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BASELINE STUDY

Tradition- & Faith-Oriented Insider Mediators (TFIMs)
as Crucial Actors in Conflict Transformation

Case Study: **Colombia**



Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Mediation formats and examples	4
3. Approaches and resources	4
4. Success and challenges	5
5. Opportunities and risks for support	7

Background of this case study

In mediation processes, usually an *outsider* and *impartial* third party mediator is sought. In certain contexts, especially in traditional and high-context societies, an insider mediator who is intrinsic (geographically, culturally and normatively) to the conflict context, and thereby *partial*, often gets more legitimacy to mediate than an outsider. Tradition- & faith-oriented insider mediator (TFIMs) are those who take an assortment of concepts, values and practices from culture, tradition and faith (among other sources) as inspiration, motivation, guidance and as methodological support towards mediation. TFIMs may include traditional and religious leaders/ authorities, but also other actors who may, on principle and/ or strategically, draw tools and inspiration from (multiple) faiths, cultures and traditions, as well as from non-religious (secular) and non-traditional concepts/ values. This case study is part of the empirical research that was carried out to understand the mediation roles, potential and constraints of TFIMs.

About the author

Katrin Planta is a project manager in Berghof Foundation's programme on Agents of Change for Inclusive Conflict Transformation. Her recent project analyses the characteristics and patterns of coexistence between state-based and/or non-traditional conflict resolution mechanisms on one hand and community-based, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms on the other, and examines the effect that such coexistence has on conflict settlement processes and outcomes. Katrin graduated in Social Science from Westfälische Wilhelms Universität Münster, Germany, and the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Lille, France, and holds an MA in Conflict Resolution from the University of Bradford, UK. She is a PhD candidate at Free University Berlin and is writing her dissertation on the role of ex-combatants' associations for peacebuilding with Colombia as a case study.

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Availability

All case studies, the main study, and a synopsis are available at www.peacemakersnetwork.org/tfim.

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1. Introduction

On account of its history of armed conflict,¹ Colombia has had an extremely rich and varied experience of mediation at different levels (local, regional, national), for different purposes (humanitarian, social, political) under different formats (formal, informal), between different actors (intra- and intercommunity mediation, mediation between the various armed actors and the state, armed actors and communities, communities and the state, communities and (agro-industrial, mining, oil, petrol) companies, etc.) and with different types of mediators (indigenous, faith-based, third-party mediators). Religious or faith-based actors play a huge role in conflicts in Colombia, which is a predominantly Catholic country with approx. 80% of the population belonging to the Roman Catholic Church and 15-20% belonging to one of the Protestant churches (e.g. Mennonites, Presbyterians, Lutherans – with Pentecostalism also playing an ever increasing role).²

The following study explores the role of faith-oriented insider mediators (FIM) in Colombia. The document was elaborated on the basis of a literature review and field research in Colombia. The field research comprised semi-structured interviews with representatives of Christian faith-based organisations and churches, and a focus-group discussion with an ecumenical women's network (GemPaz). The data gathered from these sources were complemented by informal conversations with academic experts and social activists undertaken between 13th and 20th April 2015 in Bogotá. While some

of the interviewees focussed on their own personal mediation experiences, others provided a more institutional perspective on mediation and conflict transformation efforts and the needs of the respective organisation or church.

The participants in this study represent a very balanced selection of the various Christian actors in Colombia. The organisations from which representatives were drawn included the Catholic Church (the Conferencia Episcopal being the highest representation of the Catholic Church in Colombia), various Protestant churches (CEDECOL being the umbrella organisation for the Protestant churches in Colombia), and a number of evangelical denominations such as the Mennonites, which are numerically small but well-known for their mediation work. In addition, a focus group discussion with members of the ecumenical women's network, GemPaz, which represents women from various churches, both Catholic and Protestant, revolved around ecumenical efforts towards conflict transformation and peacebuilding. While all of the organisations and churches have offices in Bogotá, their work is carried out across the country, with many activities taking place in remote and often conflict-affected areas. All of the interviewees were leaders in their respective organisations or churches and many of them were well-known national peacebuilding pioneers and activists. More than half of the interviewees were women.

1. In 2016, the Colombian government and the biggest guerrilla group in the country, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo / FARC-EP) are expected to sign a peace agreement, putting an end to more than half a decade of armed violence. Nevertheless, Colombia has not only experienced an internal armed conflict between governmental and various guerrilla forces, but has also had a long history of paramilitary violence, drug-related violence, and high levels of social and intra-family violence. Even in the event of a peace agreement, then, the country still has a long road ahead towards a more peaceful society.

2. Religious minorities include Jews, Hindus, Muslims (0.02% of the population, with a particularly significant migrant community from Lebanon) and the various belief systems held by the indigenous population, which amounts to approx. 3% of the overall population.

2. Mediation formats and examples

As noted earlier, concrete examples of mediation efforts varied substantially with respect to their level and scope, the actors involved, and the purpose they served. One interviewee proposed the following categories:

1) Direct, informal mediation and negotiation accompaniment at the local level

This includes spontaneous, ad-hoc and needs-based mediation, along with *diálogos pastorales* (pastoral dialogues, whereby “pastoral” serves to indicate that these dialogues concern social and humanitarian rather than political issues) conducted by the Catholic Church in conflict-affected regions. These interventions concern issues such as: negotiating access to food, improving security conditions, mediating in cases of recruitment of minors, mediating hostage releases, etc. Since the 1990s, the Church has defended its pastoral dialogues against legal restrictions on “talking to terrorists”. In setting up these dialogues, the Church asserts its right to “talk to everybody” if need be. The pastoral dialogues have—to varying degrees—been tolerated by successive Colombian governments (though not without certain bishops/pastors having been accused of collaborating with the guerrillas), which has provided a form of legal protection for local mediation with armed groups. One example referred to was the mediation process between the community in Micoahumado and the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación*

Nacional, ELN, the second biggest remaining guerrilla group) with regard to demining, which was accompanied by representatives of the Catholic Church. The fact that these negotiations took place under the “auspices” of the Catholic Church helped the community to maintain their efforts within a sort of legal framework.

2) Creating spaces for encounters

One example where the church was able to serve as a “convener” or “facilitator” of dialogue among different groups was the *Asamblea Permanente de la Sociedad Civil por la Paz* (Permanent Civil Society Assembly for Peace) which was created in the 1990s and represents all sectors of society). Here, the Catholic Church served as a secretariat (taking minutes of meetings, coordinating, convoking, etc.) for these encounters. Nevertheless, the power of this space was diminished when the business sector dropped out and the dialogue was consequently weakened.

3) Official participation in peace processes/negotiations

In some instances, church representatives have also been called on to participate directly in peace processes. During the negotiations with the FARC in El Caguán (1999-2002), for instance, the President of the Episcopal Conference was part of the government’s negotiation team.

3. Approaches and resources

All faith-based insider mediators described their faith and spirituality, along with their theological formation, as an immense resource for their work, as a source of inspiration, and as a starting point for their engagement. Concrete faith-based resources included prayers and biblical texts, as well as an overall outlook based on religious texts and Christian teaching. A number of other faith and church-related resources were mentioned, including:

- **Historical presence** of (initially Catholic, but now also other) churches in Colombian territory. The church was seen as a much more important resource than the state, one which often replaces the latter by providing basic services (health, education), thus making religious actors the main (and often only) “service point” in rural communities.
- **Mobilisation capacity** of the church in Colombia (remains a faith-based country, churches can reach out to an enormous number of people): in Colombia, the church is an authority. One interviewee said that while people would not obey their superiors at work or their family at home, they would listen to their priest.
- **Reliability and continuity**: whereas international agencies and NGO staff leave the country during periods of

instability, the local priest/pastor remains. Local priests and pastors often spend years in the same place and therefore come to know the territory and the people very well, building up trusted relationships.

- **Recognition and credibility** as a “moral reference point”. The church is perceived as being close to victims (it was the Catholic Church, for instance, that established the first database on victims in the country). The church is seen as supporting the “poor” and “vulnerable”.
- **Reconciliation** lends itself to a spiritual approach because it touches the very heart and soul of the individual.

Nevertheless, the faith-based insider mediators also mentioned a range of other resources that they have at their disposal and make use of. The following resources were mentioned across the interviews:

- Conflict and context analysis.
- Technical capacities (how to design a dialogue process) and knowledge concerning conversational methodologies, such as dialogue, in general.
- Theoretical concepts such as “multitrack mediation”/“bridge building”, (Lederach’s) track 2 diplomacy.
- Training and capacity building.

- Publications (analysis) and training materials.
- Relationships: building on networks and alliances, including at the international level.
- Dedicated and trained staff, or in many cases volunteers.
- The members of the women's initiative (GemPaz) also highlighted their gender as an important resource which makes it easier for them to connect (and overcome their own internal faith-based differences) and gives them a special entry point when working on the ground. In this context, everyday experiences were also mentioned as a connecting factor (helping to connect on a personal level, talking about small things, private issues, etc.).

Specific approaches to mediation, as discussed in some of the interviews:

In the discussion with the ecumenical women's group, the participants highlighted three points with regard to mediation: 1) mediation is inherent to women's daily lives

(they are networkers, they find themselves in many situations where mediation is applied on a personal level); 2) where conflict is concerned, mediation is not something you "choose to do" but a response to the situation (of armed conflict) and to the need for dialogue; 3) mediation is a "natural" skill. In this regard, the interviewees warned against a "professionalisation" of mediation that might lead to mediation becoming an "exclusive" arena for "trained" individuals.

Another important issue raised was the question of where to draw the line between mediation and dialogue. In many instances, especially where local mediation efforts are concerned, the faith-based mediator is part of the local community in whose name she claims to mediate. Can we then still talk about mediation? It was argued that the specific role of the church makes it a mediator and not a community representative like any other.

4. Success and challenges

A number of working principles were mentioned across the various interviews, which can be regarded as additional assets/conditions of successful mediation:

- **An openness to collaborating** with others, including through ecumenical encounters or inter-religious dialogue, reduces the likelihood of being perceived as partisan.
- **The independent** character of initiatives was held to be a key condition of success and of the capacity to reach out to different actors. Most often, this independence consisted in not accepting money from national state/government or other "critically regarded" actors (e.g. multilateral companies, US-American foundations). Where such funding was used, transparency was held to be crucial. Independence also meant that mediators remain in dialogue with all conflict actors so that they cannot be perceived as being more aligned with one or the other ("equidistance"). In that sense, independence is also a key protection mechanism.
- **Transparency** (with regard to methodology, principles, donors).
- **The principle of non-violence** was described in one interview as a "protection shield" and a powerful principle.
- **Counting on advisers/technical support** for inspiration/guidance (international and national advisers)
- The knowledge and "established reputation" acquired through **long-term engagement**.
- **The right "gatekeepers"**: having the right bridge-builders that local people trust. As one interviewee remarked: "people make the difference".

- **Personal integrity of the mediator**: several interviewees highlighted the importance of the institutional background as well as the personality of the mediator.
- **Protection**: one interviewee stated that being identifiable as a cleric (through one's dress, for example) served in many instances as a protective shield.

Nevertheless, there are also limits that faith-based mediation should not cross. One interviewee stated that proselytism is a no-go. Furthermore, there are also a number of factors that are context related and can only be influenced to a certain degree:

- **Windows of opportunity**/the right timing of activities: the interviewees recognised, for instance, that certain mediation exercises would not be possible in certain conflict contexts, e.g. where there is significant polarisation or heavy fighting. The ability to identify the right time (which is linked to an intimate knowledge of the context) constitutes another asset.
- **Behavior of spoilers/armed conflict actors**: the interviewees also noted that their activities were partly dependent on gaining "acceptance" from the insurgents present in the territory where they wish to intervene.

Finally, **one open question** was also addressed in two interviews: how can one effectively be a mediator when one has made an explicit choice to side with the most vulnerable/poor/marginalised? In these two interviews, it was stated that some reflection is needed on this topic. How can one remain true to one's own mission and at the same time gain a broader vision and a deeper understanding of all sides of the conflict, which is a necessary condition for mediation?

With regard to challenges, the interviewees mentioned the following difficulties:

- **Lack of economic resources** (even though one interviewee mentioned that the lack of financial resources can also have a positive effect because it can ultimately lead to a greater sense of ownership) and heavy competition in the Colombian peacebuilding market (one interviewee remarked that peace had become a business in the country and that many organisations did not have a “serious” interest in peace).
- **Lack of human resources**: many activities depend on volunteers, where no professional/full-time staff are available.
- **Resistance** to faith-based mediation/reconciliation work both within society and within the faith-based organisation/church itself (some claim that peacebuilding actors are ultimately “instrumentalised” by the government or the insurgents. There is also a certain resistance within the church(es) to becoming too “political”, which demonstrates the importance of internal backing for mediation efforts).
- **With regard to challenges in the coordination** of networks: competition and the need for all network participants to be “visible” enough were mentioned as hampering good coordination.
- **A further problem was the illegality** of dialogue with armed groups: in Colombia, the law prohibits interaction with armed actors. A presidential decree only allows those actors to engage with armed groups that have been nominated by the president himself (such as the High Commissioner for Peace or, in some instances, the Catholic Church).
- **Security risks**: faith-based actors have been subject to violence, threats and assassinations. It was mentioned that Protestant clerics in particular had been subject to repression by insurgent groups, as some of these churches had established a fairly tight control over “their” population, thereby competing with the insurgency’s desire to exercise control over the territory they operate in.
- **Lack of knowledge about and integration with other initiatives**.
- **General conflict context**: polarisation and stigmatisation.
- **In some instances**: lack of training and conceptual confusion. **“Naïve” understanding or too little critical capacity** vis-à-vis (armed) conflict actors, based on a positive concept of human beings. One interviewee also mentioned that in general and also beyond the sphere of mediation, a radical understanding of “forgive and forget” among some Christians is not very helpful in the context of armed conflict and massive human rights violations, since reconciliation must be based on more than just “forgiveness” (e.g. must also involve social justice, recognition of wrongdoing, reparation).
- **Lack of theological grounding** and training, false interpretations of the Bible.

5. Opportunities and risks for support

The support needs mentioned across the interviews can be broadly grouped into seven categories:

- 1. Financial support for activities, capacity building and human resources.**
- 2. Capacity building and exchange, especially for grassroots organisations/mediators.** Non-violence and mediation training were mentioned in particular; the question, however, is who should conduct such training? It was also mentioned that exchange with/learning lessons from other regions (of the world and of Colombia) would be helpful.
- 3. Articulation (nationally and internationally):** there is an extremely wide array of different groups, initiatives, networks and networks of networks in Colombia. Some interviewees mentioned that there were even too many such networks, making coordination complicated. Yet despite (or even because of this), most interviewees referred to the need to strengthen the integration between different initiatives, especially those implemented in remote regions. International organisations can make a big contribution by providing spaces in which these different actors can be brought together. Some interviewees also expressed a desire for their initiatives to be better linked with national /state initiatives.
- 4. Visibility and recognition:** there is a desire to make visible all of the valuable insights achieved, especially at the local level, and to “set an example” to help initiatives and people that operate under extremely adverse conditions to continue their work and overcome resistance. One interviewee mentioned that the international community often provides more recognition to mediation initiatives than Colombian society itself and that such recognition, be it through funding, encouragement or symbolic rewards (peace prizes etc.), can have a tremendously motivating effect and boost organisations at the national level too.
- 5. Protection:** in difficult situations, international accompaniment can provide protection.

6. Coordination with local actors: in order to avoid duplication, international organisations should first check what is already being done by local actors and analyse how they can effectively support, rather than duplicate, existing initiatives.

7. Last but by no means least: an improvement of the overall conditions of mediation is required. International actors should work towards improving the overall framework conditions rather than focussing on specific mediation actors. It was also suggested that their engagement should be driven by a broader vision and theory of change that goes beyond single support activities towards the long-term goal of sustainable and comprehensive peacebuilding.

Nevertheless, the following caveats/considerations were also mentioned with regard to the risks of international support:

- The need for local organisations to remain independent (and especially not to be associated with certain “biased” international donors or political parties / the government in Colombia. Few specific support needs were mentioned with regard to the government; it was rather stated in general terms that the state should be more present/provide services/be less corrupt and more democratic, or in short: provide an appropriate context/structural conditions for mediation).
- Financial contributions can also create divisions and increase competition; one suggestion was therefore to support networks/platforms rather than single initiatives.
- Peacebuilding and mediation are local processes: one interviewee was very explicit about the risk of internationals coming in and setting up projects without sufficient knowledge or trust on the part of the local participants. It was stated that mediation support should rather be channelled by insiders, who know how to build (long-term) processes and have trusted relations with project participants.

The Network for
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The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers brings together actors to provide global support for grassroots to international peace and peacebuilding efforts. The aim of the Network is to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of peace focused efforts through collaboratively supporting and strengthening the positive role of religious and traditional actors in peace and peacebuilding processes.

www.peacemakersnetwork.org



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www.kirkonulkomaanapu.fi/en

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