

OUTCOME NOTE

2024 Donor – Practitioner M&E Roundtable:

Up for the challenge? Peacemaking M&E in a polarised world

On 15 and 16 February 2024, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) convened the eighth “Donor-Practitioner M&E Roundtable” in Geneva. The event brought together leading donor and practitioner organisations¹ to discuss and advance monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approaches for peace mediation and dialogue. This Outcome Note summarises the discussion at the Roundtable and presents the latest insights on M&E methods, shared challenges and credible and pragmatic solutions for the peacemaking sector.

A changing political landscape: what this means for mediation and the role of M&E

Discussions at the 2024 Roundtable took place against the backdrop of a changing political and conflict landscape characterised by increasing geopolitical competition, rising inter-state conflict, the fragmentation of conflict parties and growing political polarisation, further fuelled by social media. These trends have resulted in a stronger donor focus on defence and deterrence, with significant implications for the mediation field. Some European governments are de-prioritizing non-military approaches such as mediation and dialogue, which subsequently constrains resources available for peacemaking. Donors and practitioners agreed that under such high levels of scrutiny, the mediation sector is under pressure to use credible M&E to prove its effectiveness and value, and to communicate this to the political level.

With opportunities for comprehensive peace more elusive, peacemakers are finding new ways to collaborate with a more diverse set of mediation actors, and are moderating their ambitions to focus on what they can deliver – violence mitigation based on ceasefires or partial agreements, and short-term de-escalation measures. These measures serve important functions: mitigating the impact of conflict on civilians, allowing the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and creating the space for political talks. Yet, the trade-offs are more acute, and it can be difficult to ensure progress towards more sustainable settlements. In polarised contexts, formal diplomatic channels can be more constrained. This increases the need to keep informal channels open to help prevent escalation.

In this dynamic context, peacemaking results are less visible. This challenges practitioners to adopt M&E approaches that are suitable to demonstrate the value of incremental results, show tangible impact, and emphasise the importance of de-escalation and preventive work.

Advances in the peacemaking M&E toolbox

Since the first Roundtable in 2014, the peacemaking sector has come a long way in establishing internal consensus that M&E approaches need to be both *credible* and *suitable* for mediation, i.e. *adaptive*, to adjust to the volatile nature of peacemaking processes; *non-invasive*, to protect confidentiality and avoid disruption of engagement with hard-to-reach or elite actors; and carried out by *trusted* and *objective* experts to maximise learning, while mitigating risk to processes and personnel. Donors highlighted that they must also be able to clearly communicate mediation’s contribution to peace and stability.

Such approaches rest on the principles of an adaptive M&E model that focuses on three levels of inquiry (outlined in [Annex A](#)): measuring results where they are observable; assessing the appropriateness of an engagement’s strategy; and assuring the quality of a mediation team’s professional judgements.

¹ Ten donor organisations were represented: Germany, Switzerland, Norway, Netherlands, Finland, Canada, Australia, UK, Ireland, and European Commission. Ten peer organisations participated: Inter-Mediate, Berghof, EIP, Swisspeace, Interpeace, CMI, USIP, Crisis Group, ICRC and HD. Four academics and independent evaluators brought technical inputs.

Recent advances in the sector's M&E toolbox included: a) the development of methods for assessing confidential mediation processes; b) methods adapted for monitoring change produced by Track 1.5, 2 and locally-driven dialogue processes; and c) advances in evaluation methods suited to reviewing the 'complexity' found when assessing thematic or regional peacemaking approaches where operational objectives are less clear. Discussions also looked at cross-cutting issues including: furthering the role of M&E in supporting projects to integrate gender and inclusion considerations, adapting M&E methods for environmental peacemaking and exploring the role of digital technologies in advancing M&E approaches.

New methods have been captured in the latest iteration of the M&E toolbox diagram which captures the diverse set of innovative approaches and tools developed by the mediation field. These are suited to different contexts, levels of engagement and stages of the peacemaking process (see [Annex B](#)).

Methods for assessing confidential mediation and dialogue tracks

Many mediation engagements take place in highly sensitive contexts with hard-to-reach or elite stakeholders. This forces practitioners to reconcile the imperative for confidentiality with the need to demonstrate value. The growing engagement by peacemaking organisations in preventive work at the inter-state level has further highlighted the need for methods suited to deal with sensitive contexts.

- One example showcased at the Roundtable was *Results Validation*, which involves an independent assessment of the validity of reported outcomes by an objective analyst who is trusted by both the mediation team and the conflict parties. This method is particularly suited to the review of discreet mediation processes, with provisions made to safeguard confidentiality.
- Other tools included a *Dashboard* used to monitor self-reported progress made through sensitive engagements against criteria such as *access, credibility, influence* and *impact*.
- Discussions also looked at ways to assess formal and informal diplomatic work. One approach used a *self-reporting system* to record progress in terms of changes in target stakeholders' *awareness, willingness* or *action*. Another approach to strengthen monitoring was the delineation of incremental steps contributing to improved diplomatic relations in an organisational-level theory of change. However, many state and non-state mediators continue to rely on peer reviews and mediator debriefings as methods for critical reflection in contexts where both objectives and results are less clear, and processes are confidential.
- Some donors discussed how their systems were more or less suited to processing confidential information. They mentioned provisions that enable the processing of information from sensitive processes including verbal reporting, flexible budgeting and the use of encrypted messaging systems. They also spoke about ways to acknowledge the rationale of sensitive engagements in programme-level reporting to the political level.

Monitoring changes produced by Track 1.5, 2 and local level dialogue processes

Practitioners also highlighted new methods they had tested for assessing the changes produced by Track 1.5 or Track 2 dialogue processes, as well as means for stakeholders to inform the design of frameworks for assessing local level dialogue work.

- One set of *Model Measures* for monitoring the impact of Track 1.5 and 2 dialogues looked at cognitive and behavioural or relational changes over time. For example, it monitored changes in expressions of trust among participants, or their participation in confidence building measures. It also looked at the extent to which these changes 'transferred' to community or societal levels.
- Another approach suitable to track localised change was an adaptation of the participatory *Most Significant Change* methodology, which involved collecting stories by stakeholders about changes they observed in discourse and attitudes following dialogue interventions.

- In addition, *Localised Evaluation* approaches assessed interventions against local perspectives of what ‘peace’ means rather than the organisation’s own theory of intervention. They engaged local monitoring committees that collect data on the implementation and sustainability of agreements to help demonstrate the impact of local mediation processes.

Evaluating mediation’s contribution to peace

Building on previous years, experts noted certain challenges to successfully evaluating peacemaking engagements. One challenge is limited data and access, given the confidentiality and sensitivity of engagements. Secondly, the iterative nature of dialogue processes makes it difficult to define results or measure contributions made by mediators in complex contexts. Thirdly, some evaluations leave mediation teams feeling that the time burden involved outweighed the value of the analysis produced.

Discussions also emphasised the importance of clarifying the scope and aims of the intervention being reviewed, and the criteria against which they are assessed. The OECD-DAC evaluation criteria² often form a foundation for assessments, but can be adapted to the realities of peace mediation and dialogue. Each criterion must also be clearly defined. Evaluating *effectiveness* for example requires looking at whether the rationale of the mediation approach is *power-based (deal-brokering)*, *interest-based (problem-solving)*, or *transformative (long-term)*.³

This year’s Roundtable presented methodologies that navigated these challenges and enabled “low burden and high value” evaluation even in complex contexts, with a focus on organisational learning. In situations where the objectives and results were less clear, some methods took ‘context’ as a starting point. These methods could be applied to assessment of thematic or macro level trends, as well as project or local level processes.

- One creative approach that can help assess the overall impact of peacemaking actions is *Attribution Based on Context*. This was introduced as a method enabling practitioners to analyse the extent to which their activities were able to influence key actors, who in turn enabled change in a specific context.
- Another innovative method discussed was *Social Network Analysis for M&E*, which allows mediators to understand the structure of their relationships and how their interventions may have contributed to transforming those relationships.
- *Localised approaches* can evaluate interventions against stakeholders’ own perspectives on peace and conflict dynamics rather than organisations’ self-defined objectives.
- Additionally, *Real-Time Evaluations* were highlighted as a helpful tool to analyse and improve project implementation.

Overall, practitioners stressed that the most beneficial evaluative approaches are longer-term and go beyond specific project cycles in order to benefit organisational, or even sectoral, learning. They should have built-in flexibility and align with demand from mediation teams.

Cross-cutting issues

The Roundtable also explored some specific M&E challenges and opportunities related to various cross-cutting issues that the mediation sector currently grapples with.

Enabling meaningful gender-responsive and inclusive peace M&E

Practitioners emphasised that in recent years, mediators have become more gender-responsive, despite high levels of gender inequality in the contexts they work in. M&E has a crucial role to play in

² Beyond the five OECD-DAC criteria for evaluating development assistance: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact, the OECD-DAC suggest two further criteria for peacebuilding: coherence and co-ordination. OECD (2012), *Evaluating Peacebuilding Activities in Settings of Conflict and Fragility: Improving Learning for Results*, DAC Guidelines and Reference Series, OECD Publishing, Paris.

³ Waehlich, Martin and Lanz, David and Kirchhoff, Lars and Siegfried, Matthias (2009), *Evaluating Peace Mediation*. Initiative for Peacebuilding Working Paper Series.

enabling projects to integrate gender and inclusion considerations by setting clear, achievable goals and indicators. It also helps steer projects to be gender-responsive and inclusive from the design through to the implementation and evaluation stage. Participants argued for more resource-sharing between donors and practitioners, for example through joint gendered conflict analyses, and noted the importance of ensuring gender and inclusion approaches are context-specific.

Early explorations into the roles of digital technologies in advancing M&E approaches

Practitioners noted that agreements with social media provisions come with a specific set of M&E challenges. These include monitoring the signatories' adherence to agreements, managing their use of digital proxies, monitoring closed spaces and groups, and getting accurate baselines to measure impact. Participants agreed that the digital sphere is now a place where online and offline conflict can play out or be incited. Donors and practitioners also reflected on artificial intelligence (AI) and ways in which it could support evaluations, for example, by helping to cross-check human-made decisions, synthesising information and identifying patterns. While pointing to risks associated with AI, they emphasised that it could also represent a useful data source for sensitive contexts where access to hard-to-reach actors is limited. Organisations should remain aware of certain ethical concerns linked to conducting digital M&E including their potential risks for the personal safety and security of stakeholders and marginalised groups on the ground.

Adapting M&E for environmental peacemaking

Mediators increasingly engage in conflicts with a climate and environmental dimension as well as use climate and environmental issues for trust-building between conflict parties. This practice, known as "environmental peacemaking", seeks to produce both positive peace and environmental outcomes. This requires integrating environmental and peacemaking objectives into project design, identifying environmental results and indicators, and gathering environmental or climate data. This poses further challenges to measure impact, but the peace sector is starting to adapt to these challenges. One example is through the [Toolkit on Monitoring and Evaluation of Environmental Peacebuilding](#). Another is through programmes that advance M&E of the impact of environmental peacemaking work on peace dynamics (see, for example, the [Peace Pillar of the Weathering Risk](#) initiative).

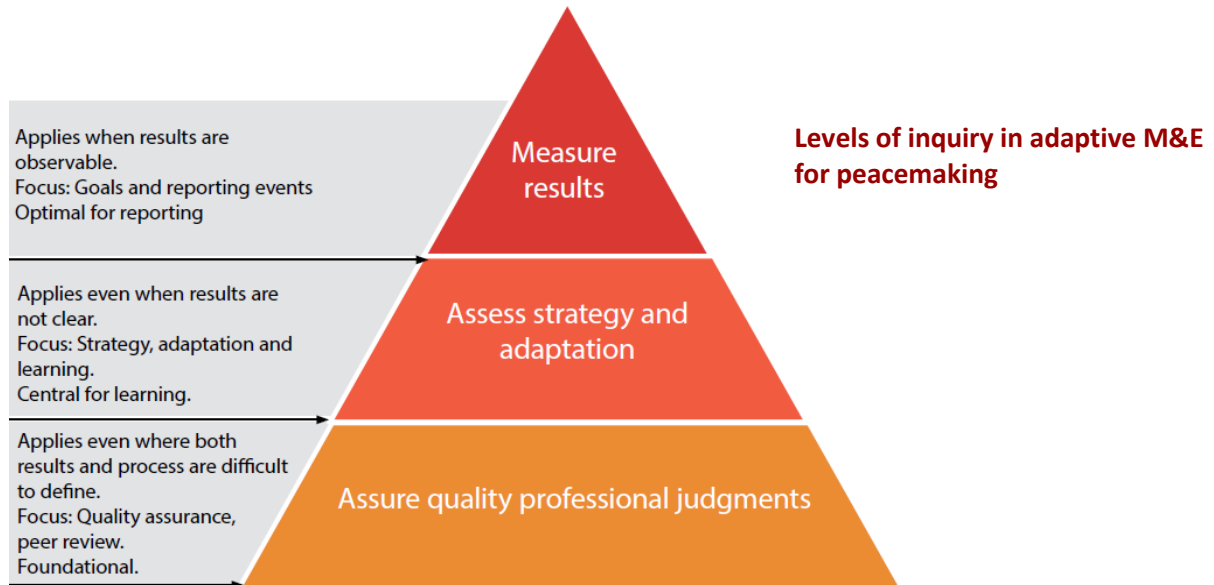
Gaps in the M&E toolbox and how to move forward

Discussions between donors and practitioners exposed a conspicuous gap between the peacemaking sector's strong internal consensus and expertise around M&E and the way results are communicated externally. The mediation field has developed a shared language on M&E and has innovative tools at its disposal. However, public communication is at odds with the sector's instincts to prioritise confidentiality and discretion. Peace sector actors therefore continue to struggle to communicate the value and effectiveness of their work to the political level, parliamentarians, and the wider public to which donors are accountable. Conversations have shifted from focusing on technical details and value for money to fundamental questions about the relevance and risks of the entire mediation field. This underlines the urgency for practitioners to develop convincing messaging to showcase the impact and value of mediation for a wider audience.

Exchanges between donors and practitioners also stressed the need to acknowledge and learn from 'forced trade-offs' and 'honourable failure'. In addition, discussions revealed that cross-organisational collaboration is often limited. To enhance collaboration and coordination, the field should invest more in joint evidence-gathering efforts, cross-organisational and cross-governmental results validations, as well as sector-wide evaluations. Finally, there were calls for increasing exchanges and coordination on M&E with emerging state and non-state mediation actors.

Annex A: Levels of inquiry in adaptive M&E for peacemaking

Adaptive M&E methods embrace three fundamental levels of inquiry in response to the realities of a given context and mediation activity, namely: 1) measuring results where they are observable; 2) where results are not clear, assessing strategy and adaptation; and 3) assuring the quality of professional judgements even when both results and processes are difficult to define.



Annex B: Peacemaking M&E Toolbox

Innovative M&E methods and tools considered by participants at different Donor-Practitioner Roundtables can be roughly mapped against corresponding peacemaking results and stages as follows:

