

Needs Assessment: Enhancing Insider Mediation

Exploring Ways Forward for Insider Mediators,
Donors, and Support Organisations



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INTRODUCTION*

It is widely recognised that insider mediators¹ involvement in peace processes has a positive impact on the realisation of sustainable solutions for peace and the building of resilience in conflict-affected societies.² Insider mediation initiatives are therefore receiving increased attention and support from (international) organisations active in conflict resolution. This is also true of Clingendael Academy and its partner organisations: since 2014, Clingendael has annually trained an average of 75 insider mediators from all corners of the world. Yet despite the general consensus on the positive impact of insider mediators and insider mediation initiatives, experience has shown that their full potential is not always realised.

Although Clingendael's training courses consistently receive positive evaluations — as do others in the field — we have observed that sometimes the long-term impact of insider mediation initiatives remains limited or falls short of the formulated ambitions. By conducting this needs assessment, we aimed to gain insight into the gap between objectives set by insider mediation initiatives and outcomes on the ground. Our goal is not only to help further the development of the field as a whole, e.g., by sharing our findings here, but also to make use of these insights in the rethinking and innovating of how insider mediation initiatives and support activities are organised.

While recognising that there are several *external* factors that influence the effectiveness of insider mediation initiatives, such as a lack of political willingness or lack of knowledge among political actors of the role insider mediators play, we specifically chose to focus on key factors that are *internal* to the functioning of insider mediation initiatives and that can potentially be influenced or changed by support organisations. This includes challenges ranging from consensus building among members of an insider mediation initiative, e.g., regarding their objective and strategy, to challenges around the organisation of third-party support. We recognise that these are often perceived as sensitive issues — by (international) support organisations, donors, and/or the insider mediators themselves — which may explain the limited availability of analysis on such dynamics. However, we believe it is important to collectively recognise such challenges with a view to identifying and lowering the barriers to enhancing insider mediation.

It should be noted that this needs assessment is *not* intended as negative criticism, either of current insider mediation work or of support organisations. Rather, it is meant to encourage (international) support organisations, including Clingendael Academy, to think creatively about how to address ongoing challenges and how to provide insider mediators with a broader set of tools for strengthening insider mediation work processes.

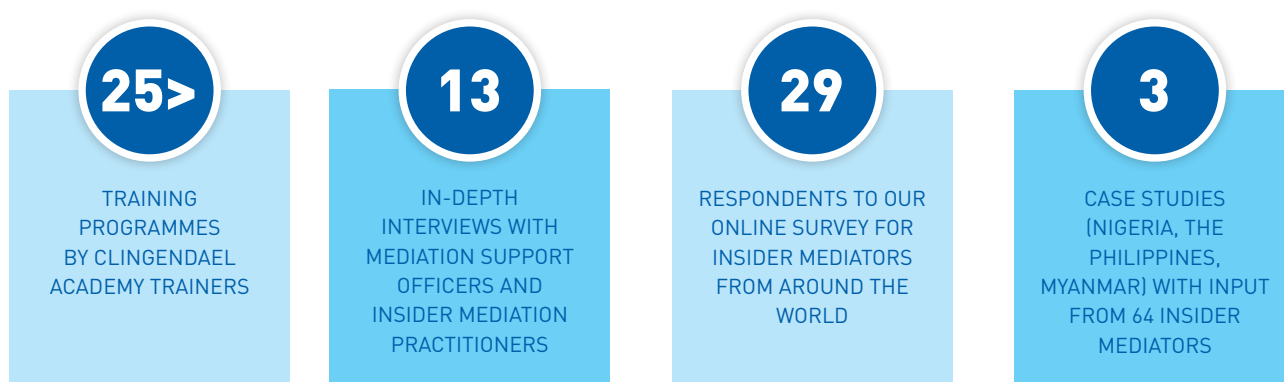
* Developed by Clingendael Academy, edited by Eugène van Kemenade

1 There is no common definition of 'insider mediators'. However, the understanding we use is mediators working in their own conflict contexts. In other words, compared to outsiders, these insiders are persons from the conflict affected contexts they are working in. What characterises them are their internal links to a conflict's context (as opposed to outside actors, who are brought in to mediate), and their socio-cultural and/or religious – and, indeed, personal – closeness to the parties in conflict, from which they derive their legitimacy, credibility and influence (UNDP 2020). Insider mediators often play multiple roles simultaneously: messenger, intermediary, conflict analyst, facilitator, mediator, witness, mentor, human rights advocate, and ceasefire monitor. Many of the individuals, networks, and organisations that play these roles might not think of themselves as insider mediators, but rather as community or religious leaders, elders, or notables responsible for their communities' wellbeing. Although insider mediation initiatives come in many shapes and sizes, the conclusions drawn by this needs assessment will generally apply to each of these modalities.

2 UNDP, 'Supporting Insider Mediation: Strengthening Resilience to Conflict and Turbulence', Guidance Note, 2014

Scope and methodology

This needs assessment is, first and foremost, the result of Clingendael trainers' own extensive experience working with insider mediation initiatives, as well as our training courses' evaluation results. These insights are further complemented and triangulated with a) thirteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with local and international mediation practitioners and support organisations³, b) data submitted through an online survey by 29 insider mediators from Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Europe, all of whom were exposed to training by Clingendael Academy, and c) supplemental literature research. In addition, we developed three case studies based on input from 64 members of insider mediation initiatives in Nigeria, the Philippines, and Myanmar. All interviews and surveys focused on the following topics: insider mediation initiatives' work processes, internal group dynamics, formal-versus-informal engagement, track 1-2-3 collaboration, the role of the third party, constituency engagement, key challenges to insider mediation initiatives' effectiveness, and capacity strengthening needs.



The scope of this assessment is limited to insider mediators and insider mediation initiatives that Clingendael Academy has worked with in the past and that are usually already affiliated with (international) support organisations, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN Women, and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD).⁴ Even so, we believe that the findings of this assessment can be applicable to a broad range of insider mediation initiatives. Importantly, insider mediators active in capacity strengthening efforts are often part of a group or initiative that is united by common ambitions and has been initiated by an (international) support organisation. Of course, as the UNDP notes, “not every insider mediator or every insider mediation process requires the support of external actors; many play important roles — both under the radar and directly in the limelight — independently of bilateral or multi-lateral actors. However, when there is limited political will, low capacity, the absence of trusted intermediaries and/or safe spaces, or when there is low momentum around a particular process, external actors can carefully support insider mediators to play constructive roles or catalyse necessary changes.”⁵ Hence, it is important to note that our findings primarily speak to insider mediators who receive such support, and are focused on insider mediation initiatives rather than individual insider mediators. The findings are therefore particularly relevant to (international) support organisations and third-party actors.

³ E.g., from the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, UN Women, and the UNDP.

⁴ Note: Clingendael Academy always works through partner organisations who support insider mediators and insider mediation initiatives when providing capacity strengthening support.

⁵ UNDP, ‘Supporting Insider Mediation: Strengthening Resilience to Conflict and Turbulence’, Guidance Note, 2014

Key factors identified

To gain a better understanding of the possible hindrances to insider mediation initiatives that are at play, we looked at the insider mediation process in its entirety: from how an objective is established and interventions are conceptualised, to the identification and organisation of an insider mediation initiative, to the daily practices of insider mediation initiatives and their supporting partners.

Although our findings require further validation through more extensive research, we have identified six pressing factors that call for closer attention:

1. Strategic planning
2. Organisational set-up
3. Internal group dynamics
4. Donor management and coordination
5. Constituency engagement
6. Track 1-2-3 collaboration and coordination

In what follows, details are given on each of these six factors as well as steps that can be taken — by Clingendael Academy, (international) support organisations, donors, and/or insider mediation initiatives themselves — in order to increase their effectiveness.



1. TIME AND RESOURCES FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING

When an insider mediation project is initiated by an (international) support organisation, the strategic planning phase requires close collaboration between the insider mediators and their (international) support organisations, and preferably already begins during the (international) support organisation's project conceptualisation phase⁶. It can also be one of the most difficult areas for collaboration, since both *insider* and *outsider* views need to be harmonised and a consensus on core ambitions must be reached. Insider mediators and members of their (international) support organisations often have different cultural backgrounds, biases, levels of experience, educational backgrounds, and interests. One of our interviewees from a support organisation explains that, during the early beginnings of an insider mediation initiative, the answer to whether, when, and how to intervene in a conflict tends to differ depending on whom you ask. In other words, ideas around conflict-resolution 'ripeness' are often subjective. This subjectivity can be reduced through a thorough process of strategic planning: timely and comprehensive discussions are needed to flesh out the goals of the insider mediation process (ambition) and how these can be achieved (strategy). However, our respondents noted that these discussions are often rushed through due to a lack of time and resources, and that as a consequence insider mediators' strategies are insufficiently formulated or operationalised.

An additional issue that was identified is that while insider mediators' deep knowledge of the conflict is one of their main assets, the important step of conducting joint conflict analyses is sometimes marginalised within the strategic planning process or left implicit. As one of our interviewees argued, 'Conflict analysis happens continuously, but informally.

'People [insider mediators] see thorough conflict analysis as a waste of time because they already have their own analysis in their heads.' – Interviewee from a support organisation

58%

OF THE INSIDER MEDIATOR SURVEY RESPONDENTS INDICATED THAT AGREEING ON THEIR MANDATE AND ROADMAP IS THE MOST DIFFICULT STEP.

That's even more the case with insiders, because that's the way they operate. People see thorough conflict analysis as a waste of time because they already have their analysis in their heads.' This practice, that conflict analysis — which often forms the basis for a strategic approach — is not always discussed in a structured and explicit manner, can (eventually) impede insider mediators' ability to formulate a joint mandate, road map, or strategy. Indeed, our survey data also showed that the majority of the insider mediators that took part in initiatives in Nigeria, the Philippines, and Myanmar found agreeing on their mandate, road map, or strategy to be one of their biggest challenges. This is important to note as it can lead to challenges later in the insider mediation process and therefore undermine the long-term efficacy.

Finally, funding proposals for insider mediation interventions can sometimes be predominantly driven by (international) support organisations while receiving limited contributions from insider mediators themselves, e.g., through their occasional engagement in strategic planning workshops. While several of our interviewees suggested that such planning and organisation should be the prerogative of a third party, the risk is that this can result in overly ambitious funding proposals in which the insider mediators themselves lack ownership of the insider mediation work processes and the intended outcomes.

'When working with insider mediators, an (international) third party often should take on planning and organisation.' – Interviewee from a support organisation

⁶ Notably, for many insider mediators this work is not a project but it is packaged as such in order to attract funding, which has immediate consequences for insider mediation work processes and what is considered as 'impact', which we will discuss further below.

Ways to support insider mediation work in this area:

- A** *Include a first inclusive strategic planning process in proposal writing:* Funding proposals sometimes insufficiently capture key aspects that shape the insider mediation initiative — e.g., the identification or selection of insider mediators, the internal functioning or organisational set-up of the insider mediation initiative, decision-making processes, liaison strategies with other stakeholders, the division of tasks between the insider mediators and the support organisation. Funding proposals would benefit from more inclusive and rigorous strategic planning, which the insider mediators feel ownership of before the proposal is submitted. By first considering key organisational choices essential to all insider mediation initiatives and then considering how each of these apply to the specific initiative at hand, insider mediators and support organisations may be better equipped to arrive at more complete funding proposals.
- B** *Include strategic planning in the final budget and project plans:* Arriving at realistic funding proposals also requires financial investment. After an initial concept note for an insider mediation initiative is approved, a larger strategic planning process is needed in order to arrive at a realistic final proposal and plan. However, we often see that this entire second step goes unfunded for insider mediators, which hinders possibilities to conduct a comprehensive and inclusive strategic planning process. Donors could consider addressing this funding gap, in order to make room for strategic planning as an integral and time-consuming part of insider mediation work.
- C** *Make use of tools to support comprehensive strategic planning:* This could be done by, for example, making use of step-by-step strategic planning tools, such as Clingendael Academy's 'strategic choice framework' that was developed in the context of this project (see Appendix⁷). Although an insider mediation initiative can undertake multiple types of activities, the steps necessary for arriving at a solid strategic plan tend to follow a certain structure. A preformulated framework could make it easier for actors to make well-considered choices, while also encouraging insider mediators and support organisations to thoroughly discuss these steps and their consequences. Such strategic planning tools can also be used to adjust or complete existing insider mediation programmes.
- D** *Provide support through training:* Strategic planning workshops for insider mediation initiatives and their support organisations, together or separately, can be helpful to facilitate abovementioned steps. Moreover, participants' capacity strengthening can focus on key insider mediation questions, such as how to formulate a mandate (if suitable in the given context) and road map, how to prepare for an insider mediation process, how to organise a support team, and how to assess networks to find entry points. Such workshops could also, for example, include the conducting of a variety of analyses, e.g., conflict analysis, ripeness analysis, positions-interests-needs analysis of key actors, and stakeholder analysis. Such training courses could also support existing insider mediation initiatives that are seeking to re-strategise their plans or approach.

⁷ The visualisation of this framework (or road map) can be found in the appendix; please note that this is not a stand-alone tool and requires further explanation.

2. ORGANISATIONAL SET-UP

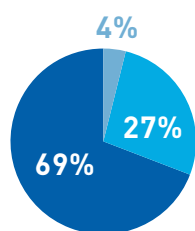
Balancing the formal-versus-informal organisational set-up of insider mediation initiatives can be challenging, and raises many questions in terms of efficacy, credibility, and security. Most of our interviewees argue that insider mediation processes are at their most effective when they operate informally and independently of formal institutions. A low degree of organisation can enable flexibility, including ample space to manoeuvre and meet informally, and give rise to an environment in which information is shared more freely — all necessary elements for building trust and relationships. If the degree of organisation is (too) high, this can limit quick action and decision-making, increase rigidity due to formal/informal hierarchies, and cause an insider mediation initiative to be perceived as a political entity.

'If we are engaged with government officials in Myanmar, it should be very formal in order to achieve our goals. [However], we are also concerned about making mistakes in the formal setting. We think the solution lies in organising enough informal time in formal processes.' – Interviewee who is an insider mediation practitioner

Nevertheless, some insider mediation initiatives explicitly seek institutionalisation or formalisation. For instance, some insider mediation initiatives seek legal recognition of their services in order to gain physical and legal protection, particularly when dealing with non-state armed actors. Similarly, some insider mediators seek a level of institutionalisation or formalisation to gain recognition as credible and legitimate actors, as this can enable them to reach stakeholders outside of their own constituencies.

Organisational set-up

- Insider mediation initiatives should be informal and flexible
- Insider mediation initiatives should become more formal and structured
- Neither



Across our three case studies (Nigeria, Myanmar, and the Philippines), some respondents indicated that formalisation is needed to improve security and attract funding (27%). They added that in their view formalisation might increase credibility and authority, increase trust with high-level actors, and provide for a clearer chain of command within the initiative. At the same time, the projectisation of insider mediation work inherent in formalisation also has direct consequences for insider mediation work processes and what is considered as impact, which need to be carefully considered. The majority of the respondents (69%) argued that the initiative should be informal and flexible in terms of organisational structure in order to be able to “put forward relevant people to manage specific problems” and to “allow for the flexibility necessary to choose a context-specific strategy for dealing with each unique issue.” They added that informality can also enable more openness to share positions and interests both within the initiative and by the conflict parties.

Furthermore, our survey respondents noted that insider mediation group meetings are sometimes too formal (68%) and that this can hamper people’s willingness to express their opinions freely. Conversely, 45% said such meetings are *never* too informal and *never* lack sufficient structure to facilitate decision-making processes (compared to 27% who said this is sometimes the case, and 27% who said this is often the case). This suggests that for an insider mediation initiative to work effectively, some structure or institutionalisation may be helpful, but not if this comes at the cost of its informal character.

Interviewees echoed the need to balance the informal character of insider mediation initiatives with some level of institutionalisation or formalisation:

'WE HAVE TO BE CAREFUL NOT TO OVER-FORMALISE INSIDER MEDIATION PROCESSES. INSIDER MEDIATORS EMERGE ORGANICALLY FROM THEIR CONTEXT, BECAUSE THEY'RE WELL-RESPECTED IN THEIR COMMUNITIES OR BECAUSE THEY'RE WELL-CONNECTED TO BOTH SIDES OF THE CONFLICT. FORMALISING INSIDER MEDIATION INITIATIVES MIGHT PREVENT NEW VOICES FROM EMERGING. SOME INSTITUTIONALISATION COULD, ON THE OTHER HAND, BE USEFUL IF WE THINK ABOUT IT IN TERMS OF ENCOURAGING AND DEVELOPING THE CAPACITIES OF INSIDER MEDIATORS. YOU ALSO NEED A DEGREE OF FORMALITY IN ORDER FOR THEM TO CONTINUE TO BE ABLE TO DEMONSTRATE THEIR VALUE AND WELL-CONNECTEDNESS AS ACTORS. ULTIMATELY, HOWEVER, IT'S THROUGH SOME LEVEL OF ORGANISATION OR FORMALITY THAT YOU END UP HAVING INITIATIVES THAT CONVENE PEOPLE OR THAT MAKE SURE THAT, WHEN SOMETHING NEW AND INTERESTING EMERGES, IT GETS SHARED WITH EVERYBODY.' – INTERVIEWEE FROM A SUPPORT ORGANISATION

Ideally, the level of organisation of an insider mediation initiative should be tuned to its specific objectives. Any attempts to formalise its processes must be carefully assessed in order to avoid negative repercussions. Nonetheless, some formalisation can be beneficial in order to attract funding, formulate and execute an effective strategy, gain traction for insider mediation activities, and/or gain access to track-1 initiatives.

Finally, some of our interviewees from support organisations saw 'excessive' informality in insider mediation initiatives as presenting a reputational risk: the more informal an insider mediation initiative, the less they are able to stay up to date on the work of the initiative as a supporter. Although this risk, they argued, should not hinder the work of an insider mediation initiative, some control mechanisms are necessary to ensure accountability and oversight. Finding the optimal balance, which is entirely context-dependent, between a more formal-versus-informal organisational set-up is critical to all insider mediation initiatives.

Ways to support insider mediation work in this area:

A *Provide support through training:* Whether in the early phases of project formulation or in the process of strategic planning, tailor-made training can provide support to both insider mediators and support organisations when it comes to making choices regarding how to balance their organisational set-up. For instance, workshops can facilitate discussions between the involved parties in order to examine the purpose and function of the insider mediation initiative against the backdrop of an organisational set-up that is loose and informal versus one that is structured and formal. Using examples from other contexts for comparison can help to find the right balance. Additionally, when engaging with parties in conflict, we have observed that the power of informality is generally underestimated. Capacity strengthening support could focus on how to make optimal use of informal talks and support parties in informal diplomacy. At the same time, such training can raise insider mediators' awareness of how informal talks can be translated into benefits within the formal sphere. Capacity strengthening training can also focus on how to effectively communicate about questions of impartiality, both towards third parties and actors in conflict.

B *Re-evaluate risk management and safety:* In insider mediation projects' (funding) proposals, donors and support organisations could place more emphasis on how to balance formality versus informality in insider mediation work processes. Security risks, reputational risks, and the risks associated with not having clear oversight need to be identified and carefully considered and weighed, also against the benefits of more informal practices. Support organisations could also work to improve personal safety measures of insider mediators working in informal networks with armed actors. 59% of our survey respondents reported that they sometimes fear for their safety at work, 32% said this was often or always the case, and only 9% said this was never the case. If such measures are not in place or certain policies or guidelines are not communicated thoroughly, support organisations run the risk of placing too much personal responsibility on individuals when it comes to their own safety. While strict security protocols can hinder insider mediation work, the sector could do more to avoid transferring safety risks onto the insider mediators themselves. As one interviewee working for a support organisation that employs insider mediators mentioned: "It is important to provide enough oversight and structure so that they [insider mediators] do not take too many risks, [...] while also not inhibiting them. It should not restrict their ability to have the meetings and informal chats they need and to build relationships. But you [as a support organisation] still need to do your due diligence in terms of risk assessments."

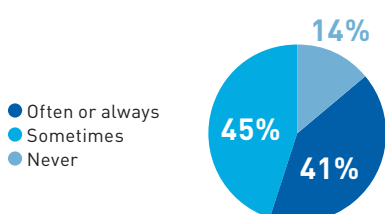


3. INTERNAL GROUP DYNAMICS

Issues around the internal group dynamics of insider mediation initiatives are regularly recognised as a point of tension, despite being seldom discussed or formally put on the agenda due to their sensitive nature. Our survey respondents identified issues around trust, internal competition, personal interests, varying cultural and religious perspectives, perceptions of impartiality, incomplete information or even misinformation, and impatience as factors that challenge the internal dynamics of insider mediation initiatives. Such issues not only hinder effective information sharing, decision-making processes and matters of leadership, they can also jeopardise the whole initiative, e.g., when ‘big egos’ become more important than the joint mission. A number of our insider mediator respondents noted that, in such cases, achieving consensus on possible actions or implementations can become too difficult, sometimes resulting in overly generic agreements in order to maintain harmony in the group.

Additionally, both our survey respondents and interviewees noted that challenges in a group’s dynamics can also be caused by conflicting interests among the group’s members. In their view — and despite the sometimes counterproductive expectation that insider mediation initiatives ‘should be harmonious entities of peacemakers’ — the achievement of group consensus is sometimes hindered by the pressure insider mediators feel from their constituencies. As we will discuss below, insider mediators still need to be mindful of managing their constituencies’ expectations in order to avoid damaging their own reputation. At the same time, however, while members of an insider mediation initiative might have a shared interest in transforming a conflict, the individual members may also feel the need to defend the interests of their constituencies or even their own individual interests. Reconciling these differences and managing expectations, within both the insider mediation initiative itself and among external parties, can be a challenge.

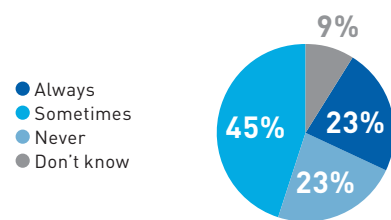
*FREQUENCY WITH WHICH INSIDER MEDIATORS
DISTRUST OTHER MEMBERS OF THE INITIATIVE*



Moreover, 45% of our survey respondents noted that they often or always observe competition around leadership roles, while 36% reported observing this in some cases. Also, 41% of survey respondents disclosed that insider mediators often do not trust each other. This is of course understandable in certain contexts, especially when members of the initiative come from opposing groups or if some are more dominant politically than others. However, this can impede joint action and the internal process of information sharing. Respondents to our survey confirmed that insider mediators are often wary to share information with other members of the insider mediation initiative. Another explanation is rank, i.e., that people with a higher status (real or perceived) may withhold information from those they perceive as having a lower status. Such behaviour could also derive from a fear of losing their privileged position.

Second, as individual members' rank, age, status, and vested interests become more apparent over time, the division of roles and their corresponding tasks sometimes becomes a sticky issue and failure to nurture second line leadership a major challenge. In some cases, our respondents noted, these uncomfortable topics are then avoided, leading to a lack of clarity on 'who is doing what'. In other cases, debating roles and responsibilities can cause internal strife. For example, in many cultures, elders are often the presumed leaders of the group. When younger members object — e.g., because traditional structures are part of the problem — the elders may be too quick to dismiss their concerns or may decide to leave the initiative

INSIDER MEDIATORS WHO REPORTED THAT ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES ARE CLEARLY DEFINED WITHIN INITIATIVES



Nonetheless, a clear division of roles and tasks can increase the effectiveness of an insider mediation initiative. These roles and tasks can of course also be flexible and change over time. It is important, however, to consider to what extent the division of roles reinforce pre-existing hierarchies. Strong hierarchies, especially in cultures that value them, may hinder open discussion and effective decision-making.

When asked how internal group dynamics could be improved (and provided with a preselected list of issues), the insider mediators affiliated with our three case studies consistently prioritised three issues (although the exact ranking varied per case). In their view, insider mediation group members must:

- Formulate a clear strategy (see section 1 on Strategic Planning)
- Build more trust among their fellow insider mediation group members
- Be able to manage opposing opinions (some even suggested by creating a designated 'dispute settlement team')

In the fourth and fifth place, they expressed the need to:

- Address informal hierarchy issues
- Learn how to deal with 'big egos'

Ways to support insider mediation work in this area:

A *Provide support through training:* It is vital that capacity strengthening support to members of insider mediation initiatives includes elements of how to build trust among themselves (next to establishing trust and maintaining relationships with other actors). Capacity strengthening could focus on techniques for trust-building and trust repair, as well as consensus-building skills. Strengthening their capacity to map out different actors' positions, interests and needs might also deepen their understanding of different conflict narratives. Such training can help participants see the value of including more diverse perspectives, allowing for creative thinking to generate outcomes that are carried more broadly within the initiative. Additionally, capacity strengthening support can focus on effective communication skills and decision-making processes, including on second line leadership and how to optimise that in hierarchical cultures. Comparative case studies, with examples of how others have dealt with similar issues around the world, can also help participants to gain new insight.

B *Adapt the support role to changing group dynamics:* Support organisations could consider (if this is not already happening) to regularly assess their support role, for example, as the internal dynamics of an insider mediation initiative change. While support organisations may sometimes need to be more proactive — e.g., by mediating between insider mediators, or by helping to create momentum to keep the process going — other moments may call for a more hands-off approach. When convening meetings with

the insider mediation initiative, support organisations could also encourage longer (informal) meetings to allow members ample space for bonding and information/experience sharing. Additionally, initiators of new insider mediation initiatives may want to (re)assess their selection criteria for insider mediators vis-à-vis the specific context in order to mitigate the effects of pre-existing social and political hierarchies.

- C** *Adopt guidelines or techniques to regulate group dynamics:* Insider mediators may benefit from drafting clearer guidelines for decision-making and brainstorming processes inside the insider mediation initiative. Developing a clear code of conduct can help members avoid the pitfalls that lead to overly generic decisions or acquiescence solely for the sake of group harmony or pleasing one dominant personality. Additionally, borrowing from other disciplines, insider mediators could for example adopt Agile working methods⁸ or scrums, which among other things takes hierarchy out of the equation to support creativity in problem-solving exercises. Adapting and incorporating such techniques into insider mediation work processes may help group members find more-inclusive methods and solutions for resolving conflict.
- D** *Manage expectations (internally and externally):* when exploring the operationalisation and implementation of strategic plans, insider mediators and their support organisations should at the same time be mindful of setting realistic expectations for the achievement of goals and measurement of progress. Raising awareness, both internally and externally, of the time it could take to achieve certain results is something that may help avoid frustration.
- E** *Promote open discussion and team building:* Donors and support organisations should be mindful of how group dynamics can influence the effectiveness of insider mediation work processes, and promote open discussion of these dynamics. Likewise, investing in trust and team-building exercises⁹ may be helpful.

⁸ An approach to project management popular in the corporate business domain.



4. DONOR MANAGEMENT AND COORDINATION

Several of our interviewees highlighted a frequent mismatch between donors' short to medium-term priorities and the long-term work required to resolve conflict. One of the core strengths of insider mediation initiatives is that they can continue over a long period of time, well into the aftermath of a peace agreement. Nonetheless, funding for these initiatives is too often inadequate for long-term engagement, especially when it comes to a peace agreement's implementation phase. In general, the donor community and supporters of peace processes¹⁰ are primarily focused on the process leading up to an agreement. But what comes next? The work of insider mediators is not finished once a deal is reached, nor is its implementation always better left to technical experts. In fact, we have heard many argue the opposite: "We need more technical people *before* the peace agreement, and we need more mediators *after*."

The implementation phase is often a long and difficult process, requiring multiple renegotiations and active trust-building to keep all parties committed, as well as many instances of dispute resolution. Given their long-term or even indefinite engagement with the parties in conflict, insider mediation initiatives are uniquely poised to play a vital role in this ongoing process. Our survey respondents also recognised this, noting that challenges in the implementation phase often arise due to a lack of funding and support *after* an agreement

'The international community tends to come in bulk, get a peace agreement and incentives, and then basically peter away. Or sometimes we just come in for the peace agreement and then disappear. But there's definitely a big imbalance when it comes to the implementation of peace agreements where mediation capacity is still required.' – Interviewee from a support organisation

has been reached (including support for the monitoring of its implementation). Other key challenges in the implementation phase that were mentioned by the survey respondents include confusion over responsibilities of the different parties involved, a lack of trust between parties, a lack of coordination, a lack of (effective) dispute settlement mechanisms, and key parties' inadequate commitment to turn words into deeds. In addition, they noted that implementation delays or even postponement can cause the often-fragile trust between conflict parties to deteriorate. As long as they have the funds to continue their work, however, insider mediators are often ideally positioned to identify such challenges early on and can take action to mitigate such challenges.

Additionally, it is important to recognise that insider mediation work requires a higher degree of flexibility compared to more traditional (external) mediation activities. The work of insider mediators includes a wide range of activities, e.g., finding entry points, creating ripeness for talks, and advocacy. Insider mediators must explore multiple avenues for bridge-building and the creating of convergence, all while keeping a close eye on developments on the ground and drawing on their personal networks and relations. The exact activities, people, or number of meetings involved in insider mediation is therefore difficult to predict (when writing a project proposal or annual plan) or measure (for reporting). The dynamics of a conflict are constantly in flux, as is the work of insider mediation initiatives. From being in a position to convene a meeting with rival party leaders, for example, it can suddenly become wiser — from one moment to the next — to invest in shuttle talks. Moreover, as mentioned above, much insider mediation work tends to take place in an informal setting. Yet this informal and fluid nature of the work, which is regularly key to building consensus for actual dealmaking, is often not (sufficiently) reflected in funding proposals or reflected in donor commitments and/or reporting (as this work often does not fit within the traditional output-based indicators and/or linear log frames). Recognising the 'less-linear' nature of insider mediation work, however, could have implications for the way it is supported.¹¹

⁹ E.g., Belbin Team Inventory, Rose of Leary.

¹⁰ E.g., IOs, governments, NGOs.

Finally, survey respondents noted a lack of coordination among primary and secondary donors, which can result in a significant loss of time and human resources for insider mediation initiatives due to 'too many' individual meetings and briefings.

Ways to support insider mediation work in this area:

A *Consider quality long-term funding:* To operationalise sustainable peace, donors should consider committing to the long-term funding of insider mediation initiatives, including during the implementation phase. Too often insider mediators are solely supported through short-term projects during the process leading up to an agreement. However, while the peace agreement is an important point of formalisation in a peace process, mediation expertise remains crucial throughout the implementation phase. Oftentimes, long-term and flexible funding commitments for such initiatives are perceived to carry a higher risk. Yet this is exactly what is needed to navigate unpredictability and to enable sustainable impact. Moreover, these risks can be mitigated by redefining how insider mediators achieve progress in the larger peace process and by deciding on a series of pre-defined moments (throughout different phases of the process) at which to determine whether to continue support and funding based on realistic indicators (see point b).

B *Measure progress through qualitative indicators that capture the informal sphere:* Donors and support organisations could consider, if they have not done so already, developing specific indicators for the monitoring and evaluation of insider mediation programmes that capture results in the informal sphere. Particularly in cases where the insider mediation work is primarily informal, it may be beneficial to measure progress using qualitative, results-based indicators in place of more conventional, output-based standards.

'The peace agreement itself is merely a formalisation point in a greater peace process, the need for mediation continues afterwards. We need to normalise that idea.'
– Interviewee from a support organisation

Such qualitative indicators could focus on access to leaders in a given conflict, the willingness of certain individuals or groups to engage, progress on initiating conversations, building trust, openness of sharing information, and/or the quality of discussions held. Leading organisations in this area would be encouraged to share best practices more broadly with the field.

C *Recognise 'less-linear' working methods:* It may be beneficial for donors and support organisations to making sure that funding allocation and reporting requirements form a better match with insider mediators' often informal and fluid work processes. Insider mediators and support organisations could also aim to broaden the understanding of insider mediation work processes. Practitioners and experts in this field could help normalise the idea that insider mediation involves a diverse range of activities, requiring more flexible budget allocation to optimise both formal and informal activities.

- D** *Streamline third-party support:* In relation to section 3: Internal group dynamics, point B, donors and support organisations should be mindful of their roles in launching and maintaining insider mediation initiatives. Though their role might shift over time, 65% of our survey respondents reported that third-party support is beneficial, if not necessary, when it comes to getting an insider mediation initiative started. Another 78% (particularly the civil society representatives) argued that a third party's continuous engagement is needed to keep an initiative going. Third-party involvement was often credited for helping to secure funding and for creating entry points for engagement in the initial stages, as well as for its help in convening the initiative members, keeping them together (by stabilising the initiative and providing focus on core objectives during difficult times), and implementing an agreement in the long run.
- relation to section 3: Internal group dynamics, point B, donors and support organisations should be mindful of their roles in launching and maintaining insider mediation initiatives. Though their role might shift over time, 65% of our survey respondents reported that third-party support is beneficial, if not necessary, when it comes to getting an insider mediation initiative started. Another 78% (particularly the civil society representatives) argued that a third party's continuous engagement is needed to keep an initiative going. Third-party involvement was often credited for helping to secure funding and for creating entry points for engagement in the initial stages, as well as for its help in convening the initiative members, keeping them together (by stabilising the initiative and providing focus on core objectives during difficult times), and implementing an agreement in the long run. At the same time, third parties could do more to improve the coordination between primary donors and support organisations of insider mediation initiatives – for instance, by encouraging information sharing and more regular coordination meetings – and thereby avoid imposing a double burden on insider mediators.
- E** *Provide support through training:* Support organisations – including Clingendael Academy – can contribute by ensuring our capacity strengthening efforts are focused on long-term engagement and tailored to the latest conflict dynamics. Long-term capacity strengthening support can be tailored to the entire process of an insider mediation initiative: from goal setting, strategy development, entry-point identification, and the creating of ripeness for talks to the strengthening of insider mediation group members' mediation skills and their understanding of the peace negotiation process. Training support in later stages of the mediation process can also focus on the implementation phase, e.g.: on what is needed to ensure sufficient 'buy-in' from all involved parties, on who should be engaged throughout the implementation phase, on how to identify and deal with potential spoilers, and/or on how to deal with deadlocks.

5. CONSTITUENCY ENGAGEMENT

Throughout the entire peace process, insider mediation initiatives can play an important role in ensuring the inclusion of diverse perspectives. Both to achieve a complete understanding of all the interests at stake and to avoid problems related to perceived partiality, insider mediators must make conscious choices about how to sequence their engagements with various actors. As they are generally closer to one or more of the parties in conflict, insider mediators always carry with them a high risk of appearing biased. Indeed, 73% of our survey respondents noted that other stakeholders sometimes challenge their position as a mediator due to the question of impartiality. At the same time, this closeness is also what provides credibility and trust.

79%

OF THE INSIDER MEDIATOR SURVEY RESPONDENTS REPORTED THEIR COLLEAGUES ARE SOMETIMES, OFTEN OR ALWAYS 'TOO OCCUPIED' WITH REPRESENTING THEIR CONSTITUENTS' INTERESTS, AT THE EXPENSE OF BUILDING CONSENSUS.

Hence, balancing their role as credible mediators who support a dialogue process with their role as leaders of their constituencies can be challenging. Both our interviewees and survey respondents confirmed that, by nature, insider mediators are strongly focused on their constituencies.¹² Interestingly, several insider mediation initiative members reported finding their colleagues 'too occupied' with representing their constituents' interests, at the expense of building consensus within the initiative. This can hinder the initiative's progress.

'Sometimes, after consultations [with their constituencies], the process goes back to square one because the members want to reflect their constituents' positions.' – Survey respondent

'What do we call ourselves? Are we actually 'insider mediators'?' – Survey respondent

One explanation for this is the difficulty of proper constituency engagement. To promote sustainable outcomes, insider mediation initiatives that support a dialogue process often have mechanisms in place for representing constituencies' interests, for example, through national dialogues, round tables, interviews, surveys, town-hall meetings, and/or other public gatherings.

In some cases, the outcomes of such meetings are shared publicly; in others these meetings are best kept under the radar. Likewise, some outcomes of talks between conflicting parties are shared openly whereas others need to be kept confidential, even though constituencies may wish to have more insight into the formal dialogue process. Hence, in practice, such mechanisms can be difficult to deal with. This is also partly connected to what we described above in section 1 on Strategic Planning. In many cases, especially early on in the process, insider mediators have strongly varying perceptions of the initiative's identity, making it inherently difficult to communicate a unified message to constituencies while at the same time ensuring confidentiality of certain talks. Moreover, survey respondents noted that constituency engagement is also made challenging due to a lack of clarity around both the specifics of the insider mediation initiative's mandate and who granted it — i.e., who has given them the authority to intervene in the conflict? Such ambiguities can significantly affect an insider mediator's credibility. Consequently, in cases where insider mediators are struggling to win or maintain the trust of their constituencies, this may affect them in their role as mediators in the sense that they may become more focused on constituencies' interests and less focused on decision-making inside the insider mediation initiative on how to set up joint plans to support dialogue.

¹² Insider mediators' constituents can include a wide range of groups and actors depending on the context. Often, both the insider mediators and their constituents are inherently linked to the parties in conflict. Insider mediators must balance the interests and management of their constituencies with maintaining their own image of impartiality.

A second explanation relates more to insider mediators' role within their constituencies. In many insider mediation initiatives, members act as local leaders who work together to support dialogue processes without officially representing their constituents' interests. However, several insider mediation initiatives *are* indeed of a mix of negotiators representing constituencies' interests and local leaders that support dialogue and peacebuilding in their communities. For example, this was the case in our case-study in the Philippines. Here, one of the core activities of the insider mediation network is to have dialogue sessions among the initiative members themselves. Hence, while members act as local mediators and peace builders in different communities, they are also representatives of these different communities' interests and negotiators that shape the political transition process.

These different roles bring about additional challenges when it comes to effective constituency engagement. While constituency engagement in this first role — i.e., insider mediators who support dialogue processes — is about promoting representation, credibility and legitimacy to the process as a whole, the challenge in this second role is for insider mediators themselves to gain credibility and legitimacy as representatives of their constituents' key interests and needs.

Ways to support insider mediation work in this area:

- A** *Provide support through training:* Although insider mediators often recognise the importance of constituency engagement, effective outreach does not always receive enough attention in daily practice. Capacity strengthening support can focus first on clarifying who their constituents are, and second on developing effective communication strategies for liaising with their constituencies before, during, and after insider mediation activities. Capacity strengthening in this area can help insider mediators to think strategically about their messaging, e.g.: what do we communicate to all constituencies and what just to some; how should we frame this information; is there one focal person or do all members engage in this communication? Such communication strategies must also be attuned to (and in accordance with) the specific parties in conflict, e.g.: what can we say about progress and how do we ensure confidentiality as necessary?
- B** *Support constituency engagement:* Donors and support organisations could consider providing more support for insider mediation group members when it comes to liaising with their respective constituencies, by organising town-hall meetings, focus groups, informal meetings with decision makers, etc.
- C** *Explore possible benefits of different communication channels:* Both insider mediators and support organisations could consider further exploring the potential of social media and other online platforms. Although traditional media is still dominant in many parts of the world, other technologies (e.g., WhatsApp, Viber, Signal) may facilitate access to groups that were previously more difficult to reach. A key issue to consider here is safety. Donors and support organisations could ensure insider mediators have access to VPNs, ProtonMail, etc. to absorb some of the risks of surveillance. Finally, the translation of communication products into local languages may also help initiatives reach different constituencies.

6. TRACK 1-2-3 COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION

Throughout a peace process, multi-track collaboration and coordination is a common challenge. Interestingly, insider mediation initiatives often already work across different tracks due to their links to both international mediation support organisations and local mediation initiatives. As a result, most insider mediators indicate that their work impacts society on multiple levels. Indeed, 76% of our survey respondents who work closely with international mediation support organisations (such as UNDP or the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue) reported that they also work with local initiatives. This indicates that insider mediators are ideally positioned to function as a bridge between the different tracks. However, this potential is not always utilised.

According to our interviewees, one explanation for the lack of track 1-2-3 collaboration is that the actors within the different tracks have different perceptions, approaches, interests, goals, and protocols (e.g., regarding confidentiality). For example, our interviewees argued that track 1 processes tend to be more outcome-focused (reaching an agreement), while track 2 and 3 processes are more focused on the long-term peacebuilding process. A similar disconnect exists between external mediators, who often focus on track 1 outcomes, and insider mediators, who generally focus on the longer-term process of building relationships and trust. This is a consequence of a difference in perspective: insider mediators have direct, long-term stakes in the conflict for which they are mediating, which is often less (or not) the case for external mediators.

Both interviewees and survey respondents also highlighted a frequent overemphasis on formal, senior-level mediation processes, and that the collaboration between insider mediators and external or formal mediators does not always run smoothly. While 62% of our survey respondents reported regular collaboration with formally appointed, external mediators — which they found particularly useful 'for working towards a common goal' and to 'have a channel to voice different concerns and challenges' — 38% of respondents still noted little to no collaboration. Respondents elaborated that formal, external mediators only selectively collaborate with insider mediators, and do not take sufficient time to consult with insider mediators.

Some insider mediators attribute this lack of collaboration to a lack of understanding among external mediators of the mandate and work of insider mediators, while others feel this may be due to a conflict of interest. To some insider mediators, the fact that they receive less publicity than formal mediators — and that there is therefore less recognition for and awareness of their work — serves as proof of their perceptions. The fact that insider mediators' contributions often go unrecognised, while international attention is drawn to the more visible, 'glamorous' aspects of high-power diplomacy, is a known challenge. As our respondents noted, formal mediators are often perceived as 'the experts' even though insider mediators tend to have a better understanding of the realities on the ground.

Lastly, a few respondents noted that there is confusion around the neutrality and impartiality of insider mediators due to their proximity to the conflict, which sometimes prevents them from being invited to track 1 processes. They noted that, for insider mediators to be successful, governments and central authorities as well as external or third-party actors need to be sensitised to the benefits of their engagement.

When asked how best to build connections between track 1-2-3 processes, the insider mediators affiliated with our three case studies mentioned:

- Regular dialogue and engagement to bring different actors together;
- Continuous sensitisation to common interests
- Trust-building
- Structured community engagement
- Systematic information sharing
- Realignment of objectives
- Creation of complementary work processes
- Adopting a bottom-up approach (as opposed to top-down)

“The inclusion of all relevant organisations, at all levels, is more effective than holding selective coordination meetings with peacebuilding organisations that have similar objectives and/or the same donors.” – Survey respondent

Ways to support insider mediation work more effectively:

- A** *Support cross-track collaboration:* Support organisations and other relevant (international) actors involved in peace mediation can play an important role in improving multi-track processes by bringing actors from different levels together. According to our survey, insider mediators would welcome support when it comes to accessing relevant networks and being introduced to track 1 and external actors.
- B** *Provide support through donor assessment:* Primary donors – and particular donors that support various initiatives in a peace process – could proactively ask secondary donors/support organisations for plans on how to link the tracks when assessing (mediation) project proposals. Funds are also required to ensure effective coordination and cooperation between the tracks.
- C** *Provide support through training:* Capacity strengthening support could focus on stakeholder analysis and stakeholder management, e.g., to better identify entry points for engagement and to facilitate effective messaging towards high-level and/or international mediators and mediation support organisations. Capacity strengthening support could also help insider mediation initiatives to strike a balance between engaging in the formal process versus informal processes. Part of such capacity strengthening could focus on how to connect with different mediation and dialogue initiatives — both at national and community levels — and how to build coalitions. Comparative case studies, which provide examples of successes and challenges in other contexts, can also be useful. In addition, capacity strengthening support might focus on deepening members’ (technical) understanding of the political nature of peace negotiation and mediation processes (e.g., in terms of power structures), in order to navigate them effectively. Lastly, training can in itself provide an opportunity for insiders and outsiders to learn and work together.

7. ADDITIONAL OPTIONS FOR CAPACITY STRENGTHENING SUPPORT

In our survey, the vast majority of respondents (78%) indicated that the training they had received was adequate and useful. However, it is important to note that 39% of respondents also said their training had *not* been sufficiently tailored to their level of literacy (only 30% disagreed with this statement; the others were neutral). This suggests that, while training is generally welcomed, it is important to [consider the literacy](#) level of the insider mediators involved, especially when working with local-level insider mediation initiatives. A proper intake assessment can help determine if (and which) adjustments are necessary.

When asking what other support insider mediators may need, survey respondents and interviewees expressed a desire for more [structured, long-term training programmes](#). In particular, insider mediators reported needing more support in [developing their mandate](#) and positioning themselves as legitimate actors. Various respondents, most notably female civil society actors, also expressed a wish to gain more [skills for effective engagement](#) with conflict parties, political actors, and other track 1 actors. Simulations in this vein may be of help, especially ones that stimulate participants to explore ways of conducting cross-track engagement, e.g.: when track 1 mediators are asked to 'synergise' with track 2 and 3 actors, or when track 2 and 3 actors are asked to identify a track 1 actor's mandate and political difficulties. Similarly, many of the insider mediators affiliated with our three case studies reported a desire to learn how to initiate, maintain, and evaluate [shuttle talks](#).

Also of note: our survey data suggests that insider mediators who form part of a group or initiative are mostly selected — by the support organisation and/or by group members — based on their status and personal networks, rather than on their negotiation and mediation skills or knowledge. This implies that, to improve their effectiveness, many insider mediators could benefit from [mediation and negotiation training](#) tailored to their specific needs. Corroborated by the insider mediators affiliated with our case studies, our survey respondents reported a need for skills training in:

- Conflict mapping and conflict analysis (particularly to gain a better understanding of how various parties may perceive the same conflict differently)
- Establishing credibility and rapport with conflict parties
- Analysing conflict parties' negotiation approaches
- De-escalating tensions
- Trust-building, both between insider mediators and conflict parties, and between insider mediators and formal mediators
- Formulating and proposing possible (written) agreements
- Media management
- Setting up action plans for implementation post agreement

In addition, to improve their mediation practice, the insider mediators affiliated with our case studies also indicated a desire to learn about:

- Balancing inclusivity and 'smooth decision-making' within an insider mediation initiative
- Dealing with cultural and generational differences
- Preparing mediation activities
- Dealing with personal safety
- Dealing with sudden disruptions to the mediation process
- Setting up support teams

Finally, there is a clear overall need for insider mediators to learn from relevant case studies that look into other insider mediation initiatives. Comparative examples can help insider mediators to better reflect on their own situations and to assess their options when dealing with specific challenges.

In all cases, capacity strengthening should be [practical](#) and have a long-term focus. [Simulations and exercises](#) can help insider mediators to first practice and strengthen their skills before going out in the field, while a post-training coaching element can help them work on specific questions and challenges they encounter(ed) at different phases of the mediation process. Lastly, expanding '[training of trainers](#)' programmes can enable more insider mediators to receive the coaching they need in order to effectively support their communities.



8. CONCLUSION

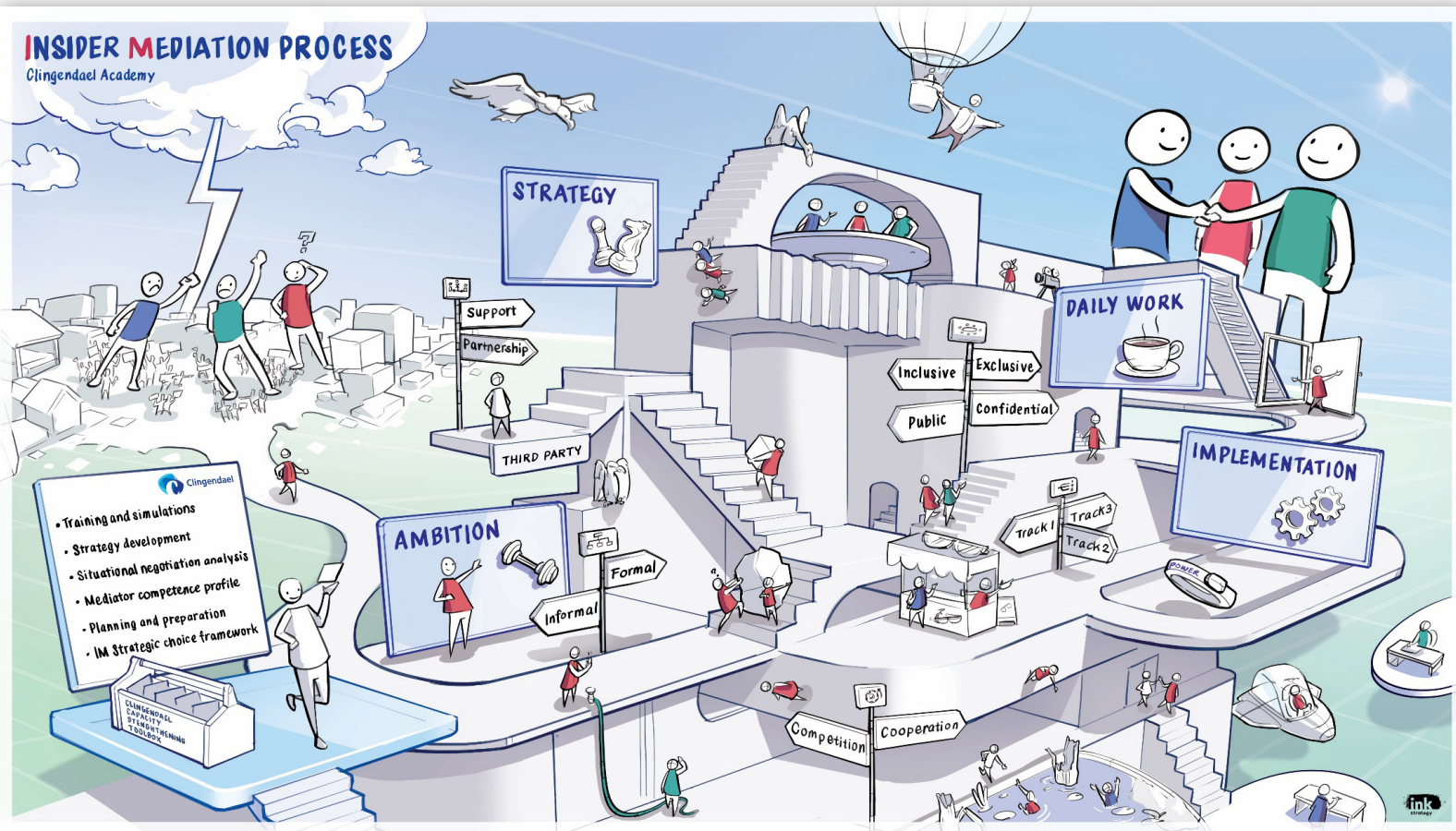
Insider mediation is becoming increasingly mainstream in peace processes, upping the need for capacity strengthening support for (potential) insider mediators as well as for their supporters. A broader understanding and use of the concept of insider mediation can strengthen resilience in conflict-affected societies and contribute to sustainable solutions that are carried by society as a whole. Equipped with effective insider mediation skills, local stakeholders will be poised to make conscious choices and suggestions in pursuit of constructive change within and between parties in conflict. Adequate funding, support, and capacity strengthening is needed to realise the full potential of insider mediation initiatives, particularly by:

1. increasing time and resources for comprehensive strategic planning
2. balancing the formal-versus-informal organisational set-up
3. strengthening internal group dynamics
4. encouraging sustainable donor management and coordination
5. improving constituency engagement
6. optimising track 1-2-3 collaboration and coordination

Capacity strengthening programmes can support insider mediators' work processes and equip them with the necessary skills and tools to effectively manoeuvre the mediation process from initiation to implementation. Unsurprisingly, this needs assessment has already resulted in many ideas for expanding the capacity strengthening support that Clingendael Academy — and others — provide in contribution to the effectiveness of insider mediation initiatives. Moreover, we hope that the findings shared here can help the field to re-strategise and innovate how insider mediation initiatives and support activities are organised. By (collectively) recognising the challenges in the above-mentioned areas, we can think creatively about new opportunities for supporting and strengthening insider mediation initiatives worldwide.



9. APPENDIX: CLINGENDAEL ACADEMY'S STRATEGIC CHOICE FRAMEWORK¹³



¹³ Please note that this visualisation is not a stand-alone product, but a tool that we use in training (which still requires further elaboration by our trainers).