

## POLICY BRIEF

# Insider Mediation: lessons learnt and best practices for conflict resolution and prevention



Lessons from insider mediation in Burundi, Niger, and Zimbabwe

December 2024

**At a Glance:** This policy brief highlights key lessons learnt on enhancing both the strategic value and the effectiveness of insider mediation as a tool for conflict prevention and resolution in diverse fragile and conflict-affected contexts. The brief draws on the broader evidence base on insider mediation as well as on the findings of the final evaluation of EU-funded *Building Peace from the Inside* project which supported Insider Mediators in Burundi, Niger, and Zimbabwe between 2020 and 2024.

Since 2012, the UN and EU have supported a number of initiatives to build the capacity of Insider Mediators (IMs) in over 20 fragile contexts, underscoring their recognition of the key role that IMs can play. The policy brief demonstrates how supporting Insider Mediators, as trusted local peace agents with the credibility and knowledge to mediate local conflicts, aligns with international commitments and offers a proven, cost-effective means to mitigate conflict escalation, safeguard lives, and reduce humanitarian and economic burdens.

Drawing on best practice, the brief also highlights the importance of ensuring external support to IMs is fully locally-led and contextually-framed, enabling communities and IMs themselves to determine local conflict prevention and resolution needs and solutions. The brief specifically highlights the importance of allowing IMs themselves to determine their capacity development priorities, establishing peer exchange and support networks between IMs, and strengthening IMs links to national and international policymaking. Inclusion is also highlighted as a key principle of insider mediation, ensuring insider mediation services are widely available, thereby enhancing their scope and impact.



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'Building Peace from the Inside' is a European Union-funded project that started in 2020 and has been implemented by Search for Common Ground (Search), Berghof Foundation and Interpeace, together with the Conflict Alert and Prevention Center (CENAP) in Burundi, Africa University - Institute for Peace Leadership and Governance (IPLG) in Zimbabwe, and Search's office in Niger. The project aims to both support capacity strengthening of insider mediators in the three countries and to strengthen the collaboration between insider mediators and global policy actors to advance the international understanding, recognition of, and support for insider mediation.

## Insider Mediation: why it matters

There has been a significant increase in the proportion of internationalised armed conflicts: intra-state conflicts in which regional and global powers intervene and play an influential role, often driven by geopolitical competition. According to the 2023 Global Peace Index, there has been a ninefold increase in the number of internationalised armed conflicts since 2004. The rising role of geopolitics in local and national conflicts has made them more complex and intractable, presenting a considerable challenge to traditional international approaches to conflict resolution. In response to this trend, key international actors, spearheaded by the United Nations, have shifted their focus from conflict resolution to conflict prevention, strengthening their commitment to preventing the outbreak and escalation of conflict in the first place. In 2016, the UN Security Council and General Assembly adopted twin resolutions setting out an ambitious comprehensive agenda for sustaining peace, particularly through the prevention of conflict by national and local actors.<sup>1</sup> One year later, in 2017, the United Nations-World Bank 'Pathways for Peace' report demonstrated that investing in conflict prevention is not just the right thing to do, but is also highly cost-effective, yielding between \$5 billion to nearly \$70 billion per year in savings to the donor community, depending on the number of conflicts among other variables.<sup>2</sup> In 2024, at the Summit of the Future, UN Member States reiterated their commitment to conflict prevention and underscored the need to build national capacities to develop and drive forward nationally- and locally-owned conflict prevention efforts.<sup>3</sup>

Conflict prevention requires concerted efforts to identify and understand the root causes of conflict, and to intervene early and effectively to stop conflicts from escalating. Ensuring conflict prevention interventions are fit-for-purpose in turn requires the leadership of Insider Mediators (IMs), local peace agents, who understand local conflict dynamics, drivers, and actors, and who have the credibility and trust to be able to effectively engage with conflict parties to prevent, resolve, and transform conflicts. In fact, research shows that the involvement of IMs in mediation processes can increase the likelihood of a negotiated agreement from 5 percent to 19 percent.<sup>4</sup> This is particularly important given evidence that Insider Mediators can act as effective early warning and early response agents, identifying and intervening to stop local conflicts from escalating into larger-scale and higher-level conflict, which are more likely to have higher fatalities and displacement.<sup>5</sup> Recognising the central role that Insider Mediators can play, the UN and the EU have been supporting the practice of insider mediation in over 20 fragile and conflict-affected contexts since 2012 through partnerships with different UN agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

From 2020 to 2024, the EU's Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) funded two phases of the *Building Peace from the Inside* project which supported Insider Mediators in Burundi, Niger, and Zimbabwe, in partnership with a consortium of international and national NGOs comprising Search for Common Ground (Search), Berghof Foundation (Berghof), Interpeace, le Centre d'Alerte et de Prévention des Conflits (CENAP) and Africa University. Like many other projects supporting insider mediation, *Building Peace from the Inside* demonstrated how effective IMs can be in resolving and preventing conflict at the local level when supported by international actors. Over the two phases of the project, the consortium supported 392 Insider Mediators across the three countries – 174 in Burundi, 159 in Niger, and 57 in Zimbabwe – who in turn were involved in 140 mediation processes. Of the 108 mediation cases undertaken in the second phase of the project (2022-2024), 75 percent successfully reached a full agreement, 20 percent a partial agreement, and 5 percent could still yet be resolved. The project also demonstrated the cost-effectiveness of conflict prevention, underscoring the findings of the 'Pathways for Peace' report. Social return on investment analysis of a sample of nine mediation cases, undertaken as part of the project's final evaluation, estimated that the project had a cost-benefit ratio of 1:1,285, indicating that for every Euro invested in mediation, there was an average SROI in the value of EUR 1,285. While the impact and cost-effectiveness of insider mediation will vary between and even within countries, the *Building Peace from the Inside* project has confirmed the imperative to continue investing in local-level conflict prevention alongside efforts at the national and international level.

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<sup>1</sup> UN Peacebuilding Support Office. (2017). Guidance on Sustaining Peace. United Nations Sustainable Development Group. Available at: [link](#).

<sup>2</sup> UN/WB. (2017). Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict. United Nations and World Bank. Available at: [link](#).

<sup>3</sup> UN. (2024). Pact for the Future, Global Digital Compact and Declaration on Future Generations. Summit of the Future Outcome Documents September 2024. Available at: [link](#).

<sup>4</sup> Svensson, I. and Lindgren, M. (2013). Peace from the Inside: Exploring the Role of the Insider-Partial Mediator. *International Interactions*, 39:5. pp. 710-711. Available at: [link](#).

<sup>5</sup> Roepstorff, K., and Bernhard, A. (2013). Insider Mediation in Peace Processes: An Untapped Resource? *Sicherheit Und Frieden (S+F)/Security and Peace*, 31(3), 163-169. Available at: [link](#); UNDP. (2014). Supporting Insider Mediation: Strengthening resilience to conflict and turbulence. United Nations Development Programme. Available at: [link](#).

Drawing on the findings of the project's final evaluation, this policy brief presents key lessons learnt on 'what works' in supporting IMs to be more effective in resolving and preventing conflicts. These lessons aim to maximise the outcomes of future international and national policies and programmes for engaging with and supporting IMs.

## Identify and select Insider Mediators through an inclusive and participatory process

The main requirement for an individual is to be intrinsic to and part of the social fabric in which the conflicts they are mediating take place. IM's effectiveness relies on their 'insider' status, in having a deep understanding of local social, political, and economic issues as well as close, long-standing relationships with conflict parties which imbues them with both the access and influence to mediate as well as the vested interest in reaching an agreement. Together, these characteristics give IMs the credibility and legitimacy needed to effectively mediate conflicts.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the criteria for determining whether someone already is or could become an IM, varies between contexts, as communities and individuals may understand and frame the practice of insider mediation – and those engaged in it – in different ways and using different terms. This requires international actors aiming to engage with IMs to adopt a consultative approach to selecting the IMs they will work with, ensuring that the selection process includes a wide range of key stakeholders involved in and affected by local conflict issues. Consultations with a diverse range of stakeholders at different levels can help to assess and understand the degree of legitimacy and trust that an individual may have in their local context, and the networks they may be a part of which link them to local, national, and even international policymakers, peace processes, and institutions.

The *Building Peace from the Inside* project identified the IMs it would engage with through a participatory and conflict sensitive manner, integrating the selection process into its mapping exercise. This mapping allowed the project to identify local conflict dynamics and peace needs per country, which in turn enabled consortium partners to develop context-specific definitions of mediation and to identify local actors with the attributes required to effectively serve as IMs. For example, in Niger, the project identified IMs in each different municipality by consulting the local authority, traditional leaders, and regional delegates of the Haute Autorité à la Consolidation de la Paix (HACP). Through these consultations, the project identified contextually-relevant criteria for the selection of IMs, which considered their level of expertise (skills, experience, and knowledge); diversity (gender, age, and ethnicity); and community perception (respect, impartiality, and integrity).

## Supporting a diverse pool of IMs is crucial to meet wide-ranging local needs

To be able to address the diversity of conflicts at the local level, and engage with the diversity of actors involved, the pool of IMs in any given context need to truly reflect the society in which conflicts occur. Ensuring a diverse pool of IMs will make insider mediation more accessible to more people, meeting their needs and increasing the scope of conflicts that mediation can address. There is considerable evidence that peace processes that are more inclusive are more likely to be sustained as they have more broad-based public support and greater legitimacy.<sup>7</sup> For example, research shows that the participation of women increases the legitimacy and credibility of peace processes, and that processes that incorporate women's perspectives result in more comprehensive, effective, and sustainable solutions. Similarly, evidence shows that the participation of youth can increase a peace agreement's sustainability.<sup>8</sup> While most of the evidence focuses on formal, state-based peace processes, the need for inclusion is equally pressing at the local level where conflict can affect and involve a diverse range of individuals regardless of their identity.

Despite the evidence, conflict mediation in most fragile and conflict-affected contexts remains dominated by older men, reflecting prevailing discriminatory social norms which exclude women, youth, persons with disabilities, and representatives of other marginalised groups from participating. This presents a challenge for international and national actors seeking to support more inclusive insider mediation in male-dominated contexts where locally-driven consultation processes are more likely to select male IMs, inadvertently reinforcing exclusionary norms. The *Building Peace from the Inside* project demonstrated that it is possible for international projects to navigate these challenges through a concerted effort to identify and seize opportunities for inclusion at different points and in different ways. For example, by implementing a highly inclusive consultative mapping process at the start of the project, consortium partners were able to ensure that they raised, discussed, and better understood community perceptions of different

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<sup>6</sup> UNDP. (2020). Engaging with Insider Mediators - Sustaining peace in an age of turbulence. Guidance Note 2.0. United Nations Development Programme. Available at: [link](#).

<sup>7</sup> Carl, A. (2019). Inclusion in peace processes. *Accord*, Issue 28. Conciliation Resources. Available at: [link](#).

<sup>8</sup> Altiok, A., and Grizelj, I. (2019). We Are Here: An integrated approach to youth-inclusive peace processes. Global policy paper commissioned by the United Nations Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth. Available at: [link](#).

groups' roles in conflict mediation, including women and youth. This enabled age and gender to be identified as relevant criteria for consideration when selecting IMs.

At the same time, the project established a gender quota system, aiming to have at least 40 percent of the IMs it supported in each country be women. While the project exceeded this quota, it also recognised that having women IMs did not automatically give them the same level of access, influence, and impact as their male counterparts due to discriminatory gender norms. Women were generally not allowed to lead the mediation of cases considered complex such as ethnic conflicts or farmer-herder conflicts, which are seen as being the purview of older male mediators. However, there were some cases of women mediators being involved in mediations around mining and land issues, which are traditionally male-dominated areas. Pairing women mediators with male mediators is an effective means of giving women mediators access to and experience in more complex, high-profile cases. Further, as women are seen as legitimate mediators in cases involving women, family conflicts, and youth, support to women mediators has broadened access to mediation services to different groups, particularly marginalised groups. Similarly, in terms of youth participation, the project's final evaluation found that many youth preferred to seek out mediation services from younger mediators. This means that while youth may lack the experience and networks that older IMs have, they can often be better placed to mediate conflicts involving youth, such as intergenerational family conflicts, as solutions proposed from young mediators are more likely to be accepted and followed. As is the case with women mediators, pairing young mediators with older, more experienced mediators is an effective way to expand their networks and give them the experience they need to enhance their credibility as mediators.

### Capacity development support should align with Insider Mediators' priority needs

IMs' effectiveness is highly dependent on their capabilities. Developing IMs' mediation capacity is one of the most important areas which external programmes can support, drawing on global good practice to address IMs' specific capacity gaps. IMs' capabilities will vary from individual to individual, based on several factors such as their educational background and their experience. This means there is no one-size-fits-all approach to building IMs' capacity. External actors supporting IMs should invest in engaging IMs to jointly assess their capabilities and identify their needs, and use this to determine the nature and level of capacity development support to be provided. This may require integrating a conflict analysis into the assessment to ensure that IMs' needs are articulated within the broader peacebuilding needs of their communities. To ensure external programmes can best meet the needs of IMs, their design needs to be flexible and adaptive enough to be able to provide different types of support to different IMs. While some may require training, logistical, financial and advisory support, others may require support in fewer areas. Mentoring can also help build the capacity of younger or less experienced IMs by allowing them to shadow, work with, and learn from more experienced IMs. Identifying IMs with more and less experience, and linking these together can complement and multiply external support provided.

The *Building Peace from the Inside* project integrated an assessment of IMs' needs and capacities as part of its mapping exercises in both phases, allowing the consortium partners to understand IMs' capacity gaps and to consult IMs on their own capacity development priorities. To ensure a consistent minimum capacity among IMs in different countries, the project developed a standardised, cross-country training curriculum which also integrated modules that specifically responded to IMs' priority needs. These included training on mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), on the difference between civil and criminal cases, and on environmental and natural resource-based conflict management (and the impacts of climate change). All IMs consulted as part of the project's final evaluation reported that the project met their respective needs and that the training and support provided was relevant to improving the knowledge and skills they needed to be effective IMs. The MHPSS training was particularly effective, as IMs reported that the training improved their mental health through stress management, and enabled them to mediate more effectively by strengthening their emotional intelligence. Mentoring was also reported to be a particularly effective approach to encourage less-experienced women and youth to participate in mediation.

### Networking can enhance Insider Mediators' effectiveness and sustainability

Providing opportunities for IMs to learn from each other and other mediation practitioners at local, national, and international level is an important means to enable peer exchange and strengthen mutual support and solidarity in ways that strengthen IMs' effectiveness. Networking is a crucial way to link different IMs who would otherwise have to work in isolation. Through networks, IMs will have greater opportunities to share and learn from other IMs in their areas, countries, and even abroad in a safe space, allowing them to identify best practices and benefit from joint problem solving. Networks can also serve as a source of solidarity and emotional support for IMs, helping to keep them motivated. In addition to enhancing IMs' effectiveness, networking can help to ensure their sustainability.

Through networks, IMs can jointly fundraise and pool resources (both financial and intellectual) and networks, enabling individual IMs to rely on the network to continue engaging in their communities.

In addition to creating networks of IMs, it is also crucial to broaden IMs' external networks by deepening their links to key conflict and peace actors at different levels. The indirect support and direct participation of traditional and state-based authorities at local and national levels can strengthen the level of buy-in and legitimacy of an agreement mediated by an IM. For this reason, IMs often invest significant time into establishing and fostering relationships with authorities, who can in turn also benefit from this as IMs can resolve conflicts which may have escalated and become an issue authorities would need to handle.

The final evaluation of *Building Peace from the Inside* found that IMs in all three project countries – Burundi, Niger, and Zimbabwe – deeply appreciated the peer learning and experience-sharing workshops organised by the project. IMs reported that these networking events fostered collaboration, mutual learning and cross-fertilisation of ideas and best practices among IMs, which in turn enhanced their effectiveness as mediators. External networks, particularly with traditional and local authorities were also found to be a fundamental component of IMs' success in all three countries. The evaluation found that involving authorities in the process of planning and implementing mediation activities, enabled IMs to better consider local needs and contextual realities and to better navigate political sensitivities. It also helped IMs to ensure authorities acted as guarantors whose validation safeguarded mediation outcomes.

Networks were also a central pillar of the project's sustainability strategy. For example, in Zimbabwe, the project organised the election of a core group of 11 IMs by the full cohort to be responsible for managing the network of IMs after the end of the project. They were then trained on strategic leadership and proposal writing to support them in accessing funding to sustain the network. External networks also contributed to the project's sustainability, as the evaluation found that local authorities who have grown to appreciate and value the work of IMs have begun to turn to IMs for their services. In some cases, there are efforts by local authorities to seek (and secure) resources which would enable IMs to continue to deliver mediation services beyond the end of the project.

## Policy recommendations

Drawing on the best practices above, the recommendations below aim to inform future efforts by policymakers and practitioners seeking to contribute to conflict prevention by improving support to insider mediation practice.

- 1. The EU should continue to support Insider Mediators while also championing the value of insider mediation to other donors.** Since 2012, the EU has been the primary donor advancing the practice of insider mediation in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America through its support to UNDP and NGOs such as Search for Common Ground, Interpeace, and the Berghof Foundation. The EU's continued support after 12 years demonstrates its appreciation of the value of insider mediation and its commitment to the practice. The EU should capitalise on its investments to-date by continuing to support insider mediation programmes while also drawing on its experience to champion the practice of insider mediation, engaging with other key donors to persuade them to support similar programming. Investing in tracking and measuring the impact of IM efforts at a global level would be highly valuable to showcase the value of their contributions.
- 2. External support to Insider Mediators should be defined and framed locally, by conflict-affected communities and Insider Mediators themselves.** The experience of international engagement with IMs to-date underlines that external actors' contribution is maximised when they play a supporting role. Local communities and IMs themselves need to be in the driver's seat, identifying their own local conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding needs, and defining what type and level of support they require from external actors.
- 3. Gender and social inclusion should be mainstreamed into Insider Mediation programmes.** The impact of insider mediation ultimately relies on the scope and scale of insider mediation services. To make insider mediation more accessible, Insider Mediators should reflect the diversity of the societies in which they operate. Evidence shows the benefits of supporting women and youth mediators, but other categories of marginalization should also be considered to broaden both access to and acceptance of Insider Mediators. The imperative to enhance gender and social inclusion in insider mediation programmes may present dilemmas in contexts where there is widespread and deep-seated discrimination and exclusion of marginalised groups. This requires adaptable and flexible programming, which analyses and monitors gender and social exclusion dynamics and

seizes opportunities to shift exclusionary norms through targeted support to different groups, including through male champions. Practically, this will require expanding project inclusion criteria and ensuring budgets are available to enable representatives from marginalised communities to be able to participate meaningfully.

- 4. External support to Insider Mediators should focus on establishing and strengthening insider mediation networks.** It is clear that building strong networks of Insider Mediators can enhance the effectiveness of insider mediation practices. When linked, IMs can learn from and support each other, sharing and increasing the implementation of best practices, which can lead to better conflict prevention and peace outcomes. In addition, by deepening external networks, particularly with key traditional and state-based peace and security actors, IMs can deepen their access to stakeholders who can facilitate, guarantee, and support mediation processes. IMs can themselves, through these networks, better contribute to peace processes at higher levels, acting as bridges between grassroots conflict prevention and peacebuilding (Track 3) and higher-level processes involving influential actors (Track 2) and key policymakers (Track 1/1.5).
- 5. Mental health and psychosocial support should be integrated into Insider Mediator training.** MHPSS training can help IMs to better manage their stress and mental health, ensuring they remain resilient and are able to continue providing services. At the same time, MHPSS training can equip IMs with emotional intelligence and communication skills that can enhance their effectiveness as mediators, including through trauma management and referrals to other services if and when required.