
The USIP Learning Agenda: An Evidence Review

Building Trust in Peace Mediation

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Introduction

Violent conflicts are fueled by narratives of harm and injustice, as well as personal and collective experiences of trauma and pain. Societal trust is a significant casualty of conflict, and its loss is a major barrier to making peace. Warring parties that have been fighting for many years are ill disposed to talk, let alone negotiate an end to violence or build peace. Peace mediation is a process that supports antagonists and communities engaged in violent conflict to reach mutually acceptable agreements to end violence and build peace.¹ Mediation processes aim to help the opposing sides make connections and reach accommodations and, in some cases, build foundations for transforming relationships toward more sustainable peace. Establishing trust in mediation processes is essential to their effectiveness.

Yet peace mediation is becoming more complex and, arguably, more difficult. Conflicts are now more internationalized and exposed to geopolitical competition, and local drivers of violence are becoming more prominent and linked to transnational dynamics and proxy wars. Conflict drivers are being amplified and distorted by the climate crisis. Armed groups are becoming more fragmented and are using more extreme forms of violence, including gender-based violence. Conflict frequently blurs the lines between the political and criminal. International relations and global decision-making are becoming more inconsistent, multilateral institutions are struggling to demonstrate their relevance, and influential states are often seen as duplicitous.

Against this backdrop, mediation processes are becoming more diverse, going beyond “grand bargains” between two conflict parties through “Track 1” talks involving their leaders and facilitated by powerful (usually male) peace mediators. Contemporary mediation processes have become increasingly messy. They now involve multiple, overlapping peace initiatives, supported by a diversity of local and external mediators and other peace actors. There are more state, nonstate, and multilateral mediation actors than ever before. And this has led to larger numbers of agreements at multiple levels that seek more transformative and durable outcomes. While the growth of the peacemaking field may make it easier to deal with the complexity of conflicts, it may also lead to increased duplication, the wasteful use of limited resources, poor coordination, and incoherence.

As discussed in this evidence review, building trust is a core objective of peace mediation.² Trust needs to be established across many different relationships—between conflict parties and the mediators, between conflict parties themselves, among elites and constituents within a conflict party, between armed and unarmed actors, and across communities affected by violence. Signs of increased trust can be used as indicators of progress in a mediation process and to gauge its impact. While many mediators agree that trust is an important ingredient for effective mediation, there is much less consensus on its strategic significance, on what

degree or type of trust is desirable or feasible, what sort of trust is required within a mediation process, and what sorts of skills are needed to help build it.

This evidence review discusses not only why trust is important for effective peace mediation but also how mediation processes can build it. Evidence suggests that trust building is essential across multiple relationships and different phases in a mediation process and that trust building needs to be approached both cognitively (from the head) and affectively (from the heart). Yet the evidence also suggests that trust building is neither sufficiently prioritized at a strategic level, nor given enough of the right kind of resources to support it effectively. Affective trust building in particular is currently undervalued and underresourced. Understanding the role of identity is key to building trust between mediators, conflict parties, and communities. But identity is complex and requires intersectional analysis to support an inclusive approach to trust building that can accommodate diversity and build a broader trust network among the different parties and communities involved in and affected by conflict.³ The evidence further indicates that trust building can be significantly aided by technology and digital mediation, if the inherent risks are carefully managed.

The first section of this review explores what trust is and how it applies to peace mediation. It reviews types and sources of trust, using evidence from political and social psychology and business management, as well as peace and security literature. There are two primary sources of trust: cognitive (based on rational choices about another party's willingness and capacity to negotiate reliably) and affective (which relates to parties' emotional responses to information, signals, and events). These typologies are situated within the complex and antagonistic human dynamics of violent conflict in order to understand their pros and cons in relation to peace mediation. A combination of cognitive and affective approaches to trust building is needed to facilitate effective peace mediation, but in current practice, affective trust continues to receive much less attention and resources.

The second section explores how trust is built across three key relationships.⁴ First, it examines how to build trust in the mediator and mediation process. This includes how mediators can initiate and sustain trust in a mediation process; process design; and mediation styles, qualities, skills, and approaches. Second, it looks at how to build trust between conflict parties. This includes how mediators can build trust between parties at different phases of a mediation process, navigate asymmetries between state and nonstate conflict parties, and develop confidence-building measures and gestures. Third, it examines how to build trust within conflict parties. This includes how a party can build trust from the leadership through the chain of command to the broader support base, so that the movement as a whole can be sure their negotiators will represent their interests and deliver dividends inclusively. Building trust in peace mediation requires navigating the dynamic nature of the mediation process and the fluid network of relationships between multiple actors as they try to end violent contestation and develop a peaceful political and social system. Literature emphasizes that as violent conflicts evolve, so do the different types of trust and relationships. To continually build trust

in mediation processes, mediators need to have a deep contextual understanding of the network of relationships and have soft mediation skills like emotional intelligence and empathy.

The third section looks at identity—how trust is affected by where someone “stands” and how identities are variously perceived, experienced, socially coded, and manipulated. Evidence shows how peace mediation is trying to move beyond simple approaches to identity, which assume that the parties are comparatively homogenous and have functioning systems of representation. There is now growing awareness that a much more nuanced understanding of identity is needed—one that (1) recognizes interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression that drive violent conflict and (2) acknowledges the limits of representation within parties. Intersectional analysis can help unpack diverse and overlapping identities as a basis for building a broader network of trust among the different parties and communities involved in and affected by conflict. The identities of mediation actors guide how they view conflict dynamics, parties, and communities and, in turn, impact how they build analysis, trust, and relationships. This evidence review takes deep dives into two key aspects of identity as they relate to trust building in peace mediation: the roles of “insider” and “outsider” mediators and the role of gender.

The fourth section explores how trust works within digital dialogue and mediation processes. Advances in technology and digitization are already helping to transform how trust is built in peace mediation by broadening accessibility and inclusion and creating new spaces for different groups to participate. The development of mechanisms for online dialogue has accelerated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. But mediators need to approach technology cautiously. Many people in conflict zones remain on the wrong side of the digital divide, and cybersecurity is a major challenge. Hate speech, fake news, and disinformation also create significant challenges for trust building. In-person human interaction will likely be paramount in building relationships for a long time to come, especially because informal spaces are hard to reproduce digitally.

The final section presents conclusions and key insights for practitioners, scholars, and funders of peace processes. These suggest that peace mediation efforts could ultimately benefit from integrating trust in analyses and scenarios by mediation teams, placing more emphasis on gestures alongside confidence-building measures to foment trust, boosting diversity and emotional intelligence in mediation teams, understanding more deeply the dynamics of identity in trust building, navigating online challenges, and paying more attention to psychological awareness and support within peace processes.

The evidence reviewed suggests that gaps exist in the literature and practitioners’ understandings of how best to apply trust-building concepts in a targeted and effective way to meet specific peace mediation challenges. Practitioners could benefit from more precise and systematic understandings of which types of trust and trust-building instruments and approaches are (1) most effective during various phases of mediation and (2) most useful for overcoming specific challenges that mediators face while, for example, negotiating ceasefires, engaging

multiple armed groups, mediating climate conflict or proxy wars, supporting gender inclusion, or facilitating the implementation of peace agreements.

The literature review covered a wide range of domains and disciplines, including social and political psychology, business management, anthropology, and peace and conflict research. It was supplemented by interviews and focus group discussions with people who have practical experience and/or scholarly knowledge in the broad profession of mediation, as well as in more specialist areas, including interpersonal and peace mediation. Participants with different backgrounds and levels of experience were selected to offer different vantage points and experiences; a mix of experienced senior and up-and-coming practitioners and researchers were included. The interviews took place from November 2021 to January 2022. The group discussions occurred in November and December 2021 with staff from the US Institute of Peace (USIP) and Conciliation Resources and with a mixed group of external practitioners, analysts, and academics. For a full list of the participants, see Appendix 1.

What Is Trust, and Why Is It Important for Peace Mediation?

According to the literature studied and the practitioners who participated in this evidence review, trust is a vital element in bringing parties to the negotiating table, reaching an agreement, and implementing that agreement.⁵ Trust can be understood as an enabler of mediation processes. It has been described as “a necessary precondition to any progress toward any solution”⁶ and “the bedrock of any mediation process and agreement, without which the process will collect dust.”⁷ Nevertheless, trust building is not always prioritized at a strategic level in mediation processes. And understandings and definitions of trust vary, covering a spectrum of behaviors, thoughts, and feelings, which are explored in this section.

TRUST FROM THE HEAD AND THE HEART

Literature broadly distinguishes two types of trust: (1) cognitive or cognition-based (from the head), considered comparatively minimalist or shallow and perceived as rational and strategic as it is built on knowledge-based assessments of the other party’s competence and predictability; and (2) affective or attitudinal (from the heart), considered more maximalist or deep and more closely tied to emotion and feelings. While literature on peace mediation has historically prioritized cognitive trust, there has been increasing focus on the value of affective trust over the last 15 years. There has also been a growing acknowledgment that trust is a complex concept and stems from both the “head” and “heart.”

Cognitive trust is influenced by rational choice theory, built on a premise of minimal cooperation and on predictions of how the other side will act. Cognitive trust refers to a willingness to accept vulnerability based on one side’s expectation of the other side’s intention or

conduct.⁸ It develops where one side has rational knowledge or evidence of the other's reliability and credibility, often considered a professional judgment of the other side's competence. Cognitive trust largely assumes that parties' decisions are based on a cost-benefit assessment and that emotions and feelings (affect) are not relevant variables.

Trust in predictability reduces the overall level of risk and uncertainty without requiring confidence in the other side's sincerity. Risk assessments based on rational choice can consider, for example, how much the other side is invested in the status quo or open to change, how willing they are to reciprocate cooperation, and how confident they are that the other side's interests are not too much in conflict with their own.⁹

Uncertainty over whether the other side will reciprocate or exploit accommodations can engender mistrust and block dialogue.¹⁰ Cognitive approaches can try to mitigate this uncertainty through "suspension," whereby a party temporarily freezes perceptions of uncertainty and vulnerability in order to risk taking a step forward.¹¹ This pragmatic freeze enables parties to take "a leap of faith" toward dialogue. Inherent within a cognitive understanding of trust is the recognition that trust and distrust can exist simultaneously. For example, a party may be confident in some aspects of the other party's behavior but suspicious about others, such as the latter's insistence on a particular negotiating format or the different clauses it has proposed in a peace agreement.¹²

An affective understanding of trust accounts for the "human factor" in decision-making overlooked in rational choice theory. It emphasizes aspects of trust that place confidence in expectations that the other side wants to "do good" rather than act in ways that injure their interests or needs,¹³ and it includes qualities like benevolence and integrity.¹⁴ Affective trust is built on an emotional bond between individuals who have positive feelings about each other—or have "interpersonal care and concern."¹⁵ In this way, affective trust is grounded in a belief about the motives of the other party's behavior. It involves identifying commonalities and shared values and goals and feeling safe in showing vulnerability.

Affective trust can create a foundation for trust as well as a prism of trust through which parties view one another. Affective thought processes play a key role in how trust develops from the start of an interaction; in fact, studies suggest that initial trust evaluations are made in milliseconds.¹⁶ First impressions—often built out of such emotion-based "gut reactions"—are also considered crucial in determining trustworthiness in subsequent negotiations.¹⁷ Emotions create a frame for interpreting the other party's behavior, as well as a decision-making shortcut to allow for efficient judgments and decisions without each time processing the full scope of information.¹⁸

Studies have shown that there are indeed multiple sources of trust (see table 1) and that cognitive and affective trust are interconnected.¹⁹ Understanding of trust and its many forms has evolved over decades. Early studies argued that shallow cognitive trust logically precedes deep affective trust.²⁰ However, more recent studies show a complex interplay between cognition and emotion. A specialist in psychology notes that "affect" is not incidental but an

Table 1. Sources of Cognitive and Affective Trust

Sources of cognitive trust

Competence-based trust: stems from an expectation that the other party has the technical skills, knowledge, experience, and reliability to fulfill its obligations. This can be based on reputation rather than firsthand knowledge.

Calculus-based trust: stems from a sense that the other party will fulfill promises because it fears the consequences of renegeing or anticipates rewards for adherence.

Knowledge-based trust: stems from repeated observations of the other party in various situations, which builds a strong knowledge and understanding of the other's likely behavior in circumstances where trust is called for.

Sources of affective trust

Identification-based trust: stems from an ability to identify with, understand, and appreciate each other's desires to the extent that negotiating parties can begin to share some of the same needs and choices with respect to the issue at hand.

Integrity-based trust: stems from a perception that the other party is honest and transparent in its activities—mainly based on perceived morality and intentions.

inseparable part of how we see and represent the world around us.²¹ In other words, emotions create a lens that shapes how we evaluate, reason, and assess; hence, emotion and cognition coproduce our beliefs.

TRUST IN MEDIATION PROCESSES

Trust is a complex element in mediation processes. A core “trust paradox” occurs very early on in a process, whereby parties cannot enter into dialogue without some degree of mutual trust, but, at the same time, they cannot build trust without entering into a negotiation process (mediated or otherwise).²² Developments in mediation and psychology have allowed for a recalibration of more traditional and cognitive approaches to peace mediation. Academics and practitioners alike stress how important understanding and addressing emotions is to building trust in peace mediation and peace processes, as well as in international relations more broadly.²³ The literature recognizes that conflict and peace are motivated not just by facts, but also by the perceptions, interpretations, and feelings about facts. But to build affective trust in peace mediation, a shift is required so that mediation teams have the requisite profiles, understanding, skills, and qualities, as well as more appropriate timeframes and approaches, as those that have primarily been shaped by the prevalence of a more cognitive approach. This association between cognitive and affective relationships is much more firmly established in alternative dispute resolution literature.²⁴

How to Build Trust in Peace Mediation

Building trust in peace mediation requires navigating the dynamic and fluid nature of the mediation process and the various relationships between actors. The literature reviewed emphasizes the reality of a moving constellation of types of trust and relationships and of the back-and-forth in phases in peace processes. Trust building reflects this complexity and may involve constructing an “ecosystem” of trust among different actors, across different phases, and for different ends. The system should be founded on a deep understanding of the conflict, the parties, and the dialogue process. Trust building can be incorporated into mediation strategies, the objectives and outcomes of mediation processes; the skills of the mediators and the makeup of the mediation support team; and the evaluation of progress, impacts, successes, and failures.

This evidence review examines trust building in peace mediation around three key relationships:²⁵

1. trust in the mediator or mediation process;
2. trust between conflict parties (for example, governments, nonstate armed groups, and political movements); and
3. trust within conflict parties (for example, between the leadership, rank and file, and support base).

BUILDING TRUST IN THE MEDIATOR AND THE MEDIATION PROCESS

Initial Trust in a Mediation Process

The initial conditions of a mediation process set the foundations for building trust between a mediator and conflict parties. The start of a mediation process often presents the first trust obstacle, as levels of trust among parties and other key constituencies in mediation are likely to be low or nonexistent amid ongoing violence. To overcome this, mediators can “import” trust into a process via a trusted third party who can introduce or “vouch for” the mediator.²⁶ However, as one senior mediator interviewed noted, such “secondary” trust can only go so far: “Connections can get a mediator their first meeting with a conflict party, but only showing empathy, respect and understanding will lead to a second meeting.”²⁷

Trust in a mediator can be an effective, temporary “stand-in” for trust between parties; it can bring parties together before trust exists across the table. Trust in a mediator can be vital to initiating and—during moments where distrust is high—maintaining parties’ engagement in a process. Studies show that an effective mediator can act as a repository of trust for both sides, thus bridging the trust gap between the parties and mitigating their sense of exposure and vulnerability.²⁸

Mediation Process Design

How a peace mediation process is designed affects parties' trust in it, positively and negatively. Common factors affecting trust include timeframes and time pressures, the intensity of focus on landing an agreement, the continuity of mediation personnel across the phases of a mediation process, competing interests and approaches among different mediators, and consistency in follow-up after an agreement has been reached.²⁹ Some mediators are known for giving parties hard and ambitious deadlines to reach an agreement at the outset, which may relate more to their own pressures and priorities than those of the parties. Seemingly arbitrary timeframes often impact trust negatively: "Quick fixes have a way of coming back to haunt the 'fixed' as well as the 'fixers.'"³⁰ However, setting timeframes and deadlines is not inherently counterproductive and can help focus minds if carefully determined based on an in-depth understanding of the context and root causes of conflict, cultural cues, power dynamics, and interpersonal relationships among the conflict actors.³¹

Mediation Styles

Mediation actors use different mediation styles that can be more, or less, conducive to building trust. Power mediation—often associated with Track 1 negotiations directly between conflict parties—uses bargaining, pressure, and persuasion to induce parties to come to an agreement. Here, mediators focus on hard power: who has it, who wants more, and how to redistribute it. Power mediation has been effective in achieving short-term gains to reach a formal agreement, to de-escalate a crisis, or to move a stuck process forward. However, studies suggest that this style of mediation risks negatively impacting the sustainability of negotiated outcomes and reduced tensions, particularly if too little focus is placed on building trust in the mediation process.³² As one practitioner emphasized, power mediation can instrumentalize various mediation techniques such as hard deadlines to gain leverage, and this can risk a "trust backlash" if parties feel that the process is being manipulated.³³ Further, as others noted, mandating bodies for mediation processes can exacerbate trust problems associated with power mediation, such as by encouraging unrealistic expectations or deploying less experienced or poorly resourced mediators.³⁴

Yet some mediators interviewed stressed that power mediation has an important role to play. The problem is rather that hard power mediation is often overemphasized at the expense of softer approaches; a more productive way forward is through a combination of the two.³⁵ Building trust in peace mediation requires more affective skills and qualities. Emotional intelligence, empathy, and patience all remain undervalued and underprioritized in comparison to cognitive attributes of reason and logic.³⁶ "Working trust" has emerged as a framework for conflict parties to start talking with each other. Working trust does not require goodwill, sympathy, or friendship (in other words, interpersonal trust) between the parties. Rather, it requires each party to believe that the other is moving in a conciliatory direction out of their own interests—moving toward accommodation through interest-driven bargaining.³⁷ Working

trust is close to cognitive trust, but it can incorporate elements of affective trust; parties make assessments of trust based on cognitive knowledge and calculus, but also on an affective belief that the other side is genuinely committed to a peaceful resolution.³⁸

Qualities, Skills, and Approaches

As shown by studies, several core factors affect the ability of any mediation entity, team, or individual to inspire parties' trust in the mediation process. Trust can be built by mediators over time by demonstrating reliability, commitment, patience, presence, persistence, friendliness, and empathy.³⁹ The relational and dynamic process of developing a rapport with the parties is considered vital to bringing them to the negotiating table.⁴⁰ Building rapport between a mediator and parties can take place inside and outside of the official negotiating space, for example, during meals and breaks.⁴¹

Empathy has a central role in building trust between mediators and conflict parties. Empathy is the understanding and awareness of the emotions of another, allowing one to see their experience and point of view. Empathic listening can help convey genuine interest in the parties and care for their needs, concerns, and feelings.⁴² Discussions and interviews for this evidence review suggest that empathy cannot be faked and is linked to a mediator's personality and innate capacities.⁴³ Demonstrating empathy in peace mediation can include recognizing the gravity of the parties' trauma, appreciating the timescale of a given conflict, and acknowledging the impact of past mediation failures. Empathy is a complex social and political process that evolves over time. It can be linked to inclusion, to recognizing the interests of different groups within society, and to forms of expression and breadth of perspectives—but it is also responsive to coercion.⁴⁴ Some scholars describe empathy as a process rather than a state, which emerges from discussion and requires cognition and emotion.⁴⁵ An empathic approach to building trust can involve mindful, reflexive dialogue intended to reduce the likelihood of social, political, or linguistic harms that can impede the positive transformation of conflict relationships.⁴⁶ The approach can also help facilitate preparedness for negotiations.⁴⁷

Drawing on their experience, skills, and emotional capacity, mediators can use empathy to recognize and address psychological manifestations of trauma in parties. Tackling the effects of trauma can have a positive impact on trust and relationship building.⁴⁸ Trauma-informed strategies and approaches are being explored and applied in interpersonal mediation and community-level peacebuilding efforts but are much less prevalent in peace mediation. This may be due to a long-standing resistance to addressing emotion in politics and international relations—either because peace mediation seeks compromises on concrete issues, which to some mediators means that they do not have the mandate to engage emotionally,⁴⁹ or because trauma takes years to address and is beyond the scope of a mediation process to fully resolve. Nevertheless, having the skills and capacity to understand and manage trauma and its triggers is critical for mediators to create a safe space in which to build relationships and trust and has obvious relevance to violent conflicts.

Many essential qualities and skills related to empathy—enabling, not dominating; facilitating, not directing; listening, not expecting to speak or be acknowledged—are perceived as feminine or “feminized” and are associated with women. Peace mediation is still largely dominated by men, and the apparent femininity of empathy alongside certain invisible gendered norms, values, and expectations can create obstacles for male mediators to demonstrate empathy. However, a multi-year study of mediators in the alternative dispute resolution sector, which has long championed relational elements of mediation, found that men and women mediators scored the same in terms of empathy, suggesting that differences are less inherent and more a result of gender socialization and can be overcome through measures such as institutional prioritization and appropriate training.⁵⁰ (See the “Trust and Identity” section of this paper for more on identity and mediation.)

Careful and clear explanation of a mediation process can increase perceptions of its legitimacy. Mediators can endeavor to put the parties on the same page, position themselves as “guides,”⁵¹ and clarify what can and cannot be expected to come out of the process.⁵² Some studies have found that a mediator’s manner or tone, and other less tangible factors, can influence parties’ trust in them.⁵³ The qualities and skills a mediator needs for building trust are summarized in table 2.⁵⁴

Table 2. Qualities and Skills for Mediators to Build Trust
<p>Qualities and skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendly, empathic, charismatic, relates to all, available, respectful, conveys sense of caring, wants to find solutions • “Chemistry” between the mediator and parties (feeling, intuition, instinct, gaze, tone of voice, other intangible factors) • High integrity, honest, respects confidences, nonjudgmental, reliable • Credible, good reputation, professional, experienced, self-assured • Smart, well prepared, knows relevant context, mastery of complex information • Courage to take risks (personal security, reputational), personal commitment to the process, making themselves vulnerable before parties, steps outside protocol • Explains the process clearly, patient, persistent, asks good questions, listens carefully to responses • Diplomatic, makes both sides feel they are gaining from the process, impartial (or multipartial), makes suggestions tactfully, makes both sides feel safe during the process • Identifies, analyzes, and summarizes contentious issues, proposes solutions, creative • Candid, firm as necessary, will speak difficult truths (dependent on power dynamics, mandate, and timing) • Understands people, relational dynamics, deft use of humor, good sense of timing, knows when to set deadlines and apply pressure
<p>Extrinsic factors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having third parties that introduce or vouch for the mediator • Stature of the mediator, perception of holding political and social leverage and resources • Social norms, perceptions, and expectations specific to a mediator’s identity

Impartiality is crucial for building trust in a mediator.⁵⁵ It generally means that the mediator does not favor one party at the expense of the other. Mediators need to understand the perspectives and values of all the parties, ensure that they feel heard,⁵⁶ and be aware of their own unconscious biases.⁵⁷ State or former state officials can find it more difficult to empathize with nonstate armed groups, for example.⁵⁸ Parties need to see that mediators understand the political economy of the country or region and are culturally attuned to its values and history,⁵⁹ especially the local terminology and potential “trigger” terms and concepts.

There is a growing awareness that contemporary mediation processes require a long-term presence and accompaniments to help create an enabling environment for parties to reach an agreement (see box 1 for a case study of accompaniment in Ethiopia’s Somali region). Mediators need the qualities and skills to perform the ancillary, enabling role required by an

BOX 1. Accompanying Peace in Ethiopia’s Somali Region

In Ethiopia’s Somali Region (also known as the Ogaden), Conciliation Resources accompanied the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) through a peace dialogue with the Ethiopian government, which led to a peace agreement in 2018.⁶⁰ A period of sustained engagement began in 2012 at the invitation of the Kenyan government’s facilitation team, which convened the formal talks, and it continues today, post-agreement. Conciliation Resources provided technical support to the ONLF, including training, advice, and inputs on negotiation, process design, and drafting of the peace deal, respectively.

The trusting relationship built over time between the ONLF and Conciliation Resources enabled the latter to play the role of a “critical friend,” providing space and expert feedback for the ONLF to reflect on contentious issues such as the constitution and self-determination. Facilitation of internal debate within the ONLF helped the group articulate its interests and, in some cases, reframe seemingly firm positions; and this helped move the process forward. For example, in 2013, Conciliation Resources supported the ONLF’s leadership to conduct a scenarios exercise, which contributed to a recalibration of the group’s strategy. A series of discussions enabled the leadership to reflect on their immediate demand for a referendum on self-determination for the Somali Region. The discussions also led to the development of a road map and a transition-to-peace plan to address the issue and help move the process forward within and outside of the talks.

Support for ONLF consultations and relationship building with diaspora and refugee communities also helped to identify agenda priorities for talks and potential solutions and to maintain internal cohesion and impetus for the ONLF to stick with the peace process in the face of obstacles and long periods of impasse. The thinking, discussion, and relationship-building processes forged during parallel peace talks within the ONLF have since formed an essential basis to support implementation following the 2018 peace agreement.

accompanying approach, including emotional intelligence to help the parties build relationships. Establishing trust with the parties enables mediators and mediation support teams to act as “critical friends,” so that the parties can hear and accept analysis to inform their own assessments of how they engage in the mediation process.

Mediation processes are often led by a senior mediator with the support of a mediation team. The distinction between the roles of the mediator and the mediation team creates different opportunities for trust building. One practitioner interviewed framed it as the mediator having the role of the hard “head” (coming in at key moments to have difficult conversations) and the team having the role of the soft “body” (focusing on contextualization, networking, and outreach to constituencies).⁶¹ Further, a mediation team that has a diverse membership—representing a broad range of experiences, standpoints, skills, and qualities—typically allows for more strategic and deft interpretation of cultural and political cues and more diverse approaches toward empathy, trust, and relationship building.

Yet, in many institutions, recruitment or selection processes for mediators do not currently prioritize having the empathic skills associated with building trust, but rather those that are needed for senior political office. The mindset built by a mediator during a political career can have a detrimental effect on their mediation practice when empathy is lacking. One interviewee reflected on the dangers of mediators acting like “strikers” in a soccer match, aiming to score a goal quickly and enhance their own status and prestige instead of administering the game between the two sides like referees do.⁶² Institutions therefore need to reflect on the role that their own interests, biases, and culture play. Unethical behavior such as breaching a party’s confidence, reporting dishonestly, acting with bias, pushing the mediator’s own solution to the conflict, or striving for an agreement “at all costs” can undermine trust in a mediator and the mediation process.⁶³

BUILDING TRUST BETWEEN CONFLICT PARTIES

Building trust between conflict parties is a precarious and iterative process. Trust building needs to overcome significant areas of resistance, such as unaddressed grievances, entrenched negative narratives of “the other,” or the politicization of the past.⁶⁴ Practitioners agree that trust is difficult to build, easy to lose, and even harder to rebuild once broken. One practitioner interviewed reflected that lost trust is harder to retrieve, as wounds become more embedded in emotional memory with each breach of trust.⁶⁵ Other practitioners have suggested that parties need mutual reassurance through repeated demonstrations of progress in trustworthiness as new risks or suspicions arise throughout a process. Such reassurance can be facilitated through the acknowledgment of grievances, symbolic gestures, or confidence-building measures. It is a persistent challenge for mediators and their support teams to identify poignant and powerful actions that can shift levels of trust among conflict parties in a positive direction.⁶⁶

Trust through Phases of a Mediation Process

Mediation processes typically require conflict parties to build trust on top of an existing foundation of intense and often long-standing distrust. Studies show that whereas people tend to give the benefit of the doubt to those they trust, they conversely are likely to doubt anything beneficial done by those they distrust.⁶⁷ In this way, distrust is self-perpetuating and results in strong confirmation bias. For example, in situations of high distrust, emotions signaling certainty such as anger or assuredness are read as misrepresentation, while those signaling uncertainty such as anxiety or prevarication are read as concealment of information.⁶⁸ One study found that a likely trigger for deception was an environment that fosters concern that the other party will behave exploitatively.⁶⁹ Given this low trust baseline, during a violent conflict, it can take years to set the initial parameters of engagement in dialogue through “talks about talks” or pre-negotiations.⁷⁰

As noted above, the concept of “working trust” provides a framework for conflict parties to start talking. Working trust can be established by a party demonstrating investment in the mediation process, which intrinsically implies a willingness to engage to some degree with the other side and to be seen to be prepared to change behavior or take a risk to do so. For example, one practitioner reflected on their facilitation efforts in the Israel/Palestine conflict and consequent trust breakthroughs when Israeli participants were willing to meet and stay overnight in Ramallah during workshop sessions—representing a significant change to usual practices.⁷¹ Working trust has been found to be preferable to interpersonal trust in some situations because of the emotional distance needed in reconciling contradictory positions and reaching an agreement.

Working trust may not be sustainable as a mediation process progresses from the moment of signing an agreement to the implementation phase, when the relationship between the parties faces new tests. Parties may be able to reach agreement with only trust in the self-interest of the other side, but unless they have built a greater degree of affective trust in one another, the relationship is likely to remain insecure. Parties need to trust that each other’s commitments are made in good faith. Implementation failures have a corrosive effect on trust in a peace process—for the parties and for other groups and communities inside and outside the respective context—raising the trust bar for subsequent efforts. Complex, multifaceted implementation processes involving disarmament and demobilization, reconciliation, and power-sharing structures imply corresponding complex trust-building requirements.⁷²

Practitioners agree that effective implementation requires parties to have at least built trust in the reliability and competence of the other side to enact the more contentious, and often more important, elements of the agreement. One academic interviewed framed this by emphasizing the importance of upholding the “spirit” as well as the “letter” of a peace deal, referring to the underlying intention of the agreement.⁷³ The challenges of building and sustaining trust can be illustrated in ceasefire and violence-reduction agreements. Without sufficient confidence in the other side’s reliability, alongside authority and legitimacy (or competence),

mutual security guarantees cannot be realized, leading to an erosion of trust and reversion to violence.⁷⁴ Studies in business negotiation have shown that the use of anger during a process has a negative impact on trust between the parties, as it can trigger distrust, deception, and covert retaliation by the counterpart.⁷⁵ Concessions gained in an agreement through anger can disappear or reverse when it comes time for implementation.

Mediators need to identify ripe moments for relationship and trust building among conflict parties as a mediation process develops and to navigate hazards when trust can sometimes evaporate. Critical points in a process for both building and breaking trust occur when parties are particularly exposed to risks that may weaken their negotiating position. External factors like time constraints and media interest can exacerbate such risks, but research shows that critical points can also offer important opportunities for parties to demonstrate their reliability (for example, through gestures of vulnerability and conciliation,⁷⁶ or by taking a chance and acting in a way that untrustworthy actors would not).⁷⁷ At such fraught moments, signals are easily misread or misinterpreted, and so sharp contextual awareness and cultural insight are critical for mediators to help identify risks and benefits and provide sensitive support. Literature identifies the potential costs for parties in making conciliatory signals, including image loss (for example, the loss of prestige and perceived strength); position loss (for example, reduced access to certain resources after conceding a bargaining position); and information loss (for example, the giving away of intelligence on the party's strength or resources).⁷⁸ Emotions are important at critical points in a mediation process; they can help nudge the trust dial in one direction or another, with the more affective aspects of trust providing opportunities to influence the direction of travel.

Trust, Asymmetry, and State and Nonstate Armed Actors

Intrastate conflicts involving significant power asymmetries between state and nonstate armed actors bring particular challenges for building sufficient trust between parties and convincing them to engage in talks. Research demonstrates that negotiators from powerful groups are generally perceived as less trustworthy than those from less powerful groups.⁷⁹ Strong and weak negotiators alike in asymmetric mediation processes are more likely to use threats, personal attacks, and persuasive arguments, resulting in less trustful and less effective negotiating.⁸⁰ A weaker nonstate actor may feel militarily vulnerable and ill equipped for dialogue.⁸¹ Inducements and threats made by a state may likewise increase a nonstate group's insecurity, which could compel them to break off talks or spoil a peace process.⁸² In multiparty negotiations, relative trust among parties has been found to be more critical to outcomes than absolute trust; the overall trust climate is affected by the least trustworthy party.⁸³

Navigating asymmetries between conflict parties has become a major focus of mediation and mediation support. Establishing trust in the mediator and the mediation process provides the weaker party with reassurance and can help encourage them to engage in dialogue with the stronger one. Many private diplomacy organizations specialize in supporting nonstate armed

groups to engage in talks, through providing technical assistance and skills development. This support can help build a group's confidence in its own capacity to participate in the mediation process and can also increase other parties' trust that it will engage competently and sincerely.

Implementing a peace agreement brings specific trust challenges in situations of asymmetric power relationships, where the main responsibility of implementation depends on the will and ability of the more powerful party, usually the state.⁸⁴ Implementation mechanisms can be carefully designed to enhance "vertical trust" post-agreement, so that institutions are responsive and inclusive, helping to promulgate trust across levels and among different constituencies.⁸⁵ Extrinsic mechanisms to enhance confidence in peace implementation—such as the use of international guarantors, observers, or verification and monitoring teams—can help increase trust among asymmetric parties, where the reliability of the more powerful party to implement the agreement is more questionable.⁸⁶

The structure of a nonstate armed group also affects the nature and level of its trust in a peace process and its preparedness to talk to other armed actors. Peace negotiations are often designed around assumptions that participating armed groups can maintain their internal coherence.⁸⁷ Negotiators need to convince others involved in dialogue of their ability to ensure that the entire group they claim to represent will implement any agreements reached. Strong ties between subgroups and individuals within an armed group's network are important to ensure coherent internal communications and influence, particularly when they command resources and personnel.⁸⁸ (See the "Building Trust within a Conflict Party" section in this paper for more on trust within warring parties.)

Confidence-Building Measures and Gestures

Confidence-building measures (CBMs) and gestures enable conflict parties to signal their preparedness to raise the level of trust in a mediation process. CBMs are typically tangible and measurable actions designed to boost confidence among conflict parties and signal how their relationship could be different. Parties can identify joint steps that are both meaningful and acceptable (in terms of level of risk).⁸⁹ CBMs can be used to enhance relationships, humanize the opposition, indicate a party's good intentions and commitment, and avoid escalation.⁹⁰

CBMs can help build working trust among the parties, rather than improve relations on a deeper level; and can act as a catalyst in peace mediation, rather than tackle the root causes of fighting. A conflict party is understood to have confidence in a mediation process when it demonstrates vulnerability and also a preparedness to take risks, with the expectation that the other party or parties will reciprocate. CBMs can be used to avoid escalation, even before a negotiation process has started; to begin or stimulate dialogue among parties; and to consolidate a mediation process and its outcome (for example, by engaging the parties' constituencies).⁹¹ The level of authority of negotiators to make decisions, mobilize resources, or transmit reliable information can be an important CBM among conflict parties—to convey commitment, capability, and respect.⁹² The role of authority is explored in relation to Sri Lanka in box 2.

BOX 2. Building Confidence between Conflict Parties in Sri Lanka

In 2002, the Government of Sri Lanka included atypical members in its negotiating team as a CBM during negotiations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In a departure from its previous approach, the government included high-level, inner-circle politicians who had substantial power and competence to make decisions. This clearly indicated that the government viewed the LTTE as an equal and legitimate partner, as well as demonstrated both commitment and respect.⁹³ Previous efforts with lower-ranking government officials had increased perceptions that the government was not serious about resolving the conflict.⁹⁴ While this initial demonstration helped to build trust temporarily, it soon evaporated after the government decided to attend a major international donor meeting on reconstruction funding without the LTTE.⁹⁵

However, literature acknowledges that CBMs have their limitations and that their value can be overemphasized. Parties may use CBMs tactically to delay engagement in more serious mediation or to mask their real intention to pursue a military victory. Effective CBMs can distract from more fundamental mediation issues. And, conversely, badly designed or managed CBMs can undermine trust (for instance, if only one side actually engages with a seemingly agreed-on CBM, which can be perceived as a sign of weakness, or if a CBM is poorly defined and leads to a dispute over what has been agreed).⁹⁶

The interviews and group discussions conducted for this evidence review, as well as literature from social and political psychology, emphasize the importance of confidence-building gestures alongside measures. Gestures are less concrete or cognitive than CBMs but can play an important affective role in helping to build trust among conflict parties in a mediation process. Gestures are subtle and emotional actions to demonstrate recognition of the other party's circumstances, narratives, or priorities—and sometimes to even help the party address a problem. Gestures can serve as turning points in an engagement, leading to a more productive exchange and the generation of new, constructive ideas.⁹⁷

Research on interpersonal relationships helps demonstrate how gestures can help make trust and relationships more resilient. Relational literature refers to an “emotional bank account,” which involves the accumulation of positive emotional memories around shared experiences and events and which can act as a buffer to deal with crises.⁹⁸ A negative interaction generally requires a larger number of positive interactions to balance it out and to sustain positive sentiments toward a relationship in moments of conflict. Mediators need to look out for psychological shifts among parties and know when to encourage key individuals to offer an emotionally significant gesture.

BUILDING TRUST WITHIN A CONFLICT PARTY

Conflict parties need to build trust internally in order to engage effectively in a mediation process—from the leadership through to the chain of command and the broader support base—so that that party as a whole can have faith that its negotiators will represent its interests and deliver dividends inclusively. Leaders of conflict parties may lack skills in political representation. Many leaders are men, which often brings trust deficits related to inclusion and diversity. Strategies to expand trust within an armed group as it engages in a mediation process can include strategic mobilization, in which senior negotiators build or “cascade” trust, starting with core military leaders, then diverse and sometimes competing groups and communities, and then finally civil society.⁹⁹ Identifying key personnel such as spokespeople with broad legitimacy can be important to this process.¹⁰⁰

Sustaining trust within an armed group is also a major challenge when entering into a negotiation process and tends to get harder as talks progress.¹⁰¹ Compromises agreed to during tough negotiations are hard to sell to others in the movement who were not present at the talks and therefore risk causing tensions between the leadership and the wider membership. Group leaders need to work hard to explain decisions and changes in positions. Because trust is liable to diminish and relationships can fracture as a mediation process progresses, armed groups should ideally invest time and effort into building a level of high trust *before* dialogue begins.¹⁰² Box 3 illustrates how an armed group engaged in a process to bring its constituents along in the journey toward peace.

As discussed in the next section, identity can affect trust building within conflict parties engaged in mediation. In wartime, identity is often instrumentalized to mobilize support for an armed movement, and identity-based enmities can be hard to dislodge subsequently during peace talks¹⁰³—for example, as leaders reach out to former enemies to engage in dialogue. Expressing trust in the other side is often considered a dangerous violation of a powerful group norm.¹⁰⁴ Mediators need to carefully manage perceptions of personal relationships across conflict parties, making judgments about when it is or is not timely to disclose improved relationships between leaders to a party’s constituents or to the wider public. Tensions between senior negotiators and other leaders within an armed group or movement can undermine its flexibility to act and can exacerbate opposition to compromise, as trust built at one level of the group can cause blowback at another.¹⁰⁵

Trust in leaders is to a significant extent determined by their performance. Perceptions of whether negotiation outcomes are living up to expectations—a kind of “running tally” of how leadership is delivering—can affect levels of trust.¹⁰⁶ Political trust can be a key factor in an indicator of performance, enabling individuals to decide whether and how to support or oppose actions by authorities.¹⁰⁷ Trust in political leadership can be based on ethics or morality, but it also derives from other characteristics such as certainty of response or favorable media coverage.¹⁰⁸ Forward-looking emotions such as hope have been found to sustain political trust for longer periods than retrospective emotions such as pride.¹⁰⁹

BOX 3. Building Trust within Euskadi Ta Askatasuna in the Basque Country

In Spain, the separatist group Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) fought for the unification of the “Basque homeland” and self-determination in the Basque Country from 1959 to 2011.¹¹⁰ Their decision to end violence in 2011 derived from the realization that there was no military solution to their struggle. As efforts to engage in dialogue progressed, it became increasingly apparent that the movement would need to soften its long-held wartime objective of independence and adopt a more nuanced understanding of self-determination. However, taking steps toward this change made it difficult for the movement to engender widespread trust in a process that would lead to a seemingly diluted and vague outcome.

Intense discussions within the movement followed, both on what their core objectives should be and whether political dialogue was compatible with these and was worth the investment. This discussion inevitably exposed differences within the movement and led to tensions between progressive and conservative elements over what level of internal change was acceptable. More time spent in exploring and agreeing on the group’s position in advance of the 2011 decision to end violence could have helped mitigate these internal challenges later on. As someone close to the process has stated, “Often slower is faster, and time is always well spent.”¹¹¹

ETA decided to disband in 2018, but before going public with the decision, an internal consultation took place involving more than 2,000 members and individuals with links to the movement. While discussions were sometimes difficult, they enabled ETA to understand the priorities of different constituencies within the movement, which helped the pro-peace elements gain the acceptance of skeptics or dissenters.

Communities, civil society, and diaspora are increasingly involved in contributing to trust building within armed actors, groups, and movements.¹¹² This engagement can help increase transparency and awareness of the decisions reached during the mediation process and can provide accountability for conflict party leaders.¹¹³ Leaders need to sustain their influence and legitimacy throughout the mediation process, so that constituencies believe that their interests are being represented. Loss of credibility means that leaders can become alienated and lose the political capital needed to promote consensus in support of a mediation process.¹¹⁴

In addition to the formal leaders of an armed group, wider political, economic, and intellectual elites are also influential in convincing communities to support or resist engagement in mediation.¹¹⁵ Leaders or others in an armed group seen to be benefiting from a peace process at the expense of the group’s wider membership will likely have a negative impact on internal trust; thus, armed groups need to be especially wary of social media photos that seem to depict members “living the high life” during peace talks or when on study tours.

Trust and Identity

Identity matters insofar as it affects trust in mediation processes. How values and norms influence the development of reliable relationships and how the mediator and conflict parties relate to and perceive one another can greatly affect trust-building efforts. Peace mediation has historically employed simple approaches to identity that assume conflict parties are relatively homogenous and are effectively represented by their leaders. A more nuanced understanding of identity acknowledges that elite representation is often limited and can help unpack the interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression that drive violent conflict.¹¹⁶ A more complex analysis of identity by mediators helps identify and engage diverse voices and viewpoints as a basis for building a broader network of trust among the different parties and communities involved in and affected by conflict. Mediators' acknowledgment and analysis of their own positionality is also important in managing bias, as it affects (1) how they understand conflict dynamics, parties, and communities and (2) how they are able to build trust in the process and with and among the conflict parties. Among others, two key aspects of identity that affect trust in mediation processes are the role of “insider” and “outsider” mediators and the role of gender.

IDENTITY MATTERS

Trust building in peace mediation is affected by power dynamics around identity markers. Identity markers are socially constructed to define human groups and signal who belongs and who is excluded. Significant identity markers can include gender, ethnicity, age, class, religion, and sexuality. Identity is intersectional, as social categorizations that apply to an individual or group are interconnected and create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. Intersectional analysis can help unpack multiple identity markers and the experiences of individuals or groups in connection with systems of power. Identities can become condensed during conflict—for example, as a result of trauma—thereby strengthening ties *within* identity groups and raising the bar for building trust *between* them.

Individual and group identities can both create and impede opportunities for engagement in mediation processes. Acting against expectations of how a particular identity group should behave in interpersonal processes like negotiations can have negative consequences for mediators and conflict parties alike, as studies show that people and groups risk reprisal when they behave counter to norms or social expectations.¹¹⁷ Social expectations, as well as the position the individual holds within a hierarchy, impact their sense of physical security and the security of their negotiation positions. Perceptions of insecurity discourage people from making concessions or showing vulnerability, which are crucial for building trust.

Identity affects the relational power dynamics among negotiating parties and mediators. Certain identities in mediation rely on power leverage as their core approach—for example, to isolate, sanction, or pressure a negotiating party—and downplay or dismiss emotional and

psychosocial spaces in which trust signals and cues are transmitted and received. Research on organizational negotiations shows how power influences the way in which negotiators display and respond to emotions such as anger. Negotiators in a position of low power tend to be more responsive to displays of emotion and tend to concede more and claim less value when the other side expresses anger.¹¹⁸ These negotiators are more attuned to the social consequences of their actions and so process information with greater attention to detail.¹¹⁹ High-power negotiators report feeling more focused and assertive when expressing anger and claim more value in the negotiation.¹²⁰ They also respond by increasing their demands when they feel the other party's anger is unjustified.¹²¹ However, anger has been found to have a negative impact on trust, affecting the likelihood of successfully applying that value.

Mediators' identity affects their capacity to manage relationships among the parties involved in negotiations. Mediators can draw on their identity to establish trust in their competence to facilitate dialogue, but whether this is effective depends on the perceptions of their identity and of the mandating body. Mediators may need to manipulate the fluidity of their identity to build trust with different groups—for example, by demonstrating proximity and connections to power networks while also remaining inherently nonelite.¹²² They may need recognizable authority to command respect from powerful conflict parties. As discussed in the next section, insider mediators may derive trust in their competence from holding a particular position and level of authority within their communities.¹²³ For example, one practitioner who participated in this evidence review reflected on a context in which trust in female religious actors' competence to support conflict resolution stemmed largely from the communities' (gendered) perceptions of their "piousness."¹²⁴

Across interviews and group discussions, many mediation practitioners considered trust building through interpersonal connections formed on the informal margins of peace processes to be as powerful as those formed in the formal spaces of negotiations.¹²⁵ People often begin to trust each other through social activities such as eating and drinking and through taking note of cultural and social cues. Cultural norms influence who can be present in which spaces, and they can either open or inhibit opportunities for engagement, often in relation to gender. For example, an international female mediator may be given access to a local space normally reserved for men, while a female mediator from that context may be excluded or find that access brings negative relational repercussions. Yet in some circumstances, women's perceived lack of power and even their exclusion from traditionally male-dominated spaces can be an advantage in building relationships of trust by enabling honest and vulnerable communication with parties, which may otherwise be considered socially unacceptable.

INSIDER AND OUTSIDER MEDIATORS

Where mediators are from significantly affects the way conflict parties relate to and perceive them. Studies show that trust in a mediator can flow from shared membership in a social or

organizational category,¹²⁶ as individuals are more likely to trust people who look similar to them or hold similar identity markers.¹²⁷ Trust can also manifest when mediators come from a locality that is perceived to be similar politically or economically, such as an ex-communist or socialist country, or when mediators have had similar experiences, such as direct involvement in a conflict or a conflict party.¹²⁸ However, sometimes it can be better for a mediator to hold different identity markers from the parties—for example, when the parties themselves are very alike. The “narcissism of minor differences” can obscure nuances in the parties’ history and culture and can make it difficult for a mediator with a similar identity to untangle them.¹²⁹ Thus, although having similar identities can help form an initial sense of trust, it can sometimes exacerbate exclusionary dynamics down the line in ways that obstruct reaching durable political settlements.

“Insider” mediators typically come from within conflict-affected contexts and communities. Their path into mediation is often built on local trust, social networks, and relationships: “Insider mediators are trusted and respected insiders who work at multiple levels in a conflict-affected society, who have deep knowledge of the dynamics and context of the conflict, who share a normative and cultural closeness with conflicting parties and who demonstrate a nuanced sensitivity in their contribution to finding solutions to conflicts that are owned and valued by the parties themselves.”¹³⁰ Insider mediators often have the relevant language and cultural communication skills alongside deep contextual knowledge and understanding.¹³¹ Their proximity to the conflict means that some parties might not see them as impartial, but nevertheless, they may still be perceived as credible, fair, and trustworthy and therefore be accepted.

“Outsider” mediators typically come from outside the conflict and have a different identity and nationality than the conflict parties. They are generally seen as neutral intermediaries, whose legitimacy and trustworthiness depends to an extent on the lack of overlap between their identity and the parties’ identities (which many assume leads to bias). However, definitions are imperfect; a mediator from a different tribe, class, or village could be perceived as an outsider from the viewpoint of a local community, while the same mediator could be perceived as an insider in another mediation process. Ultimately, the parties’ perception of the mediator’s identity counts, but trust, knowledge, and competency usually matter more than whether mediators are insiders or outsiders.¹³²

Notably, outsider mediators can carry some negative baggage that hampers trust in their competency, such as poor coordination skills, a lack of contextual awareness, or a penchant for seeking publicity. Further, a mediator’s association with an international organization—for example, the United Nations (UN), a regional organization, or an international nongovernmental organization—can negatively influence parties’ perceptions of what is motivating a mediator. And interpersonal relations between a mediator and parties can reinforce power asymmetries (for example, when the mediator is an ex-state official).¹³³ A way to mitigate this is to ensure that mediation teams are diverse and have a breadth of skills and qualities relevant to building

trust and relationships with conflict parties and constituencies. Diverse teams may be better equipped to identify commonalities among parties and constituencies, which can help create empathy and the sense of being deeply understood.¹³⁴ Their various identity markers can then be leveraged to emphasize these common challenges and interests and build trust in a peace process.

GENDER

Sociocultural expectations are highly gendered and are shaped by long-standing gender biases. Men and women are often socialized to express qualities and characteristics that align with gendered expectations of masculinity or femininity. Globally, culture norms generally ascribe power and authority to men, which leads to male hegemony and results in significant obstacles for women to access politics and decision-making processes.

Across the world, women are expected to express feminine characteristics, qualities, and behaviors, such as being warm, agreeable, and comforting. Girls and women are typically socialized from birth to be more focused on emotions and relationships and are expected to—and often in fact do—place more emphasis on forming and maintaining relationships with others, including to their own disadvantage.¹³⁵ Studies show that displays of certain emotions and behaviors are more and less acceptable according to gender. For example, studies from the United States show that men who express anger are more likely than women to get positive outcomes.¹³⁶ Women hold multiple identity markers that further delimit expectations of their behavior in public spaces. Patriarchal gender norms create a “double bind” for women mediators: the expectation that they follow (acceptable) feminine behavior and also demonstrate a kind of competence heavily defined by cultural understandings of masculinity.

Gender socialization has led to different approaches to building trust between women and men in negotiations. Women are found to be more likely than men to maintain trust in the face of repeated trust violations and are more likely to regain trust in a previously untrustworthy counterpart.¹³⁷ This can lead to perceptions of women as being more gullible than men, putting them at greater risk of exploitation.¹³⁸ On the other hand, a mediation process requires cooperation, creativity, and persistence to reach mutually beneficial outcomes; and, thus, greater propensity to trust can be an asset. Multiple interviews and group discussions that informed this evidence review indicate that a more “feminine” approach to mediation and negotiation could prompt parties to initiate conciliatory signals by making themselves vulnerable to potential costs and risks. Men may be less likely to build trust in these scenarios and to continue collaboration in the face of minor misunderstandings.

Relationship building in conflict-affected settings is also gendered due to the way women and men are socialized to engage, connect, and relate to one another. Recent qualitative studies on the role of women in postwar Rwanda and Cambodia indicate that women are more

trusted than men to be honest and incorruptible.¹³⁹ Although this may have more to do with the fact that women are often considered to be less implicated (whether correctly or not) in past violence, the perception of women as cooperative and nonthreatening can be useful in sensitive conflict and postwar situations. This perceived positioning within society can allow them to build alternate connections and relationships across communities and create different spaces to discuss difficult topics. Some women involved in public life (for example, parliamentarians, local councillors, or public or civil servants) have been found to build connections in a more personal way and, perhaps because of their “outsider” status, adopt different approaches to representation.¹⁴⁰ This is highly relevant for identifying potential mediators in postwar settings who can support agreement implementation.

For over 20 years, the UN Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda has been a major driver of rethinking the business of contemporary mediation, by asking, “Where are the women?” and advocating feminized mediation qualities. Still, women remain sidelined. There is a continuing need to move beyond the rhetoric and significantly increase the number of women involved in peace mediation at all levels, while at the same time further valuing emotion and relationship building. Terms of reference and recruitment processes for mediators and mediation teams still require radical revision—for instance, by listing emotional intelligence as an essential skill on a par with other key competencies.¹⁴¹

Peace mediation has been to a large extent dominated by “big man” mediators: male (often Western) political and military leaders and high-level diplomats whose competence to mediate derives from their status as powerful men.¹⁴² However, reliance on such a narrow and homogenous demographic is increasingly being challenged. More emphasis is being placed on having a variety of skills and experience and on emotional intelligence as a central quality for effective mediation.¹⁴³ And emotional intelligence is an attribute currently still much more associated with women.¹⁴⁴

Feminist approaches to mediation are increasingly being recognized, particularly their focus on rethinking power-based mediation.¹⁴⁵ As noted by one academic, “Highlighting the value of empathetic listening, and the ethics of care, feminist scholars have advocated a vision of mediation that is less about power relations and hierarchy and more about relational aspects of conflict and the ability to listen and negotiate with empathy with those with whom one does not agree.”¹⁴⁶ Accurately assessing emotions during a process can help ensure that parties do not reject agreements out of spite when their pride or ego is wounded.¹⁴⁷

Trust and Digital Dialogue

Technology and trust are not automatic allies in peace mediation. Challenges to trust abound in the digital sphere, from hate speech and fake news, to disinformation, to breaches of privacy, to conflict narratives and terrorist recruitment through social media. And these

challenges have strengthened perceptions that technology is duplicitous and dangerous.¹⁴⁸ But technological advances have had a profound positive impact on mediation and dialogue processes in recent years and have considerable potential to contribute even more to building trust and enhancing the effectiveness of mediation. Social media and online mediation are helping to broaden access, participation, and inclusion in peace mediation and to create new spaces for a range of communities and constituencies to voice their views. The COVID-19 pandemic has hugely accelerated widespread use of online mechanisms for convening dialogue—representing a radical shift for mediation approaches that have historically relied on face-to-face communication—withstanding the associated challenges of “Zoom fatigue.” Still, risks and challenges need to be taken seriously and mitigated. The digital divide remains a significant obstacle for many people in conflict zones, cybersecurity is a highly sensitive issue in conflict dialogue, and human interaction will always be paramount in building relationships, including in informal spaces that are hard to manufacture online. In addition, many groups are still suspicious of engaging online, and digital tools have hugely increased the amount of information parties and mediators have to manage, thus altering their skill and capacity requirements.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media can be a powerful tool to both build and break trust in peace mediation. Social media refers to a range of interactive websites and applications that enable users to create and share information and ideas with an online community. The potential of social media to affect human interaction is clear: In 2020, 56 percent of the world’s population was online, with 45 percent using some form of social media platform. More and more people are getting their information online.¹⁴⁹ Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp are now significant tools for peace promotion and public diplomacy. Although social media interactions can further divide societies and incite violence, they can also stimulate debate, social movements, and political change. States, armed groups, conflict-affected communities, and mediators can all deploy social media to disseminate their own narratives of conflict and mediation efforts. Social media offers new spaces to hear a greater number of and more diverse perspectives and can play an important role in leveling asymmetries—for example, by enabling both state and nonstate conflict parties to broadcast their views.¹⁵⁰

Social media can help build trust and confidence in a mediation process through establishing direct and inclusive channels of communication and dialogue between conflict parties, communities, and mediators. This can be important early on in dialogue and mediation, when more conventional diplomatic channels for communication are generally much more exclusive. Mediators can use social media to communicate directly with various groups and communities, develop a more inclusive picture of different conflict narratives, and identify potential entry points for dialogue, including in territories or circumstances that are otherwise inaccessible.¹⁵¹ For example, the Donbass Dialogue was a virtual dialogue platform that

reconnected members of divided communities amid ongoing conflict in Ukraine, in order to support them to visualize different relationships; the platform helped build trust both in the peace process and the other side.¹⁵² Careful use of social media can also help mediators to counter mis- or disinformation (in other words, false information disseminated unintentionally or intentionally).¹⁵³

On the other hand, social media can also destabilize relationships and undermine trust in mediation processes. Online communications bring serious concerns for security and confidentiality. Hacking and cybersecurity attacks are increasing, alongside the leaking of sensitive information via social media. And such events can rapidly break the trust among conflict parties and mediators, particularly at sensitive moments during the early stages of a process when confidence is low and parties are suspicious of respective motives. Social media can also create new hierarchies or imbalances through discrepancies in internet access, including across different gender and class groups and across social media users and audiences. Research shows that rather than facilitating a connected global community, social media often exacerbates or creates silos, as users tend to connect mostly with like-minded people, aggravating polarization and social divides. Conflict parties sometimes use social media to spread disinformation or promote divisiveness. As a result, social media has a track record of enabling extremist views and hate speech. In recognition of the issue, in 2019, Secretary-General António Guterres launched a UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech.

Disinformation campaigns on social media deliberately aim to feed contradictory information into conflict narratives, aggravating distrust among conflict parties and creating an environment of uncertainty and insecurity.¹⁵⁴ Mediation actors are now operating in the era of fake news and volatile, reactionary social media, creating many more possibilities for actors to disrupt trust in relation to a mediation process. In Myanmar, for example, the military has become adept at using technology to spread disinformation and exacerbate suspicion among communities that oppose them.¹⁵⁵ Disinformation can be used to undermine trust in the mediation process itself, discredit parties or factions that support peace, or draw attention to controversial topics to destabilize negotiations or change the balance of power within them. In Yemen, in 2016, false information that reported the violation of a ceasefire reached negotiators during peace talks between Yemeni parties. One side walked out, and talks were paused for several days before it was confirmed to be disinformation.¹⁵⁶ Though talks continued, this incident had an enduring impact on levels of trust.

Mediators need ways to manage the use of social media in negotiations and safeguard the trust being built around the negotiating table. They could, for example, create a code of conduct on how parties can use social media or help foster jointly agreed limits on information sharing.¹⁵⁷ Indeed, developing and implementing effective and joint mitigation measures can help to generate trust. Mediators could also engage in online narrative dissemination themselves to help build trust in the mediation process. But mediators would need to approach this active use of social media judiciously.

DIGITAL MEDIATION

Mediators continue to prioritize in-person interaction as the most effective way to build relationships and trust among conflict parties and groups in mediation processes.¹⁵⁸ But the contribution of digital technology is becoming ever more important. Digital technologies help increase efficiency and opportunities by alleviating some of the challenges associated with distance, time, security, and human and financial costs. Mediators can use a range of tools to engage with conflict parties—from email to social media platforms, online chat rooms, messaging applications, and audio- and videoconferencing platforms—as well as to avoid unwelcome surveillance and ensure privacy of communications.¹⁵⁹ And they can choose the tools that best match the mediation strategy, contextual circumstances, connectivity and gender considerations, and that are known and trusted by the parties.

A study by the UN and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue lists ways that digital technologies can support communications and trust building.¹⁶⁰ Communication technologies, including instant messaging applications and videoconferencing platforms, allow for prolonged dialogue in real time at significantly reduced costs. These technologies can enable complex mediation processes that involve numerous parties and timely follow-up to meetings. They can also reduce security risks associated with in-person meetings. Digital technologies offer new spaces for dialogue or, when physical contact is impossible, virtual negotiating rooms in which people can talk to each other or work simultaneously on drafting text documents. Increased use of online space has encouraged some organizations to broaden the types of dialogues that they convene—bringing in women’s rights groups, civil society organizations, or, where possible, rural communities—and to creatively use platforms like LinkedIn to reach out to young people through youth education platforms.¹⁶¹

As with social media, however, the potential of digital mediation to enhance trust is matched by risks of damaging it. As stressed by some actors, digital dialogue “does not offer the same quality of personal interaction as physical meetings, and in the worst cases, can lead to exclusion, harassment, or violence—particularly against women and minorities,” and can also “create more distance between parties, as it is more difficult to read body language and often more difficult to trust the purported identity of the online interlocutors with whom they are engaging.”¹⁶²

During the interviews and discussions for this evidence review, many mediators suggested that it is possible to maintain existing relationships through online communication, but harder to establish new relationships with different parties and communities.¹⁶³ The human connection required to build trust from scratch is difficult to make in an online setting, especially amid concerns over digital surveillance. One practitioner reflected on the loss of the more affective informal moments when trust can blossom.¹⁶⁴ Mistrust in online communication is high: Some people feel anxious about meetings being recorded or viewed by people off-screen. Some who are not fluent or comfortable in the languages being spoken can find it

hard to pick up nuances in discussions and facial expressions and can find the meetings additionally tiring or exclusionary. Mitigation measures include shorter online sessions, simultaneous interpretation (human or machine), and online side rooms to encourage informal relationship building.

Conclusion and Key Insights

This evidence review aimed to take stock of contemporary perspectives on trust in peace mediation. It involved an extensive literature review, as well as interviews with practitioners and academics that represent different disciplines, domains, and experiences. As such, the evidence review offers key insights for practitioners, scholars, and funders working to improve peace processes. These insights are categorized below into key areas and issues for building trust in mediation processes.

Managing distrust while building trust. Parties entering a mediation process can trust and distrust each other simultaneously. They need to get to a point where they believe that the other party has a genuine self-interest in making peace and engaging in negotiations as a strategic choice, not a tactical maneuver. Mediators can help create space that enables distrust to be managed while trust is being built. Cognitive and affective trust are intertwined, and approaches to building them need to be applied complementarily. Mediators can help establish working trust among conflict parties, whereby parties' confidence and willingness to compromise aligns with their own interests. In political conflicts involving violence and repression, working trust between conflict parties is deemed more realistic and achievable than deep interpersonal trust, which is emotional, unpredictable, and demands heavy investment of time and resources. Working trust can also extend beyond individual relationships to wider communities. Yet mediation practitioners must still grapple with and work in spaces where cognitive assessments of trustworthiness are framed by emotions, perceptions, and memories of past experiences.

Using complementary emotive gestures. Emotive gestures can complement practical confidence-building measures, which include tangible and measurable actions to boost confidence and psychological ties between parties involved in peace mediation processes. The mediation sector, as well as the broader peace and security research field, have largely focused on confidence building as a conduit to building trust and measuring progress in peace processes. This approach is now well established in the peace mediation, disarmament, and security domains. But the interviews, discussions, and analysis of social and political psychology literature conducted for this evidence review all highlight the additional value of emotive gestures, which include intangible, emotionally loaded, subtle actions to recognize, link, or

even help an enemy in order to bridge connections between parties and communities in conflict. More attention needs to be invested in understanding culturally specific and politically potent gestures, given that these can play understated yet pivotal roles in building trust and relationships.

Analyzing trust ecosystems. The different levels or tracks in peace processes have different forms of trust and relationships associated with them. These add up to a trust ecosystem, which is fluid and affected by conflict dynamics. Considering this ecosystem when conducting conflict and political analysis could lead to more insights and levers for change in relation to trust. Critical analysis of trust ecosystems can enable mediation teams to start developing more dedicated methods for building trust. This is an area where digital visualization could help, enabling mediators to plot out interpersonal and group trust dynamics.

Ensuring the necessary skills and qualities. The professionalization of peace mediation over the past two decades has led to an increased focus on the required core skills and qualities. What makes advisers, facilitators, and mediators suitable and equipped to implement effective peace mediation? How can trust-building skills and qualities be learned or acquired by international or local mediators? Few studies that examine the approaches, skills, and impact of mediators focus on trust building—how to nurture trust and how to mitigate salient factors that lead to trust being broken. Trust building should be understood as a strategic process that requires analysis of where it may fail or stall.

Understanding complex identities and promoting inclusive trust. Peace mediation has historically applied simple approaches to identity, which assume that conflict parties are relatively homogenous and effectively represented by their leaders. A more nuanced understanding of identity can help unpack interlocking systems of power, privilege, and exclusion that drive violent conflict and guide inter- and intragroup dynamics which trust- and relationship-building efforts must navigate. An analysis across multiple axes of identity—an intersectional analysis—can help mediators to identify and engage different voices and viewpoints as a basis for building a broader trust network among the different parties and communities involved in and affected by conflict. The positionality of the mediator also requires exploration, as it can affect how they understand conflict dynamics, parties, and communities and, in turn, how well they are able to build trust in the process (between themselves and the conflict parties and among the parties).

Using mediators as repositories for trust. Mediators can act as “stand-ins” for trust between conflict parties by bringing parties together before trust exists across the table and, during moments where distrust is high, by maintaining parties’ engagement in a process. In this way, a mediator can act as a repository of trust for both sides, bridging trust deficits

between the parties and mitigating their sense of exposure and vulnerability during dialogue or bargaining. But mediation actors need to know when to step back or hand over this role to another individual or organization when they are no longer able to act as a repository or when they are seen to be favoring one party over others. Trust in the mediator cannot be an alternative to trust between parties.

Building trust through empathy and deep understanding. To build trust in themselves and, by extension, the mediation process, mediators and mediation teams can ensure that they are seen as impartial and that they understand the perspectives and values of different sides of a conflict. To ensure that each party is empathetically heard, mediation actors need to have a solid grasp of the cultural context, the local political economy, and the history of the country and conflict. Astute inclusive political and historical analysis is critical. For insider mediators—those directly linked to a conflict party or community—this can be easier than it is for outsiders. But insiders’ proximity to the conflict also means they can be perceived as partisan. Bringing together a diverse mediation team that represents different perspectives and skills and offers a broad array of lived experiences and insights is essential to ensure that the most effective approaches and strategies are used to build trust and relationships with conflict parties, stakeholders, and constituencies.

Valuing and resourcing soft mediation approaches. Power mediation approaches that focus on bargaining, pressure, and persuasion are important for building cognitive trust. But these approaches are sometimes too dominant in peace mediation. More attention needs to be paid to approaches that focus on reliability, commitment, patience, presence, persistence, and empathy. Greater emphasis on mediation skills associated with affective trust can help parties build the functioning and sustainable relationships required to negotiate contentious and emotive conflict issues (for example, humanitarian access, power sharing, institutional reform, or reconciliation). The increased focus on building these skills needs to be supported by adequate resources. Soft skills are also crucial to engage with and make accurate assessments around communities’ narratives, experiences, perspectives, and trauma.

Increasing psychological awareness and support. Existing guidance for mediators provides little insight and advice on the role of emotions in building trust between the mediator and the parties, as well as between the parties. While psychology research suggests that emotions need to be seen as a point of departure for trust building, guidance for mediators tends to treat emotions as a problem to be addressed or suppressed.¹⁶⁵ Mediation practice could be improved by training and support to increase self-awareness and psychosocial knowledge, more nuanced understandings of trust and its emotional elements, and deeper insights into psychology. Mediators might then be better equipped to understand their own emotional biases and blind spots and to surface emotions that negatively impact trust, such as those

related to trauma.¹⁶⁶ “Vicarious trauma” is a real risk for mediators. Psychological support and training on self-care and resilience could also help mediators and mediation teams deal with their prolonged exposure to trauma and violence through lengthy mediation processes.¹⁶⁷

Managing digital mediation tools carefully. Misinformation, fake news, and online hate campaigns are all part of the digital space in which peace processes are now occurring. Social media is a blessing and a curse, as it can help to both erode and build trust. The shift toward using social media and digital tools to achieve political and strategic goals in peace processes requires an accompanying shift in mediators’ skills and profiles. This is a growth area in mediation and mediation support, as mediators and their teams need to understand how the array of digital tools work, how they can be used by conflict parties for political and military purposes, and how mediators themselves can use them to promote trust in mediation processes.

Appendix 1: Methodology

Michelle Gehrig and Cate Buchanan wrote this paper with Sally Holt and Alexander Ramsbotham in late 2021/early 2022. It summarizes the main findings of an evidence review that USIP commissioned from Conciliation Resources, one of 12 commissioned by the Institute in late 2021. The evidence review included a detailed analysis of literature, focusing on data and ideas from a wide range of domains and disciplines (for example, social and political psychology, business management, anthropology, peace and conflict research, and the broad profession of mediation including interpersonal and conflict). See Appendix 2 and the endnotes for the reviewed documents.

Three group discussions occurred in November and December 2021 with Conciliation Resources staff; a mixed group of external practitioners, analysts, and academics; and USIP staff. The discussions were complemented by interviews that captured the insights of both experienced and upcoming practitioners and researchers.

Limitations impacting the evidence review included the dominance of US studies on trust, the review of English-language literature only, the limited time and resources available to conduct interviews, the conducting of discussions in English only, and a failure to meet gender parity in discussion groups and interviews despite having goals in this regard.

GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Conciliation Resources, November 11, 2021

Olivia Caeymaex, director, Conciliation Resources-EU; Rachel Clogg, senior adviser, South Caucasus Program; Jonathan Cohen, executive director; Felix Colchester, project manager, Research, Advisory and Policy Department (RAP); Teresa Dumasy, director of RAP; Ali Hassan Fahimi, project manager, South Asia (Afghanistan); Sally Holt, head of Accord, RAP; Valeria Minisini, assistant, RAP; Gabriel Nuckhir, gender adviser; Eleanor O’Connell, policy manager, RAP; Cecile Pentori, program manager, South Asia Program; Caesar Poblacks, project manager, East and Central Africa Program; Alexander Ramsbotham, director of research and innovation, RAP; Monica Reeves, Europe-Asia Department officer; Basile Semba, project manager, East and Central Africa Program; Rebecca Smith, Africa Department manager; Mira Sovakar, Europe-Asia Department manager.

Mediation Practitioners, Analysts, and Academics, December 7, 2021

Eileen Babbitt, professor of international conflict management practice, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University; Francisco Diez, senior mediation adviser, UN Mediation Support Unit’s Standby Team of Experts; Martine Miller, guest lecturer at Georgetown and American University and lecturer and program adviser to the Peace and Conflict Studies Center at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand; Marie-Joëlle Zahar, professor of political science, director of the Research Network on Peace Operations, Université de Montréal, and senior nonresident fellow, International Peace Institute.

USIP, December 13, 2021

Juan Diaz-Prinz, senior expert on mediation and dialogue; Billy Ford, program officer for the Burma team; Osama Gharizi, senior program adviser for Iraq; Sarhang Hamasaheed, director of Middle East programs; Sloane Katleman, senior programs assistant, Inclusive Peace Processes and Reconciliation team; Keith

Mines, director of the Latin America program; Elizabeth Murray, senior program officer in the Africa program; Antti Pentikäinen, visiting scholar; Elizabeth Shillings, program specialist, Inclusive Peace Processes and Reconciliation; Carl Stauffer, senior expert on reconciliation; Scott Worden, director of Afghanistan and Central Asia programs; and Xochilt Hernandex, program officer, Nonviolent Action team.

INTERVIEWS

- Elie Abouaoun, director, Middle East and North Africa programs, USIP, December 20, 2021
- Anonymous mediator in Myanmar, January 20, 2022
- Anonymous senior peace mediation expert in the United States, February 17, 2022
- Betty Bigombe, Uganda's ambassador to Malaysia, December 7, 2021
- Vlad Corbu, chief program manager, Dialogue Advisory Group, December 17, 2021
- Gorka Elejabarrieta Diaz, Basque senator and director, EH Bildu International Relations Department, December 9, 2021
- Martin Griffiths, UN under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; former UN special envoy for Yemen, February 17, 2022
- Haider Al Ibrahim, director, Peace Paradigms, December 7, 2021
- Laurie Nathan, mediation program director, Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame, November 15, 2021
- Mara Olekalns, professor of management, Melbourne Business School, University of Melbourne, February 17, 2022
- Nilar Oo, Myanmar representative, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, December 29, 2021
- Bruna Seu, professor in psychosocial studies and critical psychology, Birkbeck, University of London, December 7, 2021

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Notes

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4. There are other important relationships to examine in peace processes. There is significant research on trust building within and across conflict communities in conflict transformation and postconflict reconciliation literature. Practitioners repeatedly brought up the (largely ignored) problems with, and importance of, trust among the different mediation entities operating alongside one another in a conflict. These relationships are outside the scope of this evidence review.
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156. UN DPPA and HD Centre, *Digital Technologies and Mediation in Armed Conflict*, 22.
157. For more suggestions, see Macjin, "Social Media Challenges to Peace-making and What Can Be Done about Them," 251–55.
158. UN DPPA and HD Centre, *Digital Technologies and Mediation in Armed Conflict*.
159. UN DPPA and HD Centre, *Digital Technologies and Mediation in Armed Conflict*.
160. UN DPPA and HD Centre, *Digital Technologies and Mediation in Armed Conflict*.
161. Comment made during a group discussion with Conciliation Resources staff on November 11, 2021.
162. UN DPPA and HD Centre, *Digital Technologies and Mediation in Armed Conflict*.
163. Comment made across various interviews and discussions.
164. Comment made during a discussion with an anonymous mediator in Myanmar, January 20, 2022, with Cate Buchanan.
165. Comment made during an interview with Laurie Nathan on November 21, 2015. See, for example, Connie Peck, *A Manual for UN Mediators: Advice from UN Representatives and Envoys* (Geneva: UN Institute for Training and Research and UN Department of Political Affairs, 2010), 6–7, <https://peacemaker.un.org/node/1849>. It sets out a problem-solving approach whereby emotions need to be "contained" or "controlled."
166. Seu, "States of Mind in Conflict," 22.
167. Comment made during a group discussion by Martine Miller on December 7, 2021.