

Creative entry points for mediation

– a guide for third parties

Third parties face numerous challenges when launching peace processes or trying to unblock situations within a process. Creative entry points are a third party’s pragmatic response to that challenge. They are answers to the questions of who to work with and on which themes to engage in order to increase the chances of a functioning process. This short guide aims to help third parties to better identify and plan for entry points.

Defining entry points – two broad categories

Entry points to access and start a new process. These tend to focus on individual actors and existing networks, on creating trust, and non-threatening issues.

Entry points to unblock stalled processes. Often a higher level of technicality is needed in these cases, which may involve changing the venue, breaking down the topics or sequencing them differently. Switching to another track, engaging conflict party representatives in their personal capacity, or working on pragmatic issues with technical experts and without addressing core conflict issues can help to unblock a situation.

Analysing entry points – a checklist

Having the clearest possible answers to these questions will help to design and use entry points in a more structured and deliberate way:

- What are your **existing relationships** with the parties? Do you or your institution have a positive image or profile that you can build on to start a process?
- What does your **conflict analysis** reveal? Do the conflict actors have individual and/or common interests or needs, or mutual relationships, that could build a base for engagement?
- What **technical or non-core conflict topics** do the parties or their constituencies care about that could help to form an opening?
- What could you do to **increase the likelihood of an entry point materialising** (e.g. establish trustful relationships and communication channels, create networks)?
- What recent or upcoming **changes in the context** could create momentum so that your entry point materialises?
- What is your **objective and strategy** for using the entry point?
- What **mediation methods** could help to increase your entry point’s potential for success?
- What is your **strategy to move from the entry point to a process**? What can you offer to the parties to create trust in you and the process?
- What are the **alternatives** if this entry point does not materialise? How would a **change of entry points** be perceived by the conflict actors?
- What are the **risks** associated with this entry point, and what can you do to mitigate them?

How to make creative entry points successful

There is no blueprint for entry points, but the following tips for the design and use of creative entry points help increase their potential for success.

1. **Update your conflict analysis** with the current situation; the characteristics, interests and strategies of key actors; their attributes and perceptions; and previous mediation attempts.
2. **Take an entrepreneurial posture.** A trial-and-error approach combined with patience and a constant awareness of political momentum will help you to identify and make best use of entry points.
3. **Think strategy.** Be clear about the objective you want to get to and to whom you need to talk. An entry point strategy needs to be constantly re-designed, testing one approach while pushing forward with another.
4. **Be transparent towards conflict parties about what you do and why** to avoid entry points being seen as threats, or simply unimportant.
5. **Maintain confidentiality** as a prerequisite to protect this early stage.
6. **Offer tangible successes.** For parties to be able to engage and make concessions, they need to see a direction of travel. Consider not working towards a political end goal, but towards a short-term tangible outcome that both sides can sell as a win.
7. **Maintain momentum.** As long as the process moves forward, the chances are (better) that it will keep moving and not fall. Come up with new ideas to keep the process going.
8. **Prioritise, sequence, compartmentalise, and try new formats and actors.** These techniques can create entry points when processes stall and are especially helpful when managing dilemmas.
9. **Be strategically empathetic.** Listen actively. The purpose is twofold: to gain the trust of conflict parties while increasing your own understanding of the conflict landscape.
10. **Keep your promises.** Deliver the activities you said you would. This helps to build trust with and between the parties, and helps to avoid the impression that your entry point was only used as a stepping stone to more political topics.
11. **Be clear about what you can offer.** Negotiations are interest-based engagements, and mediators need not fool themselves that parties engage for altruistic motives.

Getting to the entry point

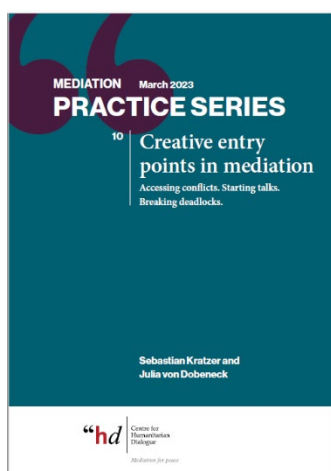
When accessing a context or starting a process, third parties often strategically prepare the ground for entry points to emerge or develop later. This is mainly achieved through establishing in-depth relationships and reliable networks.

Third-party posture and strategic patience: this ‘micro-technique’ encompasses active listening, the targeted use of empathy and personal contact. As a senior mediator put it, “not doing anything but talking to everyone” is an integral precondition for entering a process. It may “sound passive but is in fact a lot of work”.

Creating the conditions: ‘ripening’ a conflict through increased pressure and incentives can give entry points a chance to materialise. Capacity-building or establishing reliable networks, without necessarily having a plan for when and where the contacts will be used, may create future opportunities.

Beware the risks!

- ❖ Jumping into negotiations too early can damage your access and process.
- ❖ A topic that worked well in making first contact may work less well to sustain a process.
- ❖ Conflict parties may try to play intermediaries off against each other, particularly in the early dialogue phases.
- ❖ Making first contact can be extremely risky for interlocutors, both in terms of physical security and potential political fall-out.
- ❖ Be aware of practical and moral dilemmas at the political-humanitarian interface.



For more detail, see:

S. Kratzer and J. von Dobreneck (2023) *Creative entry points in mediation: Accessing conflicts. Starting talks. Breaking deadlocks.* Mediation Practice Series. Geneva: Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.