

HD Donor-Practitioner MEL Roundtable 2025 – Insights and Impressions

On 9-10 September 2025, HD hosted the 9th *Donor-Practitioner Roundtable on Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) for Peacemaking*. Representatives from 23 different donor and practitioner organisations met in Geneva to discuss the question: *How can peacemakers better use MEL insights to inform credible narratives about the value and impact of their work?*

This outcome document captures key issues discussed and agreed on by participants.

Why do we need to make the case for peacemaking?

- **Geopolitical shifts**, recent **funding cuts**, and greater prioritisation of **defence spending** and military approaches are challenging peacemakers to make the case for their work, now more than ever.
- The number of conflicts is rising, and **fewer comprehensive peace agreements** are being signed. As peace processes are **rarely linear or rapid** and are often **confidential in nature**, this makes progress and impact especially difficult to demonstrate.
- There is therefore a real need to find new and better ways to credibly communicate the value and impact of peacemaking to key audiences.

What is the HD-hosted MEL Roundtable?

Since 2014, HD has convened interested donors and fellow practitioner organisations to explore how MEL approaches can help to define, assess and demonstrate the value of peacemaking work.

Frank discussions at the roundtables have helped bridge the gap between practitioners' MEL tools and donors' information needs. They have enabled honest reflections on how to better show the value and impact of peacemaking.

Who should peacemakers communicate with?

A multitude of potential audiences need to understand the value and impact of mediation and dialogue efforts to help ensure continued funding and support for this work. Within each group, certain individuals may be more supportive, while others may be more sceptical of peacemaking. Beyond conflict parties themselves, **relevant audiences** include:

- **Donor representatives** at different levels and in different functions, such as grant managers, field-based diplomats and senior leadership;
- **Politicians and policymakers** within countries that fund and/or support peacemaking;
- **Conflict-affected communities**, as well as key in-country and regional stakeholders; and
- Members of the **general public** within donor countries, including media representatives.

For each of these audiences, **peacemakers must ask themselves**:

- What does this audience want and/or need to know?
- How do they like to receive their information, and what narratives resonate?

September 2025 roundtable participants

Government and donor representatives: Canada; European Commission; Finland; Gates Foundation; Germany; Ireland; Luxembourg; Norway; Sweden; Switzerland; United Kingdom.

Practitioner representatives: Berghof Foundation; Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue; Centre for Peace Mediation, European University Viadrina; Conciliation Resources; European Institute of Peace; International Crisis Group; Inter-Mediate; Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation; ODI Europe; Royal College of Defence Studies; Sant' Egidio Foundation for Peace and Dialogue; swisspeace.

What are credible narratives for peacemaking?

Credible narratives for peacemaking are arguments **backed by evidence** that are designed to **resonate with specific audiences**. Collectively, such narratives seek to explain why peacemaking is important, effective and worth investing in. They aim to shape both public opinion and political action.

Different **types of narratives** that peace actors may want to build on describe how mediation and dialogue can help to:

- **Improve national security** and **reduce the risk of war**, including management of the broader impacts of interstate conflict;
- **Address global challenges** and strengthen collective security with direct foreign policy benefits;
- **Advance domestic policy agendas**, such as addressing the causes of migration or preventing the blockage of international trade routes; or
- **Promote common values** of humanity by contributing to violence reduction and improved humanitarian conditions in conflict-affected communities.

How can adaptive MEL help inform credible narratives?

Collectively, monitoring, evaluation and learning efforts consider how effective, impactful and sustainable peacemaking work is. MEL practice **generates data and evidence** that helps to better implement, assess and adapt specific initiatives. These insights can be used to substantiate arguments and demonstrate the value of peacemaking to internal and external audiences.

Adaptive MEL approaches also **promote critical reflection, learning and accountability**, including in situations where progress is slow or when peace processes are stuck.

In short, MEL supports peacemaking efforts by supplying the ‘raw material’ needed for making a *credible* case towards policymakers, funders, and affected communities alike.

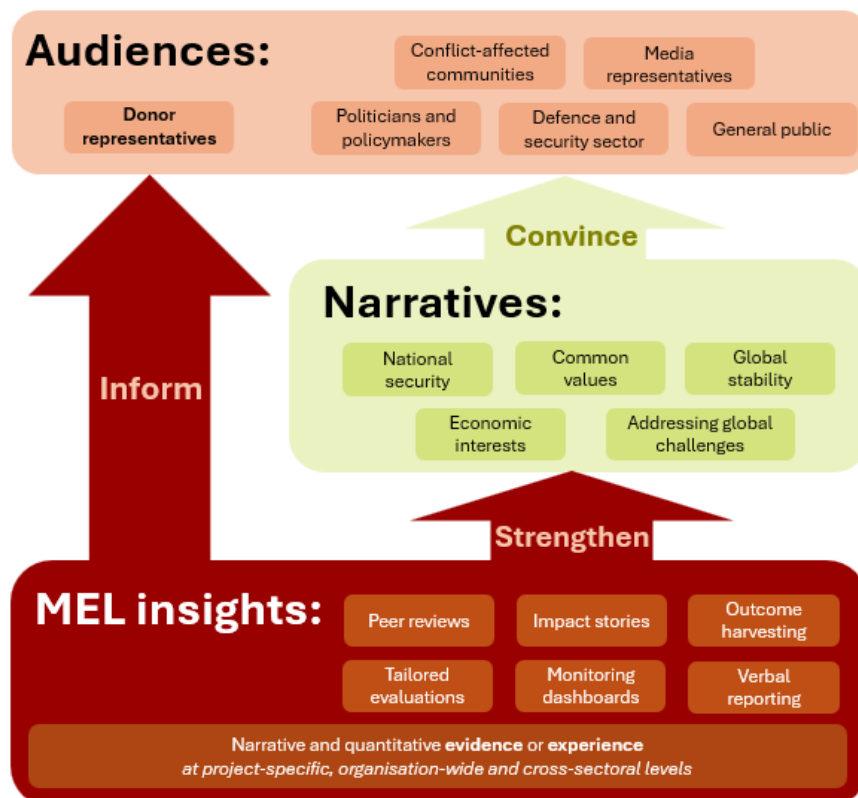


Figure 1: How MEL insights can strengthen ‘credible’ peacemaking narratives for diverse audiences

Assessing value and impact – what is working well?

Over the years, peacemaking organisations have developed an adaptable and robust toolbox for MEL. This features a broad range of data, methods, and formats that assess and convey the value of mediation and dialogue. Some examples of these **fit-for-purpose tools** are captured in Figure 1.

The strength of the peacemaking MEL toolbox lies in its versatility: specific tools can be applied in **diverse contexts** for a broad **range of purposes**. Practitioners and donors alike continue to see existing approaches as relevant for understanding the complexity of peacemaking. For instance, even in stuck peace processes or highly confidential settings, specific adaptive MEL approaches that feature independently-facilitated critical reflection are able to assess the quality of ongoing efforts.

Demonstrating value and impact – what can be improved?

The following approaches are considered equally relevant for donors and practitioners to further strengthen their ability to demonstrate the value and impact of peacemaking.

What individual actors can do:

- **Recognise interim and final outcomes:** Tailored MEL systems for peacemaking should adopt a process and outcome view that values both ‘interim’ milestones and ‘final’ results. Adaptive MEL approaches capture results where possible, yet place even greater emphasis on sound decision-making, critical reflection and timely adaptation.
- **Explain why specific achievements matter:** Clear and context-specific explanations of what was achieved and why it matters are typically more valuable for accountability than reporting against key indicators. This can include contributions to violence reduction, relevance for vulnerable or under-represented communities, as well as increased attention on ‘forgotten’ conflicts.
- **Remain locally anchored:** The most credible stories are told, or at least informed, by conflict-affected communities themselves. MEL approaches can help ‘translate’ and capture stories from the ground to develop products that resonate with diverse audiences, without digressing from their original meaning.
- **Consider value across a (‘stock’) portfolio:** Given the long-term nature and inherent uncertainty of many peacemaking efforts, the immediate outcomes from project-specific MEL can be limited. Instead, it can be more accurate and meaningful to take a broader perspective that assesses the value of investing in a ‘portfolio’ of peacemaking efforts, rather than individual ‘stocks.’
- **Use clear and simple language:** Where MEL evidence exists to plausibly show why peacemaking is worth investing in, it should be communicated clearly and simply.



“Shiny peace agreements may be absent, but lots of important work is still being done. How do we stay ahead of the curve and share this?”



“Why are we better at telling specific stories than shaping overarching narratives?”



“Viewing mediation as a stock portfolio means continuing to invest even when certain stocks are performing poorly.”

How actors can work together:

- **Develop tailored narratives:** Different messages will resonate with different audiences, depending on their interests, understanding and values. Tailored narratives can emphasise diverse issues, for example: the national security or economic interests of donor states; shared global challenges like climate change; or common values such as humanity.
- **Ensure common messaging:** While organisations are skilled at telling individual project stories, more can be done to communicate impact at both organisational and sector-wide levels. To highlight the collective value of peacemaking, key messages for specific audiences should be used consistently by diverse actors. Similarly, MEL insights should more deliberately inform nuanced communication strategies.
- **Establish and protect ‘safe spaces’ for learning:** MEL practice plays a key role in understanding setbacks and failures, while contributing to future improvement. This is done most meaningfully when learning can happen in a safe space, decoupled from external communication needs or donor reporting requirements. Learning should also be promoted at organisation- or sector-wide levels, where appropriate.
- **Promote donor-practitioner partnerships:** A shared understanding between donors and practitioners of which MEL approaches are needed, possible and meaningful remains invaluable. This is best achieved by establishing genuine partnerships based on trust.
- **Strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration:** Many of the challenges peacemakers face are shared by other actors. Peacemaking actors should more deliberately collaborate with, learn from, and seek to complement efforts in other fields including development cooperation, defence and security, and academia. Communications and public relations expertise could strengthen existing efforts to make simpler and bolder arguments for peacemaking.

For more information

To learn more about the Donor-Practitioner MEL Roundtable format and history, please visit HD’s website: <https://hdcentre.org/our-approach/>

Additional insights from the September 2025 discussions have been shared with participants. This includes lessons and proposed ways forward to address shared MEL challenges, as well as draft peacemaking narrative types for use with European audiences.

These materials are available on request from the HD Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning team: mel@hdcentre.org

“What do different audiences need to know, see or feel – and when?”



“There are incentives to share success stories, but we need to feel safe to unpack failures as well.”



“We should remain ambitious, even when faced with immense resistance. Let’s redouble efforts to communicate the value of our work.”

