



# **Peace Mediation in Times of Radical Uncertainty**

Inaugural lecture of the Nagulendran Chair in Peace Mediation

By Achim Wennmann

With contributions from

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**GENEVA  
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## Table of Contents

Preface	3
<i>By Marie-Laure Salles</i>	
Philanthropy and Peace Mediation	4
<i>By John Nagulendran</i>	
Peace Mediation in Times of Radical Uncertainty Inaugural lecture of the Nagulendran Chair in Peace Mediation	5
<i>By Achim Wennmann</i>	
Introduction	5
1. The era of radical uncertainty	5
2. Demystifying peace mediation	7
3. The peace mediation sector	10
4. Adapting peace mediation to an era of radical uncertainty	14
Commentary	16
<i>By Itonde Kakoma</i>	
Endnotes	19

## Dedication

This publication is dedicated to the memory of Professor Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou (1968-2024). Mahmoud was a great intellectual who was also never afraid of engaging in practice – serving as he did as Minister of Foreign Affairs in Mauritania from 2008 to 2009. More than anything else though, Mahmoud was a man of peace – a fighter for peace – and an exceptional human being. In many ways, he represented the pioneering spirit that is at the heart of the identity of the Geneva Graduate Institute. May his dedication to critical thinking live on in the many he has inspired.

## Acknowledgements

This inaugural lecture marks an important moment in my professional trajectory. Not only has it been an opportunity to take stock and reflect on my own work, but it has also been a first attempt to shape a voice of a new Chair that I am honoured to hold – the Nagulendran Chair in Peace Mediation. I would like to thank Dorothy and John Nagulendran and recognize their courage to take a fork in the road of life and jointly embark on a new project in philanthropy.

The death of my friend and colleague Mahmoud Mohamedou on 17 September 2024, one day before the Inaugural Lecture, was an important reminder to me of the transitory nature of our existence and that we should align focus and energy with purpose within the undetermined duration of our own lifetime. It also made me want to embrace and thank those closest to me and who represent in so many ways the focus, energy and purpose that drive me forward. Thank you, Soledad and Santiago – without you I would not have reached this moment, let's keep on making roads by walking together.

Achim Wennmann  
Geneva, 4 October 2024

## Preface

*By Marie-Laure Salles*

*Director of the Geneva Graduate Institute*

Peace is our north star at the Geneva Graduate Institute. And it has been so for nearly a hundred years. The original title of Immanuel Kant's 1795 essay is "zum ewigen Frieden" – the preposition is key here – *Towards* perpetual peace. If anything, the last years have reminded us is that it is not peace that is perpetual but the struggle for peace. As Kant said "peace must be established". It is not a natural state of things.

Peace is utopia... but a utopia that should always guide us including in those years when states tend to be rather in the business of war and its preparation. Let us not forget Albert Camus' words in 1945 – peace is the only battle worth fighting.

Peace however needs not only to be established. It needs to be constantly re-established, fostered and sustained. So the work of the mediator is in fact a vocation – the kind that comes with a form of asceticism, a burning fire and great humility because progress will always be slow and a step ahead might be countered by two steps backwards.

For Kant, the key for the sustenance of peace is law and regulation. It certainly is. But as important may be is education – the education for and through peace. This is an important tool for spreading a culture of peace in all spaces of our lives. Hence, the initiative to launch the Nagulendran chair in peace mediation. The objective of the chair is to contribute to the development and spread of this culture of and for peace, here at the Institute, but also well beyond.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to John and Dorothy Nagulendran for allowing us to make the chair a reality. When we discussed the project, we rapidly came to an agreement that the role of the chair would be to promote peace by stimulating reflection and practice on conflict resolution and peace mediation. The chair should foster collective exploration of new responses and solutions allowing the re-establishment of dialogue and negotiations in a world increasingly polarized and immersed in a hunger for war and conflict.

I would also like to thank John and Dorothy for initiating, around the chair, a partnership with our Fabrique de la Paix with an Inspiring Peacemakers series. This has fostered over the past months robust and rich discussions between our students and inspiring figures of the peacemaking and negotiation world.

Let me say also a big thank you to the holder of the chair, Achim Wennmann. Achim was undeniably the right person for this chair. His appointment builds on his significant academic and practical track record in the field of peace and security, associated with dedicated service to the institute for over two decades. Between 2011 and 2021, Achim directed the Geneva peacebuilding platform, a position in which he co-founded the Geneva Peace Week and the peace Talks initiative. He has also had several mediation support roles, most recently on the economic dimensions of the conflict in Yemen. Between 2020 and 2023, he served as the executive advisor of the Peace Dividend Initiative and is currently serving on the advisory board of the Geneva Water Hub.

Achim's distinguished academic work focuses on the political economy of violent conflict, peace processes and political transitions. His key areas of interest include the financing of armed groups, the economic dimensions of peace mediation, the negotiated exits from criminal violence, and the application of peace approaches in urban settings, including as strategies for climate change adaptation.

## Philanthropy and Peace Mediation

**John Nagulendran**

*Co-Founder, Nagulendran Philanthropy Alliance*

In this digital age of rapid technological advances and complex social changes, we have forgotten how to talk to one another as the primary means of navigating and resolving our conflicts at all levels, whether on the global stage or within our communities or at home. We have also forgotten how to hold safe spaces for dialogue and develop the skills and knowledge to build trust and demonstrate mutual respect and understanding for each other.

We know that conflicts are normal. Furthermore, it is inevitable that we will have more conflicts in the years to come. Our challenge is not to eliminate our conflicts but instead to learn how to resolve and transform our conflicts in a manner which strengthens our relationships with each other and to build a more sustainable, inclusive and peaceful world.

In this context, we hope that the Nagulendran Chair in Peace Mediation, the first ever chair in peace mediation in Switzerland, can support and inspire research, innovation and teaching of peace mediation at our universities. Even in these difficult times of war and spiralling violent conflicts, we need to rise to the challenge of learning new skills and finding innovative solutions to bring back dialogue and mediation as the primary means of resolving and transforming our conflicts.

Dorothy and I are deeply honoured to partner with the Geneva Graduate Institute in establishing the Chair. We also wholeheartedly congratulate Professor Achim Wennmann on his appointment as the inaugural chair. There is no other person more qualified and respected in International Geneva and beyond to assume this role and to inspire our next generation of peacemakers.



*Beth Krasna, Marie-Laure Salles, Achim Wennmann and Dorothy and John Nagulendran launch the partnership on the Nagulendran Chair in Peace Mediation, Geneva, 19 March 2024.*



# Peace Mediation in Times of Radical Uncertainty

*Inaugural lecture of the Nagulendran Chair in Peace Mediation*

**Achim Wennmann**

*Professor of Practice in the Interdisciplinary Programme, Nagulendran Chair in Peace Mediation, and Director for Strategic Partnerships, Geneva Graduate Institute*

## Introduction

This lecture is a reflection about the peace mediation sector in an era of radical uncertainty. When I refer to ‘peace mediation’ during my lecture I mean a spectrum of activities that range from high-level peace efforts, to targeted problem solving, or community-based approaches. I will argue that the practical acquis of this sector and the tested instruments and approaches are important for navigating the political landscapes of an era of radical uncertainty. Yet to assure the full potential of this acquis, the sector must adapt, otherwise it risks being side-lined by the securitization of everything.

I have structured my lecture along four parts. In the first part, I will present the contours of the era of radical uncertainty and propose peace mediation practice as an alternative to an exclusive reliance on securitization. In the second part, I will demystify peace mediation practice around three stories. I think this demystification is important to take the practice out of the shadows and emphasise its most important practical characteristics. In the third part, I will offer a perspective on the current constitution of the peace mediation sector, also as a backdrop to the fourth part, in which I will reflect on the continuities and change necessary for the adaptation of the sector.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. The era of radical uncertainty

Friends and colleagues, what a time to hold a Chair in Peace Mediation. Speeches at every global gathering emphasize that we are living in an era of radical uncertainty. We are now all too familiar with the factors shaping this era – pandemics and new diseases, population growth, displacement, urbanization, climate change, environmental degradation, geopolitical shifts, technological innovation, rising inequalities and exclusion, just to name a few. When these factors converge in specific localities, ever more frequent, widespread, and intense crises become the norm, and we are already seeing how they are overwhelming governance capacity at every level today.

Let us look together at some projections on demography, climate and conflict to illustrate these strategic developments.

- Demography: The population in least developed countries is expected to double from 900 million in 2020 to 1.8 billion in 2050, with a very high youth bulge.<sup>2</sup>
- Urbanization: An additional 2.5 billion people will be residing in cities by 2050 on top of the 3.9 billion people living in cities in 2014. 90% of this increase will concentrate in Asia and Africa, primarily in what today are medium-sized cities with less than one million inhabitants.<sup>3</sup>
- Rising sea levels: The IPCC estimates that 1 billion residents of low-lying cities and settlements will be at risk from coastal-specific climate hazards in the coming decades.<sup>4</sup> Cities like Shanghai, Mumbai, Bangkok, Alexandria, Ho Chi Minh City or Basra are projected to become uninhabitable by 2050 due to rising sea levels.<sup>5</sup>

- United States: 1 in 12 Americans will be on the move due to climate impact, leaving the Southern and Central states for the Northeast and the West.
- China: Recurring heatwaves in the North China Plain will put its key agricultural region and 400 million people at risk.<sup>6</sup>

We have never known more about the trajectories of future risks,<sup>7</sup> and we should use this knowledge as an engine to adapt our policies and practices today. This is the reason why I am speaking about adaptation of the peace mediation sector in this lecture.

When turning to conflict dynamics we can see a multiplication of different types of violent conflict. Interstate wars and great power competition have grown in intensity recently, and so have the risks of the use of nuclear, chemical, biological and cyber weaponry. At the same time, however, many other types of violent conflict continue to exist.

Let us look at the most recent results of the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED is one of several data projects measuring conflict trends. ACLED registers 50 countries experiencing extreme, high or turbulent conflict dynamics. Ukraine and Gaza are on top of the list in the annual reporting. Ukraine was the most violent country (measured by event count) averaging over 791 political violence incidents per week (26% of all political violence events). It was also the deadliest with 37,303 recorded fatalities. Palestine ranks highest in deadliness, conflict diffusion, and danger to civilians. 39,787 people were reportedly killed in 16,938 conflict events, most in Gaza.<sup>8</sup> But when you look beyond Ukraine and Gaza and focus on the month of July 2024, there are several countries experiencing extreme levels of conflict that are currently not in the public imagination of war and violence: Myanmar, Syria, Mexico, Nigeria, Colombia, Brazil, Sudan, Cameroon, and Pakistan.

This evolution of conflict dynamics is not a zero-sum game in which one type of conflict becomes more intense and others decline. Much rather, it builds like layer cake in which different types of violent conflict pile on top of each at different scales from local to global. Not all these conflicts are always part of the public imagination, and this is why ACLED's geo-located data on violent conflict and protest is such an important evidence base to accompany peace mediation practice.

Let us also recall the important work of the Small Arms Survey that collects data on violent deaths. Their results suggests that over 500.000 people have died violently every year since at least 2004. That is about one dead person every minute for the last 20 years, or a total of 10 million people.<sup>9</sup>

These projections on demography, climate and conflict describe just three of many factors that shape the era of radical uncertainty. However, they are already giving us a sense of the challenges ahead. The era is 'radical' because change is fast and happens at scale; it is 'uncertain' because present instruments and approaches to manage this change are either inadequate or non-existent.

When looking at this strategic landscape therefore, one observation stands out for me: The world will not be able to securitize or militarize its way out of the array of interlocking crises; it needs to find alternative approaches. This is not an anti-security agenda but an invitation to question the dosage of security and military instruments and if they are the right treatment for the future landscape of conflict and instability. I think the instruments and approaches of the peace mediation sector have a lot to offer to deal with this strategic landscape. They should be elevated more directly into the strategic imagination of politicians and policymakers.

The next part is an attempt at doing just that. I will reflect on three stories that illustrate key characteristics of peace mediation.

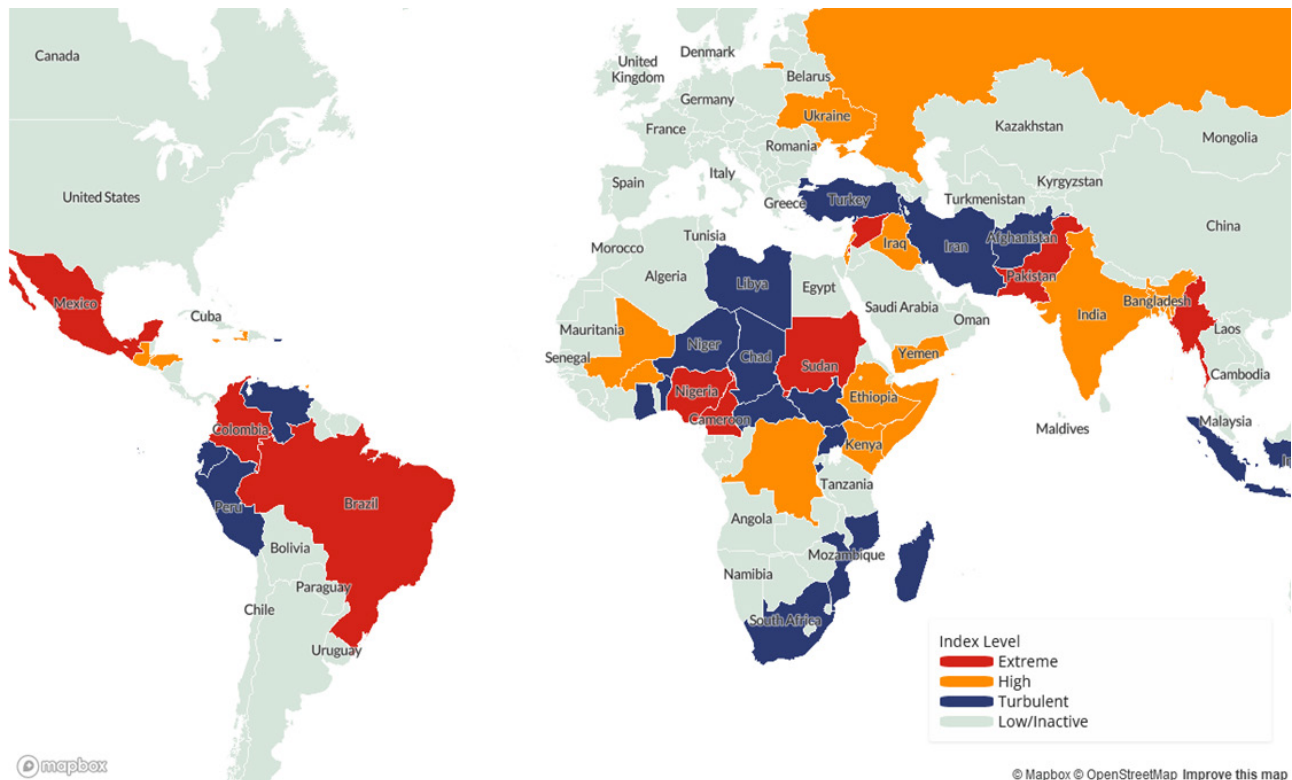


Figure 1: ACLED Conflict Index Results: July 2024

## 2. Demystifying peace mediation

### *Doris Barreto*

Let us start with the story of Doris Barreto. Doris works in a health facility in Catuche – one of the most violent parts of one of the most violent cities in the world, Caracas in Venezuela. Beyond offering health services for women and girls, Doris facilitates encounters between mothers of killed teenagers, and their killers. This work is important because the mother and the killer live in the same neighbourhood and see each other several times per day. What she does is to ensure that the mother can live with less grief, and the killer can live with less guilt.

For me, the story of Doris helps us demystify peace mediation in at least three ways.

To start with, the story underlines the incredible agency for peace that exists in even some of the most difficult environments. I was blessed in the last 20 years to have met many such outstanding individuals, and they have shaped my belief that peace is possible. Doris also illustrates that the leaders in the sector are from the societies or regions in which conflict takes place. These individuals belong to a relatively undefined, yet global network of peace professionals which are called ‘insider mediators’ in the peace mediation sector.<sup>10</sup>

The second observation is about the importance of third parties. Professor William Zartman make this point eloquently. Violent conflicts, in his words,

*“are marked by intensity and commitment that (...) lock the parties into opposition and hostilities that they cannot reach a turning point of perception and find a way out by themselves. They are unable to communicate with each other, unable to think of a solution that could be attractive to the other side as well as themselves, unable to conceive any side payments or enticements to turn the zero-sum conflict into a positive-sum solution, and unable to turn from commitment and a winning mentality to problem solving and solutions to grievances.”<sup>11</sup>*



Doris Barreto during the Geneva Peace Talks,  
8 September 2014

In the case of Catuche, Doris was that third party that could help nurture a turning point in perceptions between the two sides. She had the trust of both parties and their consent to organize this emotional encounter.

My third observation on Doris' story is about something deeper: I think it underlines that nurturing peace really means managing the space of the unforgiveable. The pain inflicted through violence leaves deep scars that are marking people for life. So, at the heart of working on peace is a sense of respect for the other, of self-consciousness about the bounds of our own moral imagination,<sup>12</sup> and of humility in our ambitions as third parties.

Doris story at the Geneva Peace Talks 2014<sup>13</sup> made me believe in the power of agency for peace, and in the ability to construct spaces in which this agency can unfold its force for good.

### *The expedition through a mountain range*

My second story is about an expedition through a mountain range. It is how Professor John Darby explained the characteristics of peace processes:

*"All previous expeditions have failed. There are no obvious paths to the top. The climbers are inexperienced in negotiation and must pick up the skills as they go along. To make matters worse, the mountaineering team is composed of people who have previously been at each other's throats, often literally, and who are now roped together. They must now overcome their suspicions and learn to accomplish a common task. For many, the ending of violence is a sufficient objective. If they succeed, a cease-fire may follow. At last, the travellers are able to peer over the summit but they will not see a tranquil panorama of gentle hills. Instead, the view reveals new mountains, some apparently more formidable than the one just climbed."*<sup>14</sup>

This story highlights that a pathway to peace is a permanent process. A peace process is a stage within it. In the current imagination about peace processes there is a rather simplistic view that you hold a peace conference, and you establish peace by declaration – which means a signature on a piece of paper. But this is only part of the process of finding a permanent political settlement in which interests are asserted through dialogue, negotiation and compromise.

Let us also recognize in this story, the implicit role of third parties as we imagine all the guides and porters helping the expedition finding its way through the mountain range. This is a useful image to describe the work of mediation support that is a core activity of the peace mediation sector, as I will discuss later on.

The story also shows that peace mediation is about relationships. Aren't we all somehow roped together? As a human family? As inhabitants of a city? Or nationals of a country? Or as neighbours? This emphasis on relationships underlines the importance of the permanent processes and institutions to manage relationships. For states it is the United Nations, for community conflict there are peace councils – if economies need critical infrastructure to enable prosperity, then societies need architectures for peace that moderate diversity, build trust and solve problems.<sup>15</sup>



### *The river*

My final story is about a river. What you see in Figure 2 is the 9-stage matrix of conflict escalation developed by Friedrich Glasl, an Austrian conflict researcher. Glasl likens escalation dynamics to a downward flowing river that destroys one dyke after the other as the water takes up speed and strength. Peace professionals construct dykes to prevent escalation and reconstruct them to protect the achievements of de-escalation. In the words of Glasl, “It is easy to float downstream with the current, but it requires a tremendous effort to row against the stream.”<sup>16</sup>

What this story underlines is that peace professionals are working against the stream; and this does not always makes them well liked by those pursuing violence and coercion as a deliberate political or economic strategy.

The metaphor also underlines that mediation is just one of several instruments for the prevention of conflict escalation and protecting de-escalation achievements. Definitions of mediation highlight that it is a process to which disputants’ consent to voluntarily, that involves a professional, impartial and mutually accepted third-party, and that produces outcomes that are mutually owned by the parties. These characteristics position mediation into the array conflict management and resolution instruments in which decision power over outcomes rests with the parties. This differentiates mediation from power strategies where this is not the case.<sup>17</sup>

Glasl also illustrates that you cannot mediate everything. He shows that there are different instruments for different stages of conflict escalation. Mediation is an instrument that is best applied in the mid-range of escalation. When violent conflict transforms into all-out war different forms of high-power diplomacy are necessary.

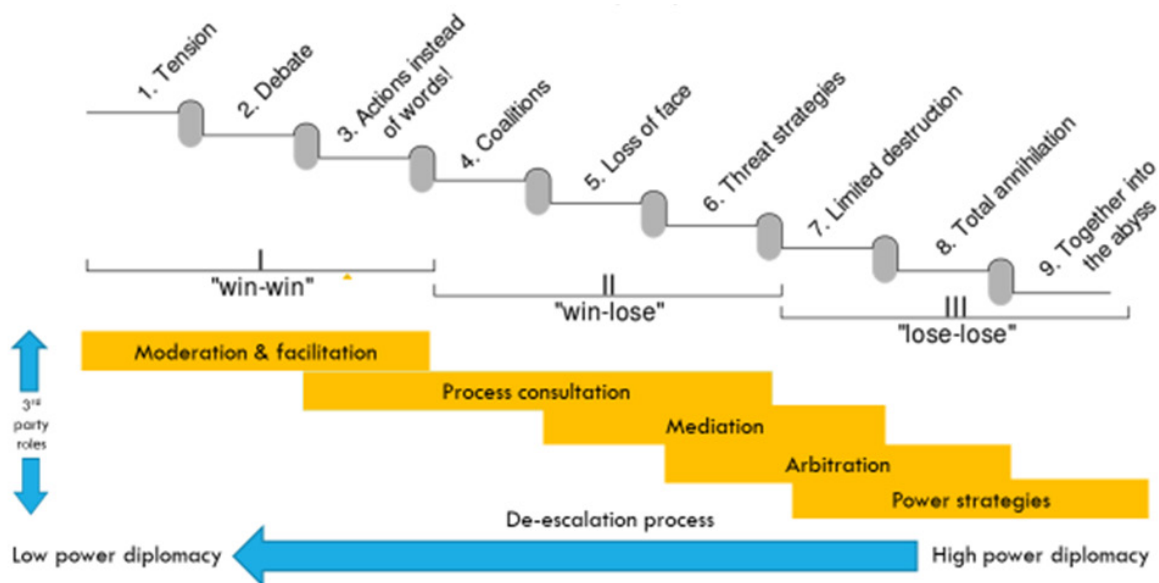


Figure 2: Nine Levels of Conflict Escalation & associated de-escalation strategies

### *Practical dimensions of peace mediation*

Friends and colleagues, I think these three stories illustrate some of the key practical dimensions of the peace mediation sector and let me attempt to condense them into five observations.

- The peace mediation sector builds on a network of exceptional people, which defines the heart of an agency for peace. These individuals also define the key assets of the sector in terms of access to difficult actors and understanding of conflict contexts.

- The pathway to peace is a permanent process like an expedition through a mountain range. A peace agreement is a stage on this pathway but should not be mistaken for the permanent human effort required to enroot dialogue, negotiation and compromise as the foundation for politics.
- No one finds peace alone. Third parties are important to facilitate the process that makes peace more attractive than the continuation of war.
- Mediation is one of various instruments in the toolbox of conflict management and transformation. It builds on the parties' voluntary consent to the process; professional, impartial and mutually accepted accompaniment by third parties; and mutual ownership of the outcomes by the conflict parties.
- You cannot mediate everything. Different stages of conflict require different instruments in a spectrum from low to high power interventions.

With these characteristics of peace mediation clarified, I would like to invite you to the third part of this lecture where I will reflect on the institutionalisation of the sector.

### 3. The peace mediation sector

#### *The institutional footprint*

At its core, the sector has institutionalized as a system of specialised NGOs and dedicated units within the United Nations, the EU and countries like Switzerland, Norway, Finland, Germany, Qatar and others. Governments have been funders and actors at the same time, and this has shaped complex competitive dynamics, including competition for processes and successes between governments and between governments and NGOs, and competition for funding between and within NGOs. A key challenge for the sector has also been the duty of care for its human resources given the sometimes-impossible circumstances that they work in.<sup>18</sup>

The membership of the Peace Support Network is a good indicator for the size of the NGO-footprint (Figure 3). These organizations offer network, convening, analysis, advising, programming, or training activities and are all united in being primarily action oriented. Over the last three decades, several organizations have stayed committed to only focusing on regions where they have built local peace networks for decades; others have diversified to respond to a multitude of donor interests on specific topics, constituencies and conflict countries.



Figure 3: Members of the Mediation Support Network. Source: <https://peacemaker.un.org/networks/mediation-support-network>

### *Mediation support*

Key to observe is, however, that the primary business of the sector in recent years has been about mediation support rather than mediation per se. What this means is exemplified by the overview of Switzerland's mediation portfolio (Figure 4). Activities include

- Dialogue support, to help enable and structure conversations;
- Facilitation, to accompany the parties to structure a negotiation process;
- Negotiation support, to provide expertise relevant for the negotiations;
- Mediation support, to provide expertise to shape processes and content of the negotiations; and finally;
- Mediation, which means the leadership as a third party of a process.

This portfolio reminds us of the need for nuance when we speak about mediation and recalls that these activities remain within a framework of mediation, which means that the parties remain in control of the outcomes and that the third-party shapes processes without coercion.

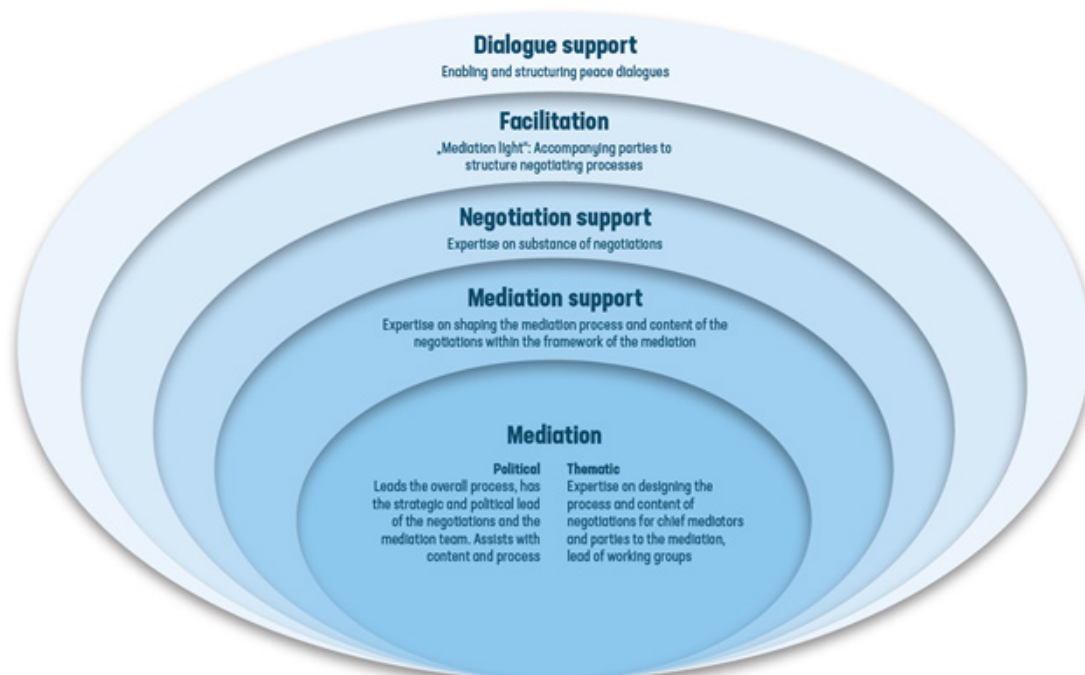


Figure 4: Mediation as part of Switzerland's Good Offices. Source: Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs

### *Funding*

The sector conducts its activities with rather moderate financial footprint. My estimates suggest that the sector has a budget of at least USD 300 million in 2023. This estimate builds on the publicly available figures from peace mediation NGOs, they do not take account of budgets from relevant government, UN and EU units, which are not in the public domain. We can see large- and medium-size clusters around USD 50 million and USD 25 million. Smaller organizations have budgets below USD 10 million.

In financial terms, therefore, the sector compares to a small boutique of access, know-how and expertise. The International Committee of the Red Cross is about six times bigger.<sup>19</sup> The budget represents about 0.01% of world military expenditure of USD 2.4 trillion in 2023.<sup>20</sup> Or if we want to be a bit more concrete, the peace mediation budget compares to about 10 meters of a US nuclear submarine.<sup>21</sup>

Insiders lament that they could do so much more with more funding. Instead, only those opportunities are funded that offer reasonable chances of success, and a photo opportunity for senior leadership. Overall, there is no competition for work, but a competition for funding and media attention. Looking at the funding of the sector, therefore, there is a clear message to send: It is time to invest in peacemaking and not warmaking.

Selected Organisation	Annual Budget 2023 (local currency)	Annual Budget 2023 (USD)
Bergof Foundation	EUR 17.6	19.5
The Carter Centre*	USD 35.5	35.5
CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation	EUR 13.9	15.4
Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue	CHF 50.2	59.7
Clingendael Institute	EUR 18.8	20.8
European Institute of Peace	EUR 10	11.9
Conciliation Resources	GBP 10.3	13.5
Independent Diplomat	USD 3.0	3.0
Interpeace	USD 31.8	31.8
Institute for Integrated Transitions	EUR 2.5	2.8
Search for Common Ground	USD 39.0 (2022)	39.0
Swiss Peace	CHF 8.3	9.9
United States Institute of Peace	USD 54.0	54.0
TOTAL		316.8
* The total 2023 annual budget of the Carter Centre is USD 413m of which USD 250m are dedicated to health programming. Only the peace portfolio of USD 35m has been accounted here.		
Figure made by the author.		

Figure 5: Annual Budgets of selected Peace Mediation Organizations

## Results

More money for peacemaking is a reasonable message to send to donors, but they might respond by asking to please get in line with everyone else who would like more funding in times of austerity and competing priorities. So, let us be clever and show what return on investment you might receive from peace mediation for USD 50 million per year.

To answer this question, I studied the Annual Report for 2023 of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. We can see the following categories of results.

- Half a dozen outcomes on highly localized conflict dynamics,
- Half a dozen initiatives to support much bigger political processes,
- Targeted contributions to diffuse great power competition,
- A sector-wide forum and new regional formats,
- Programme development and innovation on cross cutting themes, and
- Secret activities that cannot be reported publicly.

The only item I would add is the exceptional quality of human resources that are both a repository of skill and knowledge that defines the organization's network value.

I think these clusters of results could be extrapolated to the rest of the sector where different organizations achieve results in the same categories. I also think that clarity in communication about results and ambitions are critical elements for managing expectation in what this sector can achieve.



***Initiatives on highly localized conflict dynamics***

- Senegal: Front Nord Diakaye to lay down arms (a faction of the Mouvement des forces démocratiques de Casamance, MFDC).
- Southwestern Niger: Community agreement signed in the Tillabéri region.
- Nigeria's Benue State: An agreement on sharing access to land, water and forest.
- Syria: Release 400 people from arbitrary detention and nearly 100 women and children from Al Hol detention camp.

***Mediation support***

- Black Sea Initiative: Incubated and supported by HD, expired in mid-2023: Helped deliver 33 million tons of grain from Ukraine to world markets and people in need.
- Ethiopia's Oromia region: Working with regional bodies to halt conflict.
- Kochi Declaration by Bay of Bengal states: HD-backed discussions helped opened wider cooperation on maritime security through a maritime research network.
- Thailand: 30 political parties signed an election code of conduct – including a section on responsible use of social media – after dialogue sessions hosted by HD.
- Sudan: HD supported mediators from the African Union and IGAD and worked with civilian actors to help prevent violence from spreading.

***Diffusion of great power competition***

- South China Sea: A new platform set up by HD to addresses flashpoints.
- Israel-Gaza: With risks of regional conflict rising, HD engaged networks across the Middle East to support efforts to avert escalation.
- China-Europe dialogue: HD brought together nuclear stability and arms control experts for a dialogue to reinforce common interests and identify confidence-building measures.

***Sector wide strategic convenings***

- Oslo Forum - 20th anniversary.
- Regional editions of the Oslo Forum in Latin America & the Middle East.

***Engagement on crosscutting themes***

- Digital conflict
- Humanitarian mediation
- Inclusive peacemaking
- Environmental peacemaking
- Organized crime
- Innovation & learning

***Secret activities*** that cannot be reported publicly

Figure 6: Excerpt from the 2023 Annual Report of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue

### *Recap*

Allow me to recap briefly to situate ourselves within the structure of this lecture. I have presented the contours of an era of ‘radical uncertainty’ that is ‘radical’ because change is fast and happens at scale and that is ‘uncertain’ because present instruments and approaches to manage this change are either inadequate or non-existent. I have also argued that given the diverse range of dynamics of this era, it is important to find alternative approaches. Then, I describe the practical characteristics of peace mediation and analysed institutional dimensions of the peace mediation sector.

I think we now have a foundation to reflect on the trajectories of continuity and change relevant for the adaption of peace mediation practice to an era of radical uncertainty.

## **4. Adapting peace mediation to an era of radical uncertainty**

Let us start with the obvious: Adaptation is in the DNA of the peace mediation sector for at least over a century. The sector builds on the attempts to institutionalize the idea of international mediation between states at the beginning of the 20th century. Only much later, the UN Charter codified mediation and good office in Article 33. The good offices roles by small states were extended to the UN Secretary General (SG), and successive generation of SGs took up these roles during the Cold War.<sup>22</sup> After the Cold War, the United Nations and several governments took leading roles in facilitating peace agreements for example, in South Africa, Namibia, Cambodia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Northern Ireland, and other countries.

Then came 9/11 with a wave of foreign military interventions and counter terror policies. The latter criminalized direct engagement with actors labelled as ‘terrorist organizations’ and made private diplomacy more complicated. However given the lack of progress on the military front, European countries opened the political space for private mediation organizations to conduct discrete dialogue with proscribed group. It was a very busy period for the sector, and it exposed the limits of foreign interventions and traditional diplomacy because the realities of war and peace did not coincide with an institutional order based on sovereignty.<sup>23</sup>

In summary then, peace mediation continuously evolved in parallel with the evolution of conflict dynamics and this is why there should be nothing but confidence for the adaptation of the sector today.

The next point is that adaptation is already taking place. Diplomats are back in the business of high-powered diplomacy to deal with increased superpower tensions, interstate wars and proxy wars. Going back to the Glasl model of conflict escalation (Figure 2), these are stage 7-9 conflict dynamics that require high-powered negotiations outside the framework of mediation. In these contexts, where government actors might be in the lead, the mediation sector supports larger processes with the maintenance of channels of communication, confidence building measures, or resolving problems that cannot be resolved through traditional diplomacy. The value added of the sector is its relationships with powerful non-state actors as well as technical expertise that are relevant for the solution of problems in a de-facto world.

For the discussion of adaption, this means that there is a degree of continuity the sector should maintain.

However, there is also a need for change. One area of change in my view is that the sector should become a much stronger voice to demystify conflict dynamics and what can be done against violent conflict. Such communication should disentangle the cold and calculated execution of violence and bring sober and impartial analysis back into the public domain. After all, as Christopher Cramer reminded us, that ‘Civil War is not a Stupid Thing’. Shaping a voice that brings analyses from the ‘de-facto’ world to global capitals

and publics would be a real asset, especially if it comes with the professionalism and impartiality of the sector.<sup>24</sup>

Another change is that the sector should become better at partnering. At this point, its primary strength lies within a network of individuals with government, humanitarian or activist backgrounds. But there are many other communities that work within a framework of dispute resolution and mediation. The Consensus Building Institute (CBI) Global Network<sup>25</sup> illustrates a strong mediator network with substantial private sector expertise, especially around large footprint investments. There are also many peacemakers in cities that connect through networks of violence reduction and prevention such as the Global Network on Safer Cities, the Peace in Our Cities Network, or Mayors for Peace.

The bigger message is that the peace mediation sector should consider itself as a segment of expertise and know how that is part of the new diplomacies. This was a field of study dear to Professor Mohamedou. He emphasized the multi-thematic foundations of diplomacy across many constituencies and argued together with Peter Maurer that diplomacy can remain alive as long it can remain an integrator of interaction on many levels.<sup>26</sup>

Let us now shift to the non-kinetic nature of conflict in the era of radical uncertainty. Given the speed and scale of impact from systemic changes, we will see a continuous spread of political turbulence and violent conflict at subnational levels. We are already seeing today how countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Brazil, Mexico, Nigeria and Sudan are grappling with the realities of interlocking crises.

The task for adaptation therefore is to project the practical *acquis* of peace mediation closer to the realities of conflict systems. We must disaggregate conflict. We should not speak about Sudan as one conflict but the about 8 violence conflicts that make up Sudan's meta conflict system.<sup>27</sup> Because many such systems are highly localised, it is important to have much stronger local peace mediation footprint. Let us call this footprint the creation of local peace mediation societies.

In fact, what such a vision would involve is, on the one hand, to strengthen local peace capacities and, on the other hand, efforts to federate capacities into regional or global networks. Such an arrangement would order the capacities for peacemaking along localised conflict systems that can engage into the painstaking work to diffuse one local conflict after the other while constructing an offer that peace is more desirable than war. International arrangements for such mediation support could be similar to the International Federation of the Red Cross that supports local Red Cross and Red Crescent action.

Allow me to sum up my reflections on about the adaptation of the peace mediation sector.

- Adaptation is already happening: The sector assists government actors and agencies in the production of result, that can only emerge outside the realm of traditional diplomacy.
- There is a degree of continuity: Civil war or terror dynamics continue, and the sector can activate its full range of mediation support activities.
- There are opportunities for change, especially in the realm of communication – to demystify conflict dynamics and opportunities for peace – and around partnering with like-minded professional networks.
- Finally, conflict dynamics of interlocking crises require the diffusion of peace mediation practices within local conflict systems. This is akin to sharing a software that can then be applied locally through peace mediation societies and that are supported at the global or regional level by an IFRC for peace.

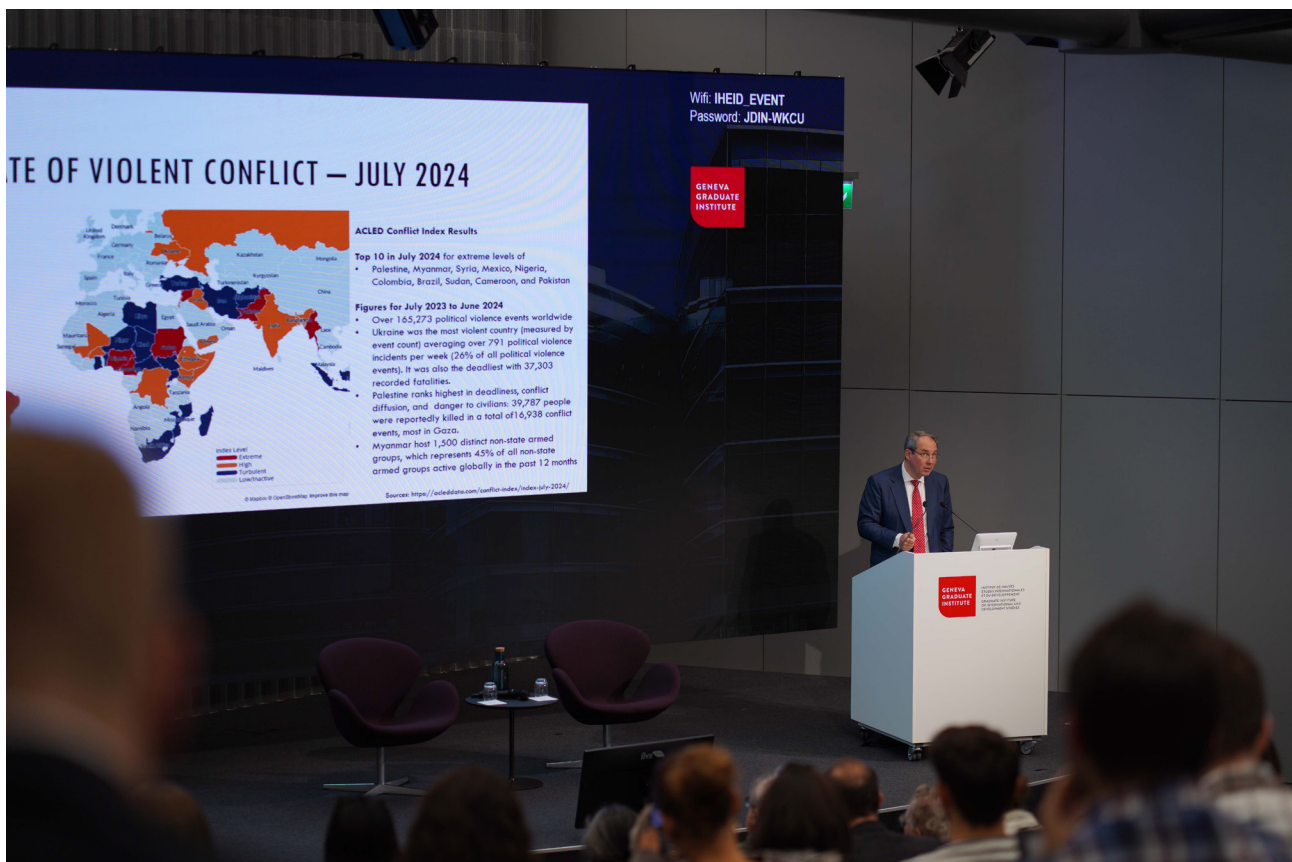
## Conclusion

Friends and colleagues, we have reached the end of my lecture, and the good news for you is that you can soon go home, while I have another five years in the framework of the Nagulendran Chair in Peace Mediation to review, detail and expand the analysis I have presented you today. In the framework of the Chair, I will give a class on peace mediation and conflict resolution at the Geneva Graduate Institute and will supervise and accompany students at the Institute. I will also continue studying the evolution of the peace mediation sector and the application of peace approaches in the context of large-scale investments and in cities. A new line of curiosity is the topic ‘peace mediation and China’, particularly with respect to understanding the domestic origins and use of mediation as a foreign policy instrument.

Holding the Nagulendran Chair in Peace Mediation in this era of radical uncertainty comes with responsibilities. For me, these responsibilities are about nurturing the courage to engage with the world as it is and to help inspire the changes that result in a more desirable present and future for people and planet. They are about helping others to step back to have a better perspective on their strategic environment, and their role within it. Equally, they are about developing new ideas and frameworks with operational value. As a Professor of Practice, I am embracing these responsibilities in the service of nurturing a new generation of leadership in peace mediation.

Let us take time to understand ‘the other’, tend our own inner garden for the tasks ahead, and build communities to walk far.

Thank you very much.





## Commentary

*Itonde Kakoma*

*President of Interpeace*

Achim Wennmann's inaugural lecture as the Nagulendran Chair in Peace Mediation serves as a culmination of ideas honed by innovative scholarship rooted practice. In doing so, he provides a signpost for setting a future direction of peace mediation in an 'era of radical uncertainty.'

His lecture is a compelling description of the state of the field through pragmatic references (e.g., comparatives of annual reports, budgets, results), whilst illuminating on the quality and effectiveness of investing in peace by contrast to overt military expenditure. To make a compelling case for peace, he insists that more confidence and "...clarity in communication about results and ambitions are critical elements for managing expectation in this sector."

His analysis of the current situation explicates the scale of issues faced, not least rise in global conflicts and the limits of formal diplomatic channels to address them. He equally stresses the inadequate if not dwindling resources devoted to support peace efforts. He asserts that it is not just about reallocating funds but about shifting mindsets. Recognizing that sustainable peace yields dividends beyond cessation of hostilities—it fosters economic development, social cohesion, and global stability.

Advocating for a more inclusive view of diplomacy, he acknowledges the contributions of independent actors and organizations alongside traditional state actors. This approach recognizes the limitations of official fora and highlights the unique positions independent mediators occupy, enabling them to operate in contexts where official actors cannot.

Wennmann calls for a comprehensive reimagining of the political, societal, and ethical dimensions in peace mediation. Public imagination reshapes how communities perceive and interact with conflict narratives. It calls for a re-envisioning of societal attitudes towards peace and conflict, encouraging communities to consider new possibilities beyond entrenched hostilities.

Strategic imagination demands a re-evaluation of resource allocation, prioritizing peace initiatives not as a naïve alternative to military expenditures but a path towards prevention and more sustainable resolution of armed conflicts. Moral imagination encourages a broader, more inclusive perspective on peace that respects diverse cultural and ethical backgrounds, and fosters empathy and understanding across social-political divides.

He outlines practical pathways needed to address today's global issues, emphasizing robust partnerships and systematic responses capable of tackling the multifaceted nature of modern conflicts at scale. His claim: the challenge ahead lies not just in envisioning peace but in implementing it through innovative strategies that encompass the compounding dynamics of global conflicts.

Akin to a long-held belief in Geneva as a fertile landscape to cultivate solutions to global challenges, he harkens back to a century's old vision of humanity embodied in the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement. More specifically, he implores the peacemaking community to draw comparative lessons from the International Federation of the Red Cross & Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

The IFRC is the world's largest humanitarian network, representing no less than 191 societies, nearly ubiquitous in number with the international community itself. He draws from the IFRC as a network that is rooted in communities yet mandated by domestic and international law. This model of having both global convening authority and access to the 'last mile,' is a vision for what the future of peacemaking can entail: a federation of peace.

In doing so, Wennmann provides contours to adapt the fundamental underpinnings of peacemaking; but equally considers the requisite scale of response needed—grounded in robust partnership—to face the peace and security challenges of our time. If the peacemaking sector does not adapt, then it “...risks being sidelined by the securitization of everything.” The thrust of his lecture asserts a belief in a new generation of peacemakers ready to take on the mantle of facilitating, mediating, and building lasting peace.

As the global community navigates turbulent times, Wennmann’s message is clear: invest in peace not just as a moral imperative but a strategic necessity.



*Achim Wennmann and Itonde Kakoma during the Q&A after the Inaugural Lecture.*

## Endnotes

1. This written version of the Inaugural Lecture is the reference version for citations of the lecture.
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12. John Paul Lederach (2010) *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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21. This figure builds on the USD 300 million estimate for the Peace Mediation Sector, the baseline of the cost of a nuclear submarine is a US Virginia class SSN-774 estimated by the Pentagon in 2023 to cost USD 4.3bn. The length of the submarine is in its longest form 140m. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia-class\\_submarine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia-class_submarine). Based on these figures 1m of a submarine cost USD 30.7m.
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