Study on EU lessons learnt in mediation and dialogue

Glass half full

Key Messages and Executive Summary

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Key Messages

The European Union has a long history and rich experience as an actor in mediation and dialogue, from its recent high-level work regarding Kosovo-Serbia to supporting grassroots work in the Philippines. It is difficult to find a region of the world where the EU is not active to some extent in mediation and dialogue. As a peace project itself since its very beginning, the EU has had mediation and dialogue as part of its internal makeup and in 2009 the EU Council agreed a Concept on Strengthening EU Mediation and Dialogue Capacities, as a clear point of policy and conceptual reference. However, despite EU experience illustrating a ‘glass half full’, the breath and depth of this engagement in mediation and dialogue is not entirely recognised even within the EU institutions. Clear opportunities exist in the post-Lisbon institutional setup to scale-up mediation and dialogue within a comprehensive approach to conflict prevention, peacebuilding and stability.

The EU has developed its capacity and experience in mediation and dialogue over the last 20 years along the lines of the five roles of the EU: as a mediator itself, and in promoting, leveraging, supporting and funding mediation and dialogue. Lessons learnt articulated in this study cut across or reference the five roles and range from Track 1 (the highest political level) to Track 3 (grassroots). This study, of a limited scope and for which only a short period of time was available, looked briefly at EU experiences in Georgia, Indonesia (Aceh), Israel-Palestine (Middle East), Kenya, Kosovo-Serbia, Myanmar/Burma, the Philippines (Mindanao), Sri Lanka, Yemen and Zimbabwe in addition to cross-cutting thematic issues and a range of other geographical examples in less depth.

The following lessons for the EU arose from the study, on which further progress should be made.

Lesson Learnt 1: Understand the context and adapt

Part of the added value of the EU is its extremely wide global reach, yet this poses both challenges and opportunities. Continual EU adaption to the various and constantly evolving country and regional contexts in which mediation and dialogue take place is highlighted as a crucial determinant of a successful EU intervention. The post-Lisbon institutions and recent developments offer greater opportunities for this that should be seized.

Lesson Learnt 2: Actively manage the EU’s own family engagement

The strength of the EU lies in its diversity and comprehensiveness in terms of the response it can offer. The EU’s family ability to ‘get its act together’ in the context of its own actions has been noted as a major determinant of success, yet too often this does not occur. When the EU manages its own engagement effectively (between EU institutions and Member States (MS), the field and headquarters, the political and operational spheres) it achieves better outcomes for mediation and dialogue and there is scope here for further improvement.

Lesson Learnt 3: Partnership is key and good partnership adds value

There are almost no instances where the EU works alone in mediation and dialogue. The EU works with UN, regional organisations, international non-Governmental organisations (INGOs) and local civil society as well as with direct parties to the conflict. Therefore the success (and failure) of EU mediation is heavily reliant on how well the EU can work together with its partners in order to add value. Good work has been done in the past but more is needed to maximise the value of the EU’s partnerships at the global, regional and local level, thus bringing together the political and financial resources of the EU.

Lesson Learnt 4: Leverage the EU’s added value by moving from ad hoc responses to international best practice

The EU’s added value lies in its global reach, its ability to engage over the long term, and its ability to work at multiple levels as well as its more ‘neutral’ profile in certain circumstances. Yet the EU’s approach is too often ad hoc rather than comprehensive, and the EU does not draw sufficiently on either its own internal experience as a peace and integration project or international best practice. Where it can act comprehensively, over the long term and across different levels, the EU has more of a chance of achieving a positive impact and this should be incentivised.
Executive Summary

Introduction

1. Where the EU’s engagement in mediation and dialogue is concerned the glass is most certainly half full. This is in the sense that there is good experience to reflect and draw upon, the relevance of EU engagement in mediation and dialogue to EU foreign policy goals is clear, opportunities exist to be built on and the EU can bring an added value to other actors. The European Union indeed has a long history of rich experience as an actor in mediation and dialogue, particularly when a comprehensive definition is used. This experience extends from high-level work in Kosovo-Serbia, through comprehensive approaches in Aceh-Indonesia to supporting specific grassroots work in the Philippines and Yemen. As a peace project itself since its very beginning, the EU has had mediation and dialogue as part of its internal makeup. In recent years there has been an increasing recognition of the importance and scope of mediation and dialogue in making a contribution to preventing violent conflict and building sustainable peace and stability. The EU, along with other actors such as the United Nations, has developed its capabilities to do better where dialogue and mediation are concerned. In 2009 the EU Council agreed a Concept on Strengthening EU Mediation and Dialogue Capacities as a clear point of conceptual and policy reference.

2. Despite the fact that the 2009 Concept sought to clarify the EU’s ambition for, and framing of, mediation and dialogue there is still considerable confusion as to this topic within the EU institutions including the European External Action Service (EEAS) and among the officials themselves; indeed, hardly any of those interviewed had ever heard of the 2009 Concept. This confusion often leads officials and third parties to contend that the EU ‘doesn’t do mediation’ or that it rarely does mediation. Yet when the ambition and framing of the 2009 Concept of the EU as a mediator but also of its role in promoting, leveraging, supporting or funding mediation and dialogue are explained, EU officials and third parties are quick to identify relevant experiences and lessons which capture the nature of their work or of their interaction as partners of the EU, particularly as the relevance of these roles ranges from the highest ‘Track 1’ political level to the ‘Track 3’ level of grassroots engagement.

3. That the EU has developed a significant amount of mediation and dialogue activities (across the five areas of the 2009 Concept) in specific contexts is not in question. The EU has also partially adapted its policy framework, institutional setup and funding mechanisms toward this. Yet there are two questions, firstly as to the quality and impact of this engagement, not least by officials themselves, and secondly as to whether the EU is currently fully exploiting its potential added value.

Background to the Study

4. The purpose of this study is to provide an overview of the EU’s extensive inputs and diverse experiences in relation to mediation and dialogue, as well as a reflection on what can be learnt from these. The key audience for this report is EU officials (EEAS, the EC Directorate General of Development Cooperation (DEVCO), Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) and EU Delegations) who may not be aware of the extensive nature of the EU’s engagement in this area. A second purpose is to provide a knowledge product that can be used as part of wider awareness-raising processes, as well as potential ‘food for thought’ for better practice and background material for internal capacity building within EU institutions. The study is not, however, an impact evaluation but rather a limited review of inputs, of what the EU has undertaken and of what could be learnt from this. Indeed it is important that the reader be aware of the methodological limitations and of the fact that this study collects only a limited number of subjective perspectives on the EU’s inputs; different interpretations and other examples could also be given.

5. While the study is unashamedly Eurocentric given its purpose, and concentrates on the EU’s role, it should of course be noted that it is the parties to the conflict, rather than the EU, who will always play the most important role in transforming conflict situations and it is to them that the greatest attribution of success or failure must be made. The study focuses on experiences that balance: 1) Geography: most
regions of the world are included in order to cover the geographical breadth of the EU’s engagement and draw on global experience; 2) Level of engagement: covering Track 1 (Highest Political Level) to Track 3 (Grassroots Level); 3) Cross-cutting institutional developments with geographical experience: the EU has significantly developed its institutional capacity as well as its geographical experience (see Section 3); and 4) Pre- and post-Lisbon institutional arrangements: the study draws on nascent lessons learnt reflecting on the post-Lisbon institutional arrangements and the creation of the EEAS, though some of the most prominent mediation and dialogue experiences took place prior to the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty. The starting point for deriving lessons was an appreciation of what the EU itself has chosen to highlight as its practice in relation to mediation and dialogue. Therefore the study looked at experiences in Georgia, Indonesia (Aceh), Israel-Palestine (Middle East), Kenya, Kosovo-Serbia, Myanmar/Burma, the Philippines (Mindanao), Sri Lanka, Yemen and Zimbabwe, yet also covers other geographical experiences and broader thematic issues.

6. In undertaking the research, interviews with 27 EU officials from institutions and with 8 others involved in the implementation of mediation and dialogue initiatives (e.g. CSOs/INGOs, UN or regional partners and other external experts) were conducted as was a review of relevant EU official documentation and third-party analysis of the EU’s role. This constitutes a limited evidence base but one that nonetheless captures a diversity of experiences and views.

Lessons Learnt

Lesson Learnt 1: Understand the context and adapt

7. Part of the added value of the EU lies in its extremely wide global reach yet this poses both challenges and opportunities. Continual adaption to the various and constantly evolving country and regional contexts in which mediation and dialogue take place is highlighted as a crucial determinant of a successful EU intervention; Kosovo is not the Philippines and the Zimbabwean political context shares few characteristics with that of Kenya even if they are on the same continent. What the EU can offer differs considerably between even these contexts as does its position in relation to the conflict parties, yet through well crafted adaption the EU provided a positive and at times crucial contribution. Where the EU has both a good understanding of the political dynamics at different levels and the ability to adapt its political and policy responses accordingly rather than seeking to offer a ‘one size fits all approach’, its experience of mediation and dialogue is generally positive regardless of geography. This has been seen in the examples of Kosovo-Serbia, Philippines, Indonesia (Aceh), Kenya and Georgia.

Sub-lessons include:

- The quality, expertise, knowledge, flexibility and motivation of EU officials (at various levels) are key to the EU’s adaption to context – good people make the difference;
- There is a need to further invest in systems and approaches that enable a better understanding of the political/conflict dynamics and to appreciate the true origins of demand and opportunities (or the lack thereof) for EU mediation;
- There is a need to be creative and take informed risks;
- Greater opportunities for mediation and dialogue exist in contexts where the EU is seen as relatively neutral but also as a credible political and financial actor; yet these contexts occur globally.

Lesson Learnt 2: Actively manage the EU’s own family engagement

8. Another potential strength of the EU lies in its diversity and comprehensiveness in terms of the response it can offer. The EU’s family ability to ‘get its act together’ in the context of its own actions has been noted as a major determinant of success, though also as a source of on-going frustration. It is this aspect of managing ‘family relations’ that external parties and even the EU’s own staff most heavily criticised in terms of undermining success and potential opportunities. EU officials at all levels generally acknowledge that, while the vision of the Lisbon Treaty is of an EU that works together more closely and coherently, the reality is that this still has to be constantly and skilfully managed rather than simply arising as a matter of course. This requires the active and pragmatic management of the EU’s own family at multiple levels; it cannot be left to chance that the post-Lisbon structures will automatically deliver this.
Sub-lessons include:

- EU-MS may either limit or open up space for EU mediation and dialogue; therefore engagement with them by EU institutions is key, particularly if mediation is at the highest level;
- EU institutions and MS must speak with ‘one voice’ at critical moments in dialogue processes; yet need not maintain complete coherence at all points of engagement or on all issues;
- Aligning and drawing on the strength of the EU’s political, financial and technical competences requires active and specific collaboration across institutions (particularly the EEAS and Commission);
- Respect and dialogue between headquarters (Brussels and European capitals) and the field (Delegations and EU-MS embassies and/or Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions) is key and provides good-quality information and knowledge that flows both ways.

Opportunities exist to better actively manage the EU’s own family in the post-Lisbon institutional setup that should be exploited, while risks that the post-Lisbon structure may create unhelpful divisions (particularly between the political direction of the EEAS and the Commission’s instruments) should also be managed.

Lesson Learnt 3: Partnership is key and good partnership adds value

9. The key observation is that there are almost no instances where the EU works alone in mediation and dialogue. Therefore the success (and failure) of EU mediation is heavily reliant on how well the EU can work together with its partners in order to add value. Indeed, while the EU engagements in the Philippines, Aceh-Indonesia and Kenya can in some ways be characterised as successes, these can be ascribed to the conflicting parties themselves and to the international community as a whole. Even in the case of Kosovo-Serbia where the EU is the central mediator, the US also had an important and critical role to play and in Yemen it is (surprisingly) Russia that is the EU’s key political partner. In the Philippines and Indonesia (Aceh) it was non-Governmental organisations that critically made space for the EU. By the same token, the ‘difficult cases’ of Zimbabwe, the Middle East, Georgia, Sri Lanka and the African Great Lakes represent a challenge for the international community overall, and the lack of progress made toward achieving positive outcomes through mediation and dialogue cannot fairly be attributed to the EU alone.

Sub-lessons include:

- EU partners can act in ways the EU cannot and can open opportunities for the EU; therefore it is constructive engagement, not competition or duplication, that should be prioritised;
- Good partnership extends beyond the provision of financial resources to smart political relationships that work both ways; there is room to further develop the EU’s political partnerships with the UN, the African Union (AU), and INGOs as well as with local actors;
- The continued cultivation of a diversity of partners at global, regional and national level is necessary and must include legitimacy, experience and connections that can work at different levels of mediation and dialogue.

The EU has developed numerous innovative tools for working with different types of partners at global, regional and country level. The challenge now is to take this partnership to the next level by combining its political and financial aspects more effectively at the different levels.

Lessons Learnt 4: Leverage the EU’s added value by moving from ad hoc responses to international best practice

10. That the EU has developed a significant amount of mediation and dialogue activities (across the five areas of the 2009 Concept) in specific contexts and is now taking them further with a specific Division in the EEAS at its centre is clear. The EU has also partially adapted its policy framework, institutional setup and funding mechanisms; however there is both scope and necessity to take this further. Nevertheless, in some cases the EU gives the impression of following an ad hoc, reactive and events-based approach, whereby it seems that in a number of contexts, it is merely conducting individual projects and initiatives rather than adopting a more comprehensive and considered approach or strategy.
Sub-lessons include:

- The EU is not maximising its potential in this area because mediation and dialogue are not immediately prioritised or understood as a response that the EU should offer. Further work on prioritising, socialising and incentivising approaches to mediation and dialogue within the EU institutions is needed;
- The EU’s biggest successes in peacebuilding through mediation and dialogue have involved a multi-level and multi-stakeholder approach; something that the EU is extremely well placed to offer if it can be managed effectively. The EU should thus approach mediation and dialogue as part of wider support to a peace process (regardless of whether it is officially labelled as such) and bring the full EU menu of responses to the table;
- The EU can cover meaningful processes of mediation and dialogue even if these are rarely subject to quick wins. The successful engagements in the Philippines, Aceh-Indonesia and Kosovo-Serbia happened over a number of years. Despite the current lack of progress in Georgia and the Middle East, the importance of staying engaged and of maintaining the lines of communication through which the EU is involved is seen as critical positioning for success;
- The EU, as a project for peace and functional integration, has significantly under-utilised this internal experience in its external mediation and dialogue, despite the fact that this internal experience of relevant mediation and dialogue issues is significant (going beyond the Northern Ireland peace process to rich experience in minority rights, devolution, transitions from military to civilian rule, and the negotiation of functional technical issues such as border management). This represents a missed opportunity in promoting the EU’s added value, yet such promotion should always be done sensitively and based on clear demand from the conflicting parties;
- The current internal systems used (by both the EEAS and the Commission) to archive, capture, and disseminate EU experience appear limited, and genuine evaluation of EU engagement in mediation and dialogue (for both learning and accountability) is practically non-existent. This needs to be developed and requires investment.

Significant opportunities exist for mediation and dialogue by the EU through coordination and leadership of the EEAS, working with the Commission, that can make a very useful contribution to the achievement of the EU’s external action goals. Positive institutional developments in all four lessons learnt can currently be observed, although complacency, or a lack of political prioritisation or institutional investment, could lead to an undermining of progress already made. This would represent a missed opportunity for the EU and could result in it having to invest politically and financially in more costly external action alternatives. The body of the main report suggests specific options on how some of these lessons can be taken forward practically, particularly by the EEAS and other EU institutions.