Interpeace, the Conflict Management Initiative, Sant’Egidio, the Carter Center, Conciliation Resources, the European Institute for Peace, Inter Mediate, International Alert, Promediation, the Life and Peace Institute, and the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP). This list is not exhaustive. Some of these NGOs are members of the Mediation Support Network. Others are not. For the members of the network, see: <https://mediationsupportnetwork.net/member-organizations>.

69 Former HD staff contributed to establishing some of the other NGOs in this field.

70 Interpeace, “Our Track 6 Approach,” available at <https://www.interpeace.org/our-approach/track-6/>.

71 These include Finn Church Aid, ACTED, Christian Relief Services, Mercy Corps, the Norwegian Refugee Council, the Danish Refugee Council, the National Democratic Institute, and Search for Common Ground.

72 Zahar and Mechoulan, “Peace by Pieces?” p. 23.

73 UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations, “The Role of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in Addressing Local Conflicts,” 2017.

contributed to conflict prevention, mediation, intercommunity reconciliation, and facilitation between the Albanian and Serb communities.⁷⁴ More recently, a number of peacekeeping operations have supported local mediation as part of their protection of civilians mandates, including by supporting early-warning mechanisms and promoting community dialogue.

Increasingly, however, local mediation is explicitly part of the mandate of peacekeeping and special political missions, including in Afghanistan (UNAMA), CAR (MINUSCA), Darfur (UNAMID), Mali (MINUSMA), and South Sudan (UNMISS). Missions' work in this area is mostly carried out by field offices and sections present in the field that support local peacebuilding and social cohesion activities, either directly or indirectly through local actors. Civil affairs sections often play this role, as highlighted by the secretary-general in 2017:

Civil affairs components of United Nations peacekeeping operations promote dialogue between communities in order to defuse tensions and create space for local peace agreements. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) supported dialogue initiatives in that country by engaging customary and religious leaders, local authorities and representatives of local civil society organizations. The African Union–United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) has organized peace forums and peace campaigns in that region to promote dialogue between nomadic communities and farmers as a means of confronting tensions that have regularly erupted in violent outbreaks and resulted in significant casualties and destruction, thereby putting a strain on the peace process.⁷⁵

As with other actors that work in local mediation,

Increasingly, local mediation is explicitly part of the mandate of peacekeeping and special political missions, including in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Darfur, Mali, and South Sudan.

the reputation and perception of the UN both nationally and at the local level matter. When the UN presence is perceived as legitimate, the organization can put its logistical capacities at the service of convening local actors. The success of UN support to the cattle conferences in South Sudan even led to the civil affairs section being jokingly referred to as the “cattle affairs division.” Most of the UN's work on local mediation consists of support to local or national actors. In South Sudan, for example, UNMISS trained local actors in preparation for their participation in mediation efforts. Thus, the mission not only supported a mediation process but also built the mediation skills of local actors. Similarly, in Afghanistan, UNAMA, which is perceived as a trusted third party, relies on national staff to support local peace initiatives, thus building sustainable local capacity.⁷⁶

Even where perceptions of the UN are less positive, the UN can often still work with local actors. In CAR, for example, the Bangassou field office's decision not to protect civilians who were being attacked in 2017 was said to have deeply affected

MINUSCA's credibility—particularly in a context where Muslim peacekeepers were often associated with Muslim armed groups. However, the field office was able to turn this situation around, in particular when it supported shuttle diplomacy between the towns of Gambo and Pombolo in 2018. Subsequently, MINUSCA has been engaged in at least ten local mediation and dialogue processes across the country.

Opportunities for local mediation often depend on the UN's role and mandate in a given country. When missions are explicitly mandated to support the government, as is the case for MINUSMA and MINUSCA, their association with national political actors may dent their legitimacy or access at the local level. In other settings, such as the DRC, a mission's countrywide presence and the prolifera-

⁷⁴ These efforts do not seem to have yielded sustainable results. However, that does not mean that they should be discounted. See: UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Interim Administration in Kosovo*, UN Doc. S/2013/254, para. 16.

⁷⁵ UN General Assembly, *United Nations Activities in Support of Mediation Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. A/72/115, June 27, 2017.

⁷⁶ This section is based on the DPPA/MSU publication “UN Support to Local Mediation: Challenges and Opportunities.”

tion of local conflicts establish the UN as the mediator by default.

However, even when local actors and communities turn to the UN, a mission's field offices may be constrained in their ability to engage in local mediation processes because of their limited human resources and lack of mediation specialists. The experience of MINUSCA, which received support in the form of mediation expertise and hired staff with mediation experience, is the exception rather than the rule. More common is the experience of the UN Support Office in Somalia (UNSOM), which has requested training from MSU due to a lack of capacity. It is because of this lack of mediation expertise that the UN created its Standby Team of Senior Mediation Advisers in 2008.

In non-mission settings, UN agencies and representatives have also supported local mediation, particularly in the context of support to electoral processes, social cohesion, and peacebuilding. In such contexts, the UN may face greater constraints, particularly where there are established insider mediators or where state agencies and representatives are directly engaged in local mediation efforts and may perceive UN engagement as an encroachment. Recognizing this limitation and acknowledging the role of insider mediators, UNDP and some resident coordinators—sometimes with support from peace and development advisers, the UN Peacebuilding Support Office, and the Peacebuilding Fund—have sought to build the mediation capacities of national and local actors.

UN humanitarian actors such as the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as well as nongovernmental humanitarian actors, have also engaged in humanitarian mediation or negotiation efforts at the local level to provide access to their teams and facilitate the provision of humanitarian assistance. In South Sudan, for example, WFP has negotiated local humanitarian truces and cease-fires to enable humanitarian access in remote locations. In CAR, OCHA was the

first actor to engage with armed groups when violence erupted in December 2013, mediating between armed groups and besieged communities over a slew of issues.⁷⁷ The Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation has recently enhanced its training for “frontline negotiators” to support humanitarian workers engaging in such negotiations.

Key Considerations for UN Peace Operations' Engagement in Local Peace Processes

The engagement of peacekeeping and special political missions in local mediation initiatives can help address local grievances and promote inclusion. However, local initiatives vary greatly in terms of their objective and their relation to formal track-1 processes, and a wide range of actors either conduct or support such efforts. This diversity of local and subnational processes points to a set of key considerations for analyzing and assessing them: What are they meant to achieve, and how strategic are they? Who do they include, and are they more inclusive than track-1 processes? And, most importantly, how are they conceived (top-down or bottom-up, formal or informal, with what state representation), and how are they linked to track-1 processes?

These considerations have implications for whether and how UN peace operations decide to engage, what to prioritize in their engagement, and what resources to allocate to local mediation. Regardless of to what extent peace operations engage in local mediation processes, these considerations can assist them in engaging in the manner most likely to support the successful implementation of their mandates.

The What: Are Local Processes Strategic?

The first set of considerations relates to what local peace processes are meant to achieve. Many of the

⁷⁷ HD, “Humanitarian Mediation: Case Study Debate,” Geneva, October 25, 2016, available at <http://frontline-negotiations.org/annual-meeting/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/CCHN-Proposed-Outline-Debate-4-Mediation-Case-Study-2016-10-21.pdf>.

processes reviewed above were creative but also ad hoc and opportunistic. This is not necessarily a bad thing in that many local processes, even as they remain separate from track-1 processes, have successfully (although temporarily) alleviated human suffering in countries torn apart by protracted conflict. However, the deals resulting from such processes are rarely sustained, since they are often under-resourced and remain under siege from national and sometimes regional conflict dynamics. Nonetheless, some local processes strategically complement track-1 processes, either during negotiations or during the implementation of a peace agreement. The difference between short-term, ad hoc engagement and strategic engagement resides in whether those involved have longer-term political intentions that go beyond the immediate conflict dynamics.⁷⁸

Working toward Conceptual Clarity on the Goal of Local Mediation

To engage strategically, UN peace operations need greater conceptual clarity on what local mediation processes are meant to achieve and how to define their success. Should the UN accept from the outset that local mediation processes could simply aim to deescalate conflict and alleviate human suffering locally? Is this an important enough objective in contexts where not much else can be achieved? Or should local processes always be conducted with a political intention, whether to support or complement a UN-led or UN-supported track-1 process? Should the UN support and facilitate local processes even if they feed into national processes that lack legitimacy and buy-in at the local level or if the state is absent? What if the state is a party to the conflict at the local level, either directly or through proxies, even if it does not acknowledge its role? Should peace operations engage in local mediation even when national-level peace processes are stalled? Or should local processes be conceived as parallel spaces to address issues that cannot be dealt with in

To avoid undermining track-1 processes, UN peace operations need greater conceptual clarity on what local mediation processes are meant to achieve and how to define their success.

formal processes but risk undermining them if left unaddressed?

It is important for peace operations to address these questions when deciding whether and where to engage in local mediation efforts. While the answers will vary depending on the context, without such conceptual clarity, local processes risk undermining track-1 processes or simply wasting resources. Poorly thought-out local processes can confer undue legitimacy on armed groups or embolden armed groups to ask for more at the negotiating table. In CAR, for example, the government prefect, MINUSCA, and the body in charge of implementing the peace agreement were unable to mediate an end to renewed violence in Bria in early 2020 between two factions of the FPRC, one of the largest armed groups. Instead, Ali Darassa, the commander of the Union for Peace in CAR (UPC), another armed group, managed to mediate a cease-fire and oversee the subsequent

operationalization of a mixed brigade in Bria.⁷⁹ In doing so, Darassa not only instrumentalized his participation in the national peace agreement to present himself as a legitimate mediator but also took advantage of the intra-FPRC conflict to expand UPC's

presence in the east of the country and to sideline other actors in the mechanisms established to implement the peace agreement.

Local processes also run the risk of simply displacing problems if they are conceived individually as one-offs rather than as part of a holistic effort that is sustained over time. In CAR, for example, a local agreement in Bambari contributed to the migration of armed groups to Bangassou, displacing the violence from one community to another.⁸⁰ This challenge is particularly acute for local processes addressing trafficking and organized crime, which tend to adapt quickly to changed circumstances following a deal.

Nowhere is the risk of UN engagement in local

⁷⁸ The authors are indebted to MSU Standby Team Senior Mediation Adviser Richard Smith for articulating this point.

⁷⁹ The agreement was called the "Protocole d'accord contraignant le cessez le feu immédiat entre les combattants armés dans la Haute Kotto notamment à Bria."

⁸⁰ Zahar and Mechoulam, "Peace by Pieces?" p. 28.

processes starker than in Syria. In Syria, many conflict parties and civil society groups have repeatedly called on the UN to provide cover and legitimacy to local cease-fire deals in an attempt to address the extreme asymmetry of deals struck between local armed groups and state representatives (primarily military officers). However, it soon became clear that these cease-fires, which were ostensibly intended to alleviate the impact of sieges on civilians, were tantamount to surrender because the Syrian regime failed to implement several of their provisions. Had the UN participated in these processes, it would have run the risk of being perceived as a partial third-party, which could have further harmed the prospects of finding a broader, long-term solution to the Syrian conflict.

Analyzing the Conflict Strategically

An analysis of the conflict that draws on the expertise of local stakeholders is the first step toward conceptual clarity—and thus toward determining the appropriateness of UN engagement. This analysis ought to identify the issues at hand, the UN's knowledge of the context and actors, and the interest of the conflict parties in seeking a resolution. Particularly when assessing the potential engagement of UN missions, which deal with protracted conflicts, the goal should be to determine whether the local peace process will contribute to pushing the overall political process in the right direction. Otherwise, missions run the risk of expending human and material resources on efforts that do not collectively amount to much, particularly considering that many local deals are not sustainable.

Based on the analysis, three rules of thumb can help UN missions determine whether they can meaningfully engage: (1) whether the local conflict is emblematic of similar conflicts at the national level; (2) whether it is the kind of conflict that political actors regularly instrumentalize; and (3) whether it will likely have an impact beyond the local area concerned. If all of these conditions hold, local mediation efforts are more likely to be able to feed into, or be leveraged as part of, a broader, longer-term political strategy. They could do so by opening political space, advancing a stalled process, or moving forward the implementation of a peace agreement at the local level. These are also the

kinds of local mediation efforts UN missions have been most involved with in recent years.

However, UN missions' engagement in local mediation can backfire if the local track remains separate from the track-1 process or if there is no track-1 process. In CAR, paralysis and progress in the track-1 process affected MINUSCA's efforts to have armed groups implement agreements resulting from local mediation processes. The lack of progress and the absence of consequences for not implementing the track-1 agreement have contributed to a feeling of impunity among armed groups, which has in turn led to a lack of commitment to implement local agreements. In Mali, the implementation of the 2015 national peace agreement excludes actors engaged in local mediation in central Mali.

Assessing the Space for Engagement

Peace operations must also consider the space available for engagement. This requires them to determine whether they would be welcome as facilitators or supporters of mediation. It also requires them to consider whether their mandate allows them to engage in local mediation efforts and what the political risks of such engagement might be. Both national and local actors may have reservations about UN engagement. National governments may see such efforts as interference in internal affairs, as in Syria, where the government restricted the ability of the Office of the UN Special Envoy to engage with local actors. Local actors may worry about the UN's closeness to the government, particularly in places such as CAR or Mali, where the mission is clearly mandated to support the reestablishment and extension of state authority.

In determining whether there is space for engagement, a UN mission's mandate may provide leverage or create obstacles. Where a peacekeeping or special political mission is mandated to lead or contribute to conflict-resolution efforts, this mandate can be interpreted to extend beyond the national sphere to the local level. For example, while MINUSMA's early mandates focused on support to the track-1 process and implementation of the 2015 peace agreement (including at the local level), the addition of central Mali as a strategic priority in 2019 gave this mandate new meaning, allowing the mission to facilitate intercommunity

dialogues in the region of Mopti.⁸¹ Elsewhere, including in CAR, Darfur, and the DRC, UN missions have increasingly supported local mediation as part of their protection of civilians mandates. At the same time, mandates to support the state can get in the way of support to local mediation. In these cases, one thorny issue is whether and how much a UN operation is willing and able to engage in local mediation when the host state is not welcome to the process or does not want to get involved.

Considering the Nature of the UN's Presence

The nature of the UN's presence in a country also affects opportunities for engagement. As discussed above, the role and mandate of a mission can broaden or narrow the scope for engagement. So can the UN's footprint, the extent of its presence throughout the country, and its logistical means. A large peacekeeping operation with field offices will be resourced differently than a special political mission or a UN country team. These resources may allow a mission to carry out follow-up field visits, bring people together at regular intervals, or finance small "peace dividend" projects to help make a deal stick. This is an important consideration in planning mission transitions. In Sudan, for example, the UN will need to consider how the special political mission replacing UNAMID will retain the ability to carry out local mediation in Darfur as part of its protection of civilians mandate.⁸²

Size is not always an advantage, however, and can create problems of its own. In eastern DRC, for example, MONUSCO's engagement in local mediation distorted the process as the influx of resources transformed it from an organic to a more formal process. Large peacekeeping missions also tend to create expectations they cannot meet. UN rules and regulations may prevent the rapid implementation of projects following the brokering of a local deal, or peacekeeping troops may be

unwilling to respond quickly. Moreover, while large peacekeeping missions can threaten to use force as leverage to incentivize local mediation deals or discourage spoilers, in practice peacekeepers have seldom been a credible deterrent.

The Who: Helping Others Help Themselves?

A second fundamental set of considerations revolves around who is or ought to be involved in local mediation processes. This raises several additional questions: What is the benefit of working with insider mediators, are local mediation processes more inclusive than track-1 processes, and can they therefore help ensure greater local ownership of a peace process? What role should the state and state representatives have in such processes? What role should the UN have in local processes, and how can its different parts work together as one? And finally, what other external actors can the UN partner with in supporting local mediation processes?

Drawing on Insider Mediators and Pushing for Inclusion

The first question is whether the UN would benefit from working with local "insider mediators." There are strong arguments that, wherever possible, locals ought to be the mediators of choice. This is in line with the UN's "Guidance for Effective Mediation," which stresses the importance of local ownership for the sustainability of local processes.⁸³ The added value of insider mediators has also become more apparent as conflicts have become more "glocalized." Only people with deep local knowledge and a sustained local presence can understand local grievances, identify relevant actors, and assess these actors' level of support, leverage, and influence. Local actors are also best positioned to understand the dynamics of alliances between different actors and identify the early warning signs of growing

81 The mission was mandated "to exercise good offices, confidence-building and facilitation at the national and local levels, in order to support dialogue with and among all stakeholders towards reconciliation and social cohesion" and "to support efforts to reduce intercommunal tensions, bearing in mind the primary responsibility of the Malian authorities." UN Security Council Resolution 2480 (June 28, 2019), UN Doc. S/RES/2480, paras. 28(d)(i)–(ii). However, local groups affiliated with transnational groups designated as terrorists by the Security Council were not included in these dialogues, even though they are important actors in the dynamics of violence in central Mali.

82 Ralph Mamiya, "Protecting Civilians After UNAMID: Options For a Follow-on Mission in Sudan," IPI Global Observatory, April 22, 2020.

83 UN Department of Political Affairs, "United Nations Guidance for Effective Mediation," 2012.

extremism. This is especially the case in situations where the UN does not have eyes and ears on the ground, as in Syria and Yemen, or where insecurity precludes regular and sustained contact between UN personnel in field offices and the surrounding communities. Moreover, if the UN itself is a controversial actor, as in the case of the “Diálogos Improbables” in Colombia, visible UN support could hurt the process.

While local actors may have more legitimacy than the UN, they often lack the mediation skills and the logistical and financial means to undertake mediation efforts. The UN can therefore support their efforts, even if in a low-profile manner. In South Sudan, for instance, UNMISS trained local actors participating in the mediation of conflict related to cattle migration. In Afghanistan, UNAMA supported the Surobi working group to bolster the conflict-resolution efforts of the district governor.

There are strong arguments that, whenever possible, locals ought to be the mediators of choice.

Working with insider mediators can also create opportunities for including marginalized groups. In Surobi, Afghanistan, the women’s mediation group leveraged the traditional role that women play as go-betweens in family conflicts to help UNAMA better understand the opinions and perceptions of armed groups and tribal elders who were not initially keen on engaging with the mission. Thinking about inclusion requires focusing not only on who to include but also how to include them. In Afghanistan, UNAMA was deeply aware of sensitivities around the inclusion of women in the Surobi peace initiative. The mission thus entrusted Afghan women staff with managing the process to address concerns that it might be using the initiative to push an international feminist agenda.⁸⁴ However, it is important to underline that inclusion should not be

understood as a shorthand for women or youth. In some contexts, marginalized communities could be lower castes or special interest groups. Here, as always, careful analysis and understanding of the context are essential.

But insider-led mediation efforts are not always more inclusive. In Libya, while local mediation efforts have increased engagement with armed groups that were left out of national-level efforts, they have not included women and youth.⁸⁵ The more local the process, the more likely it is to draw on traditional mediation norms and mechanisms like shura councils and qadi commissions that may increase its perceived legitimacy but also exclude women, youth, and other marginalized groups. Because of this exclusion, traditional authorities may also lack the legitimacy to deal with intergenerational conflicts or conflicts related to intergroup power relations (e.g., between different castes or between minority and majority social groups).

One set of actors that local processes can help bring into the discussion is the local business elite, as in Colombia’s “Diálogos Improbables.” This has been a blind spot for both track-1 and local mediation efforts. As Josie Lianna Kaye argues, international mediators have more effectively made “the business case for peace” than they have embraced what she terms “the peace case for business.”⁸⁶ The inclusion of pro-peace local business elites who understand licit and illicit business dynamics could be an important source of added value for local processes.⁸⁷ However, the UN’s legal and normative frameworks, as well as the trend to impose Security Council sanctions against individuals involved in illicit business dealings, may limit the actual or perceived ability of peace operations to engage with a broad range of business actors.

84 This is based on a case study DPPA/MSU conducted in 2019. An abbreviated version of this case study is included in the publication “UN Support to Local Mediation: Challenges and Opportunities.”

85 A local mediator working with UNSMIL explained that this is because of Libya’s tribal culture. However, the exclusion of women limits the ability to broach the topic of sexual and gender-based violence, while the exclusion of youth is a problem given the importance of the phenomenon of revolutionary youths in Libya. Vericat and Hobarra, “From the Ground Up,” pp. 1, 19.

86 Kaye, “The Business of Peace and the Politics of Inclusion: What Role for Local Business Actors in Peace Mediation? The Case of Yemen (2011–2016).”

87 In conflict and post-conflict settings, the boundary between the formal and the gray economy is difficult to trace. Licit and illicit business are often intimately connected, and businessmen often develop ties to various conflict parties out of necessity (e.g., to secure safe passage of goods or negotiate potential taxation).

Bringing in the State

The second question may be the most hotly debated: Should the state be represented in local mediation processes? And, if so, at what level (local, national, or both) and in what capacity (as the main mediator or facilitator, as a privileged observer, or as a party to the conflict)? In track-1 processes, the state is generally both a party to the conflict—though treated differently than armed groups—and the primary actor responsible for implementing a peace agreement. Many local mediation processes, however, start in the absence of the state (by virtue of state collapse and the emergence of new forms of governance) or with limited participation of local state representatives. While national authorities may express concern over external interference and loss of sovereignty and power, particularly when local processes are mediated by local or international NGOs, local processes can also support the progressive return of a more accepted state presence at the local level.

For example, in South Sudan, where national government officials have little contact with citizens, the UNMISS-supported cattle conferences gave government officials an opportunity to get out of Juba and to forge relationships with their constituents.⁸⁸ While these conferences addressed local tensions, the participation of government officials provided an opportunity to feed into the broader political process. UNMISS also involved the government in the establishment of a new border committee to address conflict between herders and farmers by having governors endorse the initiative, even while the communities themselves led the effort. In CAR, the follow-up committee monitoring a local deal in Bangassou included a civil administrator, which facilitated communication with the national government and helped restore state authority in the city.

Working with the state becomes more complicated when the government is part of the problem. In the Surobi mediation effort in Afghanistan, for instance, the district governor opposed the peace

initiative, and it was only when he was replaced that it took off.⁸⁹ Furthermore, a member of parliament with personal economic interests in the conflict resisted the initiative and sought to undermine it. In CAR, the government's local peace and reconciliation committees not only displaced local mediation and social cohesion committees that had organically grown up during the crisis but were also envisaged as a way of extending the arm of the state and its particular vision of reconciliation.⁹⁰ Sometimes, local officials may be better placed to engage in local mediation processes than the national government. In Libya, for example, divided national authorities lacked the legitimacy and presence to mediate locally. Municipalities, on the other hand, provided basic services during the 2011 war and gained democratic legitimacy following municipal elections in late 2013. Since then, they have played a leading role in local mediation.⁹¹

Ultimately, UN missions should work with rather than risk marginalizing and weakening existing institutions. This suggests that the UN should bring state representatives and local office holders into local processes wherever possible. In this way, the UN can use local mediation as an opportunity to bring the state closer to the people and help restore its legitimacy. However, this requires giving local state institutions and representatives the resources to sustain local deals.

The How: Organizational Considerations

The third set of considerations pertains to how the UN organizes itself to meaningfully engage in local processes. While local actors and communities sometimes turn to UN missions to facilitate or lead local mediation efforts, UN missions are often constrained in their ability to engage in these processes. This may be because of their limited mandate, inadequate resources, security restrictions, or the rapid turnover of staff, which makes it harder to build trust and sustain engagement in lengthy processes. Moreover, UN missions often

88 DPPA/MSU, "UN Support to Local Mediation: Challenges and Opportunities."

89 Ibid.

90 Zahar and Mechoulam, "Peace by Pieces?" pp. 22-23.

91 See: Romanet-Perroux, "Libyan Local Governance Case Studies."

do not coordinate their support to local mediation efforts either internally or with other UN actors. What, then, are the comparative advantages of UN missions' involvement in subnational and local mediation, and how could they ensure a "One-UN" approach to local mediation support? When and how should these UN peace operations partner with other external actors, including NGOs?

Leveraging the UN's Comparative Advantages and Working as One

One comparative advantage of UN peace operations is their logistical capacity. In South Sudan and CAR, where road infrastructure is often lacking, the UN transported key participants in local processes. UN missions can also provide

To understand how local mediation efforts fit into their mandates, UN peace operations must understand their comparative advantages and strengthen internal coherence and coordination.

advice and mediation training to local actors, as in Afghanistan, where UNAMA advised and trained local mediators working through traditional mediation mechanisms. UN missions can also amplify the impact of local mediation processes. UNAMA's local radio station allowed it to broadcast information about the Surobi peace initiative, increasing the buy-in of neighboring communities.⁹² UN missions can provide technical inputs, as in South Sudan, where UNMISS provided maps that helped the parties plan cattle migration routes, as well as complementary programming, including trainings, workshops, sensitization campaigns, and quick-impact projects focused on livelihood support, social cohesion, and reconciliation.

UN missions also bring added value in their access to the highest circles of national and international decision making. This can contribute to solidifying links between processes at different levels and bring coherence to concurrent mediation efforts. In CAR, MINUSCA's representation on the Bangassou follow-up committee helped with the implementation of the national peace agreement. MINUSCA was also able to secure donor support for subnational and local mediation efforts. In Mali, MINUSMA has been supporting the government's "Concertation Framework" to improve

coordination and coherence between the local mediation efforts of NGOs and donors in central Mali. They can also provide good offices, as in Colombia, where the UN helped make the link between ex-FARC members and local elites participating in the "Diálogos Improbables."

As mentioned earlier, some of these advantages are double-edged swords. A major risk is that well-resourced, highly visible UN initiatives could undermine or marginalize existing local initiatives,

though this was not an issue in the cases considered here. Providing peace dividends can bring reluctant parties to the table but may also distract the UN from the role of facilitator and turn it into a "project manager." The expectation that the UN will bring

resources to the table can also backfire when the provision of these resources becomes a precondition for participation in mediation processes, as has often happened in CAR. UN missions' rules and regulations, mandates, and complex and long chains of command that disempower frontline staff can also constrain their engagement in subnational and local mediation processes. In Afghanistan, for example, UNAMA's efforts to include women in the Surobi peace initiative ran up against UN rules that prevented the mission from paying the expenses of minders to accompany the women.

To understand how local mediation efforts fit into their mandates, UN peace operations must not only understand their comparative advantages but also strengthen internal coherence and coordination with UN agencies, funds, and programs present in-country. Many UN field staff from both peace operations and country teams have been involved in efforts to manage local conflicts, but they do not always have the same resources, expertise, or vision. Partnerships between different parts of missions with different areas of added value could therefore prove beneficial. UNAMA, for example, could benefit from partnerships involving the peace and reconciliation office, which supports local peace initiatives; the governance team; and the human rights section. In

⁹² DPPA/MSU, "UN Support to Local Mediation: Challenges and Opportunities."

MINUSMA, partnerships could involve the civil affairs section, whose sub-offices often lead efforts to support local processes; the mediation section, which has mediation expertise but does not have staff in the field; the political affairs section and joint mission analysis center (JMAC), in some cases; and the stabilization and recovery unit, which manages project funding, as needed. In UNMISS, partnerships could connect the work of the civil affairs section on local peace processes between herders and farmers and the political affairs section's efforts to support the track-1 political process. In MINUSCA, the DDR section, which implements community violence-reduction projects could partner with the political affairs section.

However, a number of issues complicate these potential partnerships. Senior mission leaders may be unaware of the details of the work conducted in missions' field offices, particularly under the aegis of the civil affairs section. This is partly due to the design of missions: civil affairs usually fall under the deputy special representative of the secretary-general (DSRSG)/humanitarian coordinator/resident coordinator, while the DSRSG for political affairs generally takes the lead on track-1 efforts. Another complicating factor is the absence of political affairs officers in field offices and sub-offices in certain settings, such as in South Sudan (though in this case, civil affairs fall under the DSRSG for political affairs). When political affairs officers are present, there is often a lack of clarity on whether political affairs, civil affairs, or another mission section is in the lead on local mediation. Heads of field offices may also lack clear directives from leadership regarding track-1 processes and the potential for, or intention to establish, complementarity with local mediation efforts. Information in UN missions tends to travel from the bottom up through the formal reporting process but does not always travel from the top down to frontline staff.

Additionally, missions do not systematically leverage their military component in the service of local mediation efforts. Research has shown that

peacekeeping troops can support such efforts by creating a secure environment and ensuring that the implementation of local deals provides visible results for communities to see and enjoy.⁹³ For example, MINUSCA peacekeepers increased their patrolling in the town of Bria in CAR following clashes in January 2020, particularly in hotspots, which helped contain the violence and enabled a more secure environment for discussions. Too often, however, military components and operations are not well coordinated with local peace efforts. According to a 2017 UN report, "Instead of engaging in preventive work to address the root causes of local conflicts, peacekeepers seldom go beyond reacting to violence that results from local conflicts, focusing instead on quick-fixes that are rarely sustainable in the long run."⁹⁴ Moreover, missions can rarely maintain peacekeeping troops in a given location for a long time if the state itself is not able to sustain its security presence.

Another challenge is that while most peace operations are integrated—at least on paper—with a triple-hatted DSRSG/resident coordinator/humanitarian coordinator, their work may not be integrated with that of UN country teams. Relatedly, local mediation efforts have not been explicitly tied to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Linking local mediation efforts to SDG 16, which calls for just, peaceful, and inclusive societies, could make the outcomes of local mediation processes more sustainable by facilitating coordination with the government or agencies such as UNDP. In CAR, for instance, coordination between the mission and the country team could have allowed UNDP, which had a large budget for work on social cohesion, to implement programming in communities where MINUSCA had helped mediate a local deal. Coordination between peace operations and country teams is especially important during mission transitions. Following the closing of the UN mission in Côte d'Ivoire in 2018, for example, a small number of the mission's Ivorian staff were hired by the Ministry of Solidarity and Social Cohesion with support

93 See: Andrea Ruggeri, Han Dorussen, and Theodora-Ismene Gizelis, "Winning the Peace Locally: UN Peacekeeping and Local Conflict," *International Organization* 71, no. 1 (2017), pp. 163–185; and Hannah M. Smidt, "United Nations Peacekeeping Locally: Enabling Conflict Resolution, Reducing Communal Violence," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, nos. 2–3 (2020).

94 UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations, "The Role of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in Addressing Local Conflicts," 2017.

from the UN resident coordinator. This allowed some continuity in local mediation and reconciliation efforts, including the implementation of a national early-warning, conflict-analysis, and mapping system that is now available to all prefectoral authorities.

The UN Security Council has additional tools it can use to impact local mediation efforts and how they link to track-1 processes. These include the explicit authorization of the more proactive use of force, as in the case of the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), MONUSCO's Force Intervention Brigade, and, to some degree, MINUSMA and MINUSCA. They also include sanctions regimes, commissions of inquiry, fact-finding missions, and other investigations. Threatening to impose individual sanctions or publicly naming and shaming individuals can encourage actors to agree to local deals. They can also pressure leaders of organized crime networks with close ties to armed groups to engage with the government to explore pathways out of illicit areas of business. But while these measures do not prohibit the UN from engaging with these individuals, they can shrink the space for UN support to local mediation efforts, especially when these individuals are playing a role as insider mediators. This was the case in Mali, for example, where one of the parties to the August 2020 agreement signed in Gao following an outburst of violence was represented by Mohamed Ould Mataly, who is listed under the Security Council sanctions regime established by Resolution 2374. While these Security Council tools are theoretically independent from UN peace operations, local actors and governments do not see it that way. UN missions' mediation efforts could thus benefit from greater political coherence in the use of these tools by the Security Council.

Partnering with Other External Actors: A Necessity, Not a Choice

Formal and informal partnerships between UN peace operations and other external actors, including NGOs and bilateral donors, are increasingly seen as valuable. For example, bilateral donors funded the Salaam Support Group project, managed by UNAMA's peace and reconciliation

office, which has allowed the mission to engage in local peace initiatives. Partnerships with international NGOs have also allowed UNSMIL to conduct local consultations at a time when the mission had a limited presence beyond Tripoli due to the security situation in Libya. While most partnerships between UN missions and civil society organizations are informal, at times they have been formalized, such as the partnership between MINUSCA and Sant'Egidio in 2017 and between UNSMIL and HD to organize national consultations in Libya in 2018.⁹⁵

Partnering with NGOs can be particularly useful when UN missions' geographic reach is limited, the process involves politically sensitive actors, or the process cannot involve the host state, at least initially. NGOs can help access and provide tailored technical support to the parties and more nimbly follow up during the implementation phase. Partnerships with NGOs can also help missions externalize risk, especially when engaging with proscribed actors. Finally, partnerships allow missions to focus on key issues and actors while still accessing information about more peripheral issues and actors, letting them deepen their engagement or make links with track-1 processes when relevant.

With so many actors potentially involved in local peace processes, coherent UN engagement with these NGOs is critical, as is coordination among mediation NGOs operating in the same country or region. Left uncoordinated, the growing number of mediation actors at the local level can be a liability. Lack of coordination has in some cases incentivized parties to forum shop and weakened their commitment to participating in processes or implementing deals. As a convener of both UN and non-UN actors, the UN has a comparative advantage in improving coordination.

Despite broad recognition of the need for and value of such partnerships, differences in culture and *modi operandi* between large UN missions and small mediation NGOs create challenges. These NGOs are often reliant on UN missions for logistical support but may fear missions getting too involved in and claiming credit for or disrupting

⁹⁵ Dulcie Leimbach, "The UN Formalizes Its Partnership With Sant'Egidio, the Rome-Based Mediator," June 9, 2017.

local processes. At times, the UN culture of constant reporting also clashes with mediation NGOs' preference for secrecy and independence. While not insurmountable, these challenges are a reminder that the size of UN peace operations and UN standard operating procedures can be both a blessing and a curse.

The How: Designing and Linking Local Processes

The fourth set of considerations pertains to the design of the process. Local mediation processes are mostly bottom-up and informal, which can have both advantages and disadvantages. Their design also has implications for how they are—or are not—linked to broader processes.

Top-Down versus Bottom-Up and Formal versus Informal

Local peace processes can be top-down or bottom-up. A top-down process is initiated by a national or international actor with the express intention of feeding into a broader political process. MINUSCA's support to local mediation processes to convince smaller armed groups to join the national DDR process in CAR is one example. Top-down processes risk being captured by national political elites or armed groups that use them to extend their influence or consolidate their position, as UPC did in CAR. In some cases, they can even use these processes to push extreme positions that were deemed unacceptable in the track-1 process.

Conversely, bottom-up processes are launched at the initiative of local actors, often with support from international actors, to address local sources and manifestations of violence. These are more likely to include local actors apart from armed groups, but they may be more loosely linked to national-level efforts. For example, local-level efforts by women peace activists in Syria to negotiate truces, release prisoners, and open

humanitarian corridors have failed not only to translate into buy-in for a national peace process but also to secure women's meaningful inclusion in track-1 discussions.⁹⁶

Local peace processes can also differ in their level of formality. Local processes are often informal in comparison to the formality associated with Western ways of mediating. Informality expresses itself in different ways. In some cultures, for example, the actors involved in local processes favor informal oral agreements. Local processes can also be less structured than national processes or more “hushed,” a function of the sensitivity of the issues discussed or of the involvement of proscribed actors. This informality can present challenges in terms of implementation and follow-up, particularly if local processes are meant to support a track-1 process. Without a written commitment, it is difficult to convince donors to provide financial support for implementation. With no agenda, rules, timelines, or other mechanisms to guide the process, it may prove difficult to assess progress, something that mediators deem essential to developing and adjusting their own strategies

Linking local and national mediation efforts is essential for any UN actor assessing whether to facilitate or support a local mediation process.

On the flip side, the insistence on a formal process, including but not limited to a signed written deal, also presents downsides. Insisting on a process with clearly defined objectives may give pause to

actors that may not be ready to engage fully but would be willing to participate in a more open-ended process.⁹⁷ When local deals are publicized by an international NGO or the UN and then fail, as has often happened in CAR, this may undermine the credibility of the mediators and turn agreements into valueless scraps of paper.⁹⁸

Linking Local Efforts to Broader Processes

Linking local and national mediation efforts is essential for any UN actor assessing whether to

96 Catherine Moore and Tarsila Talarico, “Inclusion to Exclusion: Women in Syria,” *Emory International Law Review* vol. 30, no. 2 (2015).

97 This is not only limited to local processes. In recent years, UN mediators have refrained from calling their mediation efforts by their proper name, often instead calling them “consultations” (e.g., the Geneva consultations on Syria and the Geneva consultations on Yemen) to convince reluctant actors to participate.

98 Zahar and Mechoulam, “Peace by Pieces?” pp. 5, 12.

facilitate or support a local mediation process. In some cases, making this link may be necessary for missions to successfully implement their mandate. Without such linkages, UN missions have to justify expending finite human and financial resources on local processes that may not be sustainable or add up to much. But creating these linkages is neither straightforward nor problem-free. This is in part due to the varying nature of ties between local struggles and broader national conflicts. While local conflicts can sometimes erupt due to local issues with little or no connection to national dynamics, they can also be instrumentalized by national politicians or echo dynamics and struggles at the national level. Local instability can also have its own ripple effects on national processes as was the case in CAR, where the conflict in Bangassou contributed to increasing tensions between Muslims and Christians in the capital, Bangui. As discussed earlier, however, UN missions' efforts to connect local and national tracks can be hampered by their architecture, internal dynamics, and information flows.

Demonstrating the relevance of local mediation to national processes requires a better way of evaluating and showcasing their impact, an area where missions often fall short. For example, while the cattle conferences in South Sudan gave government officials an opportunity to forge relationships with their constituents, UNMISS leaders did not leverage this success to secure funding and support from the Security Council and did not showcase the role of its civil affairs section in its reporting. This is something the UN's new Comprehensive Performance Assessment System, launched in 2019, could help with by providing both quantitative and qualitative reporting to UN headquarters and member states on missions' impact and activities (rather than solely quantitative reporting on activities).

The problem is that results are seldom quantifiable and not always immediate. In Afghanistan, for instance, the local peace initiative in Surobi district seems unrelated to negotiations between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan in the

short term. In the long term, however, such local peace initiatives could pave the way for implementation of a future national political agreement by addressing local grievances and lessening the risk of spoilers taking advantage of local instability. The interplay between multiple processes at different levels can also be difficult to assess, as in Libya's Nafusa Mountains, where "local initiatives could not have been developed... if the national context had not significantly evolved as a result of the UN-led dialogue. What made the dialogue successful is precisely the fact that several processes undertaken simultaneously at different levels and by different actors combined to bring about positive outcomes."⁹⁹

Linking different mediation tracks also raises questions about the timing and timelines of these processes. The timing of mediation efforts matters. This is encapsulated in the notion of "ripeness," which suggests that mediation efforts could fail if the actors are not ready to engage or if they still believe they can achieve a military victory.¹⁰⁰ But it is difficult, if not impossible, to precisely determine the right time to launch a mediation process. Another complication is the timeline of processes. Both local and national mediation processes have their own timelines, which are determined by factors such as the sense of urgency, the availability of resources, and the difficulty of the issues at hand. It is therefore rare for these processes to coincide. UN peace operations need to consider the impact of these varying timelines on their ability to link various processes in a strategic way. On the other hand, they could also use these timelines to delink processes or shield them from one another when doing so is strategically advantageous. Even where one process is short and another is long, UN missions ought to consider the impact of each on the other in the manner of a chess player who calculates the impact of one move on the position of the other pieces on the board. In this sense, support for or engagement in local mediation processes can be seen as a short-term investment in a longer-term process.

Another challenge is that the timelines of both local

99 Collombier, "Dialogue, Mediation and Reconciliation in Libya's Local Conflicts," p. 31.

100 I. William Zartman, "Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond," in *International Conflict Resolution after the Cold War*, Paul C. Stern and Daniel Druckman, eds. (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences, 2000).

processes and track-1 processes do not necessarily coincide with those of UN missions. Missions are often constrained by the performance requirements associated with the cycle of mandate renewal and reporting or by the funding cycles of donors that require them to demonstrate quantifiable results at set times. While there are no easy fixes to these challenges around timing, better conflict analysis and stronger partnerships with non-UN actors can help mitigate the problem.

Conclusions and Recommendations

What does all of this mean for the UN? While this paper does not advocate for UN peace operations to engage more or less in local mediation processes, missions ought to assess whether, when, and how short-term investments in local mediation can contribute to longer-term, sustainable conflict resolution. The considerations raised in this report can provide a useful, but by no means definitive, set of guidelines. Given peace operations' increasing engagement in local mediation, this may be an area where the UN could develop guidelines and policies and professionalize practices.

However, in a context where track-1 processes are increasingly paralyzed, there is a danger that local mediation becomes a false panacea. UN peace operations should not embrace any and all local mediation processes and opportunities; they should tailor their role to each local

UN peace operations should tailor their role to each local process based on informed strategic decisions and appropriate partnerships and as part of a broader effort to strengthen and foster greater coherence in national peace processes.

process based on informed strategic decisions and appropriate partnerships and as part of a broader effort to strengthen and foster greater coherence in national peace processes. The following recommendations, organized by the policy level (directed to UN headquarters and member states) and the operational level (directed to field missions), are a first step in this direction.

Recommendations for UN Headquarters and Member States

- Build a common understanding of local mediation:** Considering that field missions have to report on and be held accountable for their work at the local level, the UN needs to build a common understanding of local mediation and what it can and cannot achieve. While the Mediation Support Unit (MSU) has undertaken a number of initiatives to this effect, it has yet to develop concrete guidance. Guidance on local mediation should include an agreed definition of success, conveying the message that local mediation cannot substitute for track-1 processes or provide answers to the geopolitical issues that affect national processes; promote coherent, “One-UN,” and whole-of-mission strategies and approaches to local mediation in relation to track-1 peace processes and whether and how to best link these; and include robust risk-management tools when engaging actors at the local level, in keeping with the “do no harm” principle.
- Engage only when and where the UN can make a strategic difference:** In contexts where there are ongoing national processes, UN peace operations should strategically focus their efforts on local processes that can complement a UN-led or UN-supported track-1 process and involve existing, legitimate, local-level state institutions or representatives that can sustain local deals. In contexts where track-1 processes are stalled or the government lacks legitimacy or a local presence, the UN Security Council should mandate missions to engage in local mediation efforts that can help deescalate the conflict, alleviate human suffering, and protect civilians. Missions should also be able to support local processes that provide an opportunity to

address issues or engage actors that are excluded from formal processes, particularly when these issues or players could undermine track-1 efforts.

- **Leverage all the resources of the UN in support of a coherent approach to local mediation:** Where missions are explicitly mandated to support local mediation, member states should ensure that they have the necessary human, logistical, and financial resources. They should also ensure that rules and procedures are flexible enough for missions to carry out such work in an effective and sustainable manner. MSU and its Standby Team of Senior Mediation Advisers should help missions develop the mediation component of their mission strategy, including multi-track processes that give them the option to link local and national processes where and when relevant. MSU and the Standby Team should also regularly lead on-site mediation trainings for mission personnel, including heads of field offices and other key staff (civil affairs, political affairs, human rights, DDR, police, stabilization, etc.).
- **Ensure support to mediation is part of a coherent approach:** Member states on the Security Council should strive for greater coherence between their support to mediation efforts, including at the local level, and their use of tools such as sanctions regimes and commissions of inquiry. Although Security Council sanctions do not bar UN actors from talking to listed armed groups and their leaders, the council should avoid using tools that unwittingly narrow the space for the UN to support dialogue between all parties to a conflict by a priori branding certain interlocutors as legitimate or illegitimate. Greater involvement in mediation at the local level needs to be accompanied by an expansion of the UN's understanding of who are valid actors to engage with.


Recommendations for UN Peace Operations

- **Assess the space for engagement:** UN missions should develop tools to better assess the space for engagement in local mediation. Before deciding to engage, they should always conduct a thorough joint conflict and risk analysis including all mission components involved in analysis (political affairs, civil affairs, and DDR sections; joint analysis cells; UN police; and military intelligence).¹⁰¹ Where relevant, broader conflict analysis should also pay attention to the dynamics of local conflicts (root causes, conflict parties, possible local mediators, avenues for partnership, etc.), with inputs from field offices and sub-offices.¹⁰²
- **Help others help themselves:** The UN's involvement in local mediation processes is most effective when it plays a low-profile support role. Local ownership remains the best guarantee of sustainability. Missions should therefore focus on building the capacity of national and local actors active in internal conflict management and recognize, strengthen, or protect existing processes and initiatives wherever possible.
- **Apply the “do no harm” principle:** Depending on the nature of the local conflict, missions should consider the added value versus the drawbacks of their involvement, whether in a lead or a support role. Rising UN interest in local mediation does not mean that missions should always get involved in these processes. Sometimes, the involvement of a mission puts local mediation in the spotlight, increasing risks to the process and the actors involved. To apply the “do no harm” principle, missions should consult local actors and other non-UN partners and adapt the nature and form of their support to maximize local ownership while maintaining impartiality.

¹⁰¹ Joint mission analysis centers in peacekeeping missions and joint analysis and reporting sections or units in special political missions.

¹⁰² A local conflict analysis and planning methodological guide is currently being developed by the UN Department of Policy, Evaluation and Training.

- **Develop a “One-UN” strategy and a pragmatic approach:** Based on the above assessment, missions should develop a “One-UN” strategy for whether and how the UN should engage in local mediation. This should include a clear and pragmatic division of roles and responsibilities among different mission components and individuals depending on their skills and experience. It should also lay out mechanisms to ensure adequate information flow and coherent decision making. The strategy should be tailored to the mission’s mandate, field presence, and capacities, as well as the comparative advantages of different parts of and individuals within the UN mission and UN country team.
- **Assess the usefulness and risks of linking local and national processes:** Missions should consider whether it is useful to link local mediation efforts to track-1 processes. Where local mediation efforts can complement track-1 processes or provide parallel spaces to address issues they cannot deal with, missions should deploy robust risk-management tools to prevent local deals from conferring undue legitimacy on, or increasing the demands of, certain actors in the national conflict and to avoid compromising the integrity of the processes or tarnishing the reputation of the UN.
- **Partner with international and local mediation NGOs wherever relevant:** When the UN does not have the required access, reach, knowledge, expertise, or legitimacy to engage in local mediation processes, it can form formal or informal partnerships with NGOs. These partnerships should be based on a common reading of the conflict and an assessment of the capacities and reach of the NGOs. They should also be based on the regular sharing of analysis and information on the process, tailored follow-up, and the “do no harm” principle.
- **Leverage the mission’s logistical, financial, and military capacities:** Missions should use flexible programmatic funding mechanisms, including for quick-impact and other community projects, to support local processes. However, they should remain mindful that this support can backfire if it becomes a precondition for certain actors to participate in the process or if the UN is not able to deliver quickly enough on its promises. Where appropriate, missions could also use peacekeeping troops to provide space and incentives for actors to engage in local mediation. The temporary presence of peacekeepers can also help “make peace stick” and deter potential spoilers while awaiting the deployment of state security forces or mixed units that integrate former elements of armed groups.



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