Practical Guide to Mediation and Engagement with Non-State Armed Groups

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Glossary

- Track I : Official mediation processes led by state or intergovernmental actors (e.g., the United Nations, governments).

- Track 1.5 : Hybrid processes bringing together both official representatives (e.g., states, international organizations) and unofficial actors (experts, NGOs, private mediators) in a more flexible framework.

- Track II : Unofficial mediation processes carried out by NGOs, researchers, religious or community leaders. Their goal is to influence or complement official mediations.

- Track III : Processes led by local civil society (e.g., associations, tribes, community leaders, women, youth), seeking to resolve conflicts at the community level.

Why Does Mediation with NSAGs Matter?

Why engage in dialogue ?

While interstate wars persist, contemporary armed violence is now largely dominated by intrastate conflicts involving non-state armed groups (NSAGs). These actors not only pose a direct threat to civilians but can also become key interlocutors in efforts to reduce or resolve violence. NSAGs are generally understood as groups that resort to arms in pursuit of political, ideological, or economic objectives, operating outside regular armed forces and without subordination to the state in whose territory they act. Their nature, however, is fluid : their goals, organizational structures, and methods vary across contexts, requiring a nuanced understanding before considering any mediation.
There are several reasons why engaging in dialogue with NSAGs may be justified :

- **Breaking military deadlock** : Dialogue may be the most effective lever to end protracted conflict, particularly when military solutions prove ineffective. Early engagement can open negotiation spaces and prevent sterile stalemates.

- **Addressing humanitarian imperatives** : Even in the absence of immediate political prospects, dialogue can facilitate humanitarian access and protection for civilians.

- **Strengthening peace processes** : Including NSAGs in negotiations, even selectively, is often strategically necessary for the success and consolidation of peace processes. Exclusion risks giving them veto power over any progress.

- **Investing in the long term** : Maintaining communication channels, even informal ones, constitutes a long-term investment. They help defuse tensions, anticipate future openings, and preserve a minimal dialogue even in frozen contexts.

- **Deepening understanding of armed groups** : Dialogue does not imply endorsement but provides an opportunity to map internal fractures, identify more moderate elements, and counter radicalization dynamics, thereby preparing the ground for more formal discussions.

Limits and Risks of Engagement

- **Risk of instrumentalization** : Some groups may use dialogue to buy time or consolidate power.

- **Implicit legitimization** : contact can confer unwanted recognition to an armed group and undermine the state.

- **Marginalization of non-violent actors** : Prioritizing armed actors risks delegitimizing peaceful voices and reinforcing the perception that violence is the most effective path to influence.

- **The “Sri Lanka option”** : Some argue that military defeat of an armed group is preferable to political inclusion. While this approach may appear to deliver a decisive victory and rapid return to order, the Sri Lankan case highlights its limits: the 2009 defeat of the LTTE came with severe human rights violations and failed to address root causes, blocking genuine reconciliation.

- **Moral objection** : Engaging with perpetrators of war crimes is ethically fraught. Yet refusing any dialogue may deny civilians tangible improvements in their security.

Opening dialogue with an NSAG is therefore an ambivalent endeavor : it creates opportunities but carries risks. Well-prepared and timely engagement can facilitate access, build trust, and enhance the legitimacy of the process. By contrast, if undertaken too early or without adequate safeguards, it may fuel mistrust, expose mediators to legal or political constraints, and ultimately undermine the process itself.

Focus on the Mediator

Mediation research and practice emphasize that a mediator's effectiveness depends on a combination of relational, analytical, and personal qualities, as well as their posture, timing, and resources.

- **Relational and Analytical Skills** : Effective **communication**, a nuanced understanding of **conflict dynamics**, the ability to grasp **divergent interests**, **active listening**, and **perceived impartiality** are essential. These must be complemented by **crisis management** skills and the capacity to **coordinate multiple stakeholders**. The mediator must come across as **reasonable**, **competent**, and **worthy of the parties' trust and cooperation**.

- **Timing and Adaptability** : The effectiveness of mediation depends on choosing the right moment, structuring the exchanges appropriately, and the mediator's ability to adjust their stance as power dynamics evolve. Success relies on a balance between **technical expertise**, **interpersonal qualities**, and **symbolic authority**.

- **Personal Qualities** : **Intelligence**, **endurance**, **humor**, **energy**, and **patience**, combined with the ability to **inspire trust**, are critical. For mediation to be perceived as legitimate, the mediator must be regarded by the parties as **credible**, **reasonable**, and **competent**.

- **Debate on Impartiality** : The role of **impartiality** in mediation is contested. For some, it is a non-negotiable requirement. Others argue that a mediator's effectiveness lies less in strict neutrality than in their capacity to actively influence the process. What matters most is not impartiality per se, but the ability to **inspire confidence** and add **tangible value**. This entails **mobilizing resources**, **exercising persuasive power**, and **leveraging strategic tools**. Mediation is thus understood less as absolute neutrality and more as a form of "**assisted negotiation**".

- **Success Factors** : A mediator's effectiveness ultimately depends on their **personality**, **posture**, **available resources**, the way they are **perceived by the parties**, and the extent to which their profile **matches the specific context** of the mediation.

Conditions for a Relevant and Secure Engagement

Before initiating dialogue with a non-state armed group, certain conditions must be met. The goal is both to ensure the **security of the process** and to avoid granting **premature legitimacy** to an actor that is neither sufficiently structured nor genuinely willing to evolve.

1. Willingness to Engage with External Actors

A first criterion is the group's **openness to external contact**. This willingness may be expressed in several ways:

- Seeking political recognition
- Allowing or requesting the presence of humanitarian actors in areas under their control
- Approaching NGOs, international organizations, or diplomats

Examples include the GAM in Aceh cooperating with NGOs to enhance its legitimacy; the FARC facilitating ICRC access for medical evacuations; and the SPLA collaborating with humanitarian agencies through Operation Lifeline Sudan.

2. Clarity of Demands

Dialogue is difficult if the group formulates no **clear demands**. Even partial or fragmented claims can nevertheless indicate political organization and a potential openness to alternatives to violence.

3. Availability of Influence

The mediator must have **credible leverage** to encourage behavioral change : partial recognition, technical or financial support, or prospects for international dialogue. Without such incentives, contact risks remaining sterile.

4. Prospects for Nonviolent Transition

The mediator should assess whether the group can evolve toward **nonviolent forms of action**. This transition depends not only on **declared intentions** but also on **external conditions** that may encourage it — technical support, access to expert networks, or international recognition. Yet such potential remains difficult to anticipate without direct interaction. It is precisely through even limited contact that the mediator can evaluate the group's real disposition to dialogue and moderation.

5. In-Depth Understanding of the Group

A **strategic and contextual analysis** is indispensable. It should address:

- **Leadership and internal structure** (centralized or fragmented).
- **Motivations** (resource access, territorial control, central power, independence).
- **Profile** (ethnic or religious anchoring, relations with civilians, role of women and youth).
- **External dynamics** (diaspora links, financing, alliances or rivalries, possible support from third states).

Engaging with an NSAG is never based on fixed criteria. It requires a nuanced understanding of its **nature**, **motivations**, and **networks**. Only by verifying these conditions can a mediator assess whether engagement is relevant, realistic, and secure.

Anticipating the Risks of Premature or Poorly Prepared Engagement

Even when the right conditions are in place, engaging with a non-state armed group remains a high-risk endeavor. These risks stem not only from the security environment, but also from the group's internal dynamics, the legal constraints imposed on mediators, and perceptions of bias or manipulation. Identifying these dangers in advance is essential to prevent setbacks and to adapt engagement strategies.

- **Risks for the Armed Group** : A poorly prepared dialogue can destabilize the internal balance of an NSAG. Opening a communication channel too quickly may fuel radicalization, trigger leadership struggles, or even lead to a resumption of military activity. Such unintended consequences highlight the need to establish a clear and well-structured framework before initiating any interaction.

- **Risks for the Mediator** :

  - **Security risks :** mediators may be directly threatened by volatile conditions on the ground.

  - **Legal risks** : counterterrorism legislation adopted after 2001, particularly in the United States, broadened the definition of "material support" to include virtually any contact with blacklisted groups. This has significantly restricted the room for maneuver of mediators and NGOs.

  - **Political risks :** engagement perceived as excessive or biased can undermine credibility. Too much involvement with an NSAG risks portraying the mediator as partisan or manipulated, jeopardizing the impartiality that is indispensable to any mediation effort.

The Dilemmas of Establishing a Communication Channel with NSAGs

Legitimacy of the Interlocutor

A mediator must first determine who within the group holds real **decision-making power**.

- In rare cases, a central authority can speak on behalf of the entire group.
- More often, leadership is **fragmented** or delegated to spokespersons with little actual influence.
- Divided groups make it harder to articulate clear demands and create uncertainty about the implementation of agreements.

To avoid this trap, it is sometimes necessary to **involve additional actors** — such as civil society, diaspora networks, or regional powers — to ensure a minimum level of representativeness.

Feasibility Conditions

The **stance of the host state** is decisive.

- In a **hostile state**, engaging with an NSAG may be perceived as legitimizing or even subversive.
- In a **weakened state**, the absence of an official counterpart generates uncertainty and complicates mediation efforts.

Furthermore, some NSAGs pursue **maximalist objectives** — revolutionary ideals or global religious visions — that leave little room for compromise. In such cases, mediators may need to **focus on more pragmatic factions** that are capable of entering a logic of engagement.

Relationnal Challenges

Trust lies at the heart of the mediator–group relationship.

- NSAGs often distrust external mediators, whom they perceive as partisan or tied to foreign powers.
- The mediator's own profile — whether Western, female, or representing an international organization — can also become an obstacle.
- Trust is therefore built less through formal mandates than through **attitude**, **consistency**, and the **ability to listen**. **Discretion** is equally vital : excessive transparency or leaked information can derail a communication channel before it produces results.

International Context

Mediation rarely takes place in a political vacuum.

- The proliferation of initiatives — by NGOs, parallel diplomacy, or third states — often creates a cacophony of messages.
- Without coordination, contradictory signals confuse the group, encourage manipulation, and weaken mediation efforts.

From Discreet to Visible : Structuring a Mediation Process with an NSAG

1. Building a Discreet Channel – Pre-Negotiations

The first step is not an official negotiation but the opening of a protected and confidential communication space.

- **Objective** : to test the group's intentions and assess whether any room for dialogue exists.
- **Key actors** : religious figures, community leaders, journalists, locally embedded NGOs. Their intermediary position facilitates first contacts.
- **Tools** : informal discussions, trusted intermediaries, experienced mediators.

This stage relies on discretion and the gradual building of bridges of trust.

2. Testing a Compromise – Exploratory Dialogue

Once communication is established, a phase of "talks about talks" begins.

- **Topics addressed** : Practical arrangements such as discussion formats, timelines, delegation composition, and security guarantees.
- **Political stakes** : This phase is highly political, as the conditions put forward often reflect the red lines and strategic priorities of the NSAG.
- **Climate of distrust** : For actors accustomed to confrontation, agreeing to "talk about negotiation" is a delicate step. Uncertainty about the outcomes and implications feeds suspicion that the opponent may use the talks to manipulate the process or expose weaknesses.
- **Levers to move forward** : Confidence-building measures are crucial. Informal and discreet conversations help clarify intentions, reduce misunderstandings, and test the compatibility of visions. Technical support such as clarifying objectives, structuring demands, and understanding legal frameworks can also help reduce asymmetries between parties.
- **Potential obstacles** : Preconditions such as a ceasefire, political recognition, or abandonment of core demands may block the process from the outset, especially when they touch on the group's identity.

- **Humanitarian entry points** : When political space is too constrained, mediators may initiate contact through humanitarian issues such as safe corridors, civilian protection, or vital aid delivery. This can open communication channels, but it also carries risks : instrumentalization, unfulfilled commitments, and blurred lines between humanitarian and political objectives.

This second phase aims to reduce misunderstandings, test the compatibility of visions, and create enough trust to move toward a more structured negotiation.

3. Establishing a Public Framework – From Dialogue to Negotiation

- **Characteristics** : Once trust is built and initial compromises emerge, discreet dialogue can evolve into formal negotiations. This takes place within a broader and more public framework, involving not only armed groups and mediators but also representatives of states, international organizations, civil society, and multiparty delegations. It relies on a clear agenda, monitoring mechanisms, and a secure environment for discussion.

- **Challenges** : Inclusivity becomes central. Excluding factions or constituencies risks undermining the entire process. At the same time, a degree of confidentiality remains necessary to limit external pressure and preserve the sincerity of exchanges.

- **External levers** : Two tools can reinforce or redirect this stage.

    - *Targeted relaxations* : Lifting certain sanctions or removing a group from a blacklist can send a strong political signal and open the door to more open discussions. Such measures must remain controlled, transparent, and reversible to avoid the perception of gratuitous concessions.

    - *Mediator's withdrawal threat* : A mediator perceived as unconditionally present loses credibility. The possibility of withdrawal — or even the threat of it — can exert strategic pressure and increase party responsibility, provided the threat is credible and proportionate.

Mediation is built step by step, through successive phases. Progress is often slow, fragile, and non-linear, but this gradual architecture anchors engagement with an NSAG in a coherent strategy. Humanitarian negotiation plays a central role here : it does not aim to resolve the conflict politically but rather to open pragmatic entry points that protect civilians and reduce violence.

Creative Entry Points and Informal Engagement Strategies with NSAGs

What is an entry point ?

An entry point refers to the **initial phase** through which an external actor, such as a mediator, manages to insert themselves into a conflict context to initiate or revive dialogue. It is not a single event but a **gradual process** — a "starting mechanism" that often unfolds discreetly and over time. In some cases, it may take years to build a climate conducive to meaningful encounters between the parties.

Purpose and added value

Entry points primarily serve to **reach otherwise inaccessible actors and areas**, establish the foundations of a process (rhythms, channels, working routines), and **unblock stalled discussions** without political confrontation. When well used, they transform sporadic contacts into regular exchanges, reduce misunderstandings, and generate small but visible results — such as access guarantees or technical coordination — that build trust and eventually allow for more sensitive discussions.

Conditions for success

Three factors are decisive. **Timing**, which means seizing windows of opportunity created by local, security, or political shifts. **Anchoring**, which relies on trusted networks such as local leaders, diasporas, or embedded NGOs. **Iteration**, which involves testing multiple avenues, adjusting quickly when one fails, and combining parallel tracks without contradiction.

A mediator gains credibility by delivering on small, concrete commitments — meetings, technical support, logistical guarantees — rather than promising sweeping compromises beyond reach.

The role of unofficial actors

Private mediators and NGOs, less politically exposed, are often best placed to open these entry points through informal channels. Their strength lies in the social and cultural proximity of their networks, their continuous presence, and their ability to translate agendas across parties. The entry points they initiate can give rise to **secondary processes** which, while not resolving the conflict, help stabilize useful forms of cooperation and prepare the ground for broader negotiations.
In Colombia, for example, a private initiative initially aimed at reintegrating former FARC members evolved into a wider dialogue framework, opening discussions on reconciliation and coexistence. What began as a one-off action turned into a practical and political mediation space, showing that creative entry points can generate new, lasting dynamics

Thus, entry points represent a **genuine engineering of openings**, where experience, adaptability, and informality become essential levers. However, when dealing with proscribed actors, the approach takes on a particular dimension, shaped by the crucial role of local intermediaries and informal channels.

Navigating the Grey Zone : Approaching Excluded Actors

Trusted intermediaries

When direct access is impossible due to proscription, legal risks, or mistrust, “internal” mediators such as religious leaders, community chiefs, notables, or economic figures act as credible bridges. They decode the codes, temper positions, and provide a secure space for contact. Their legitimacy derives from their local history, their networks, and their ability to remain over time, beyond media cycles.

Taking the social pulse

Local communities act as a barometer : they reveal the group’s accessibility, its divisions, and its posture toward civilians. By relying on them, it is possible to discreetly test messages, guarantees, or formats without prematurely exposing the parties in a heavy political framework. This approach reduces the risk of over-promising and grounds the process in concrete needs (security, services, mobility).

Bridges through “more moderate” actors

In plural environments, relatively more moderate groups can serve as pivot interlocutors toward harder factions : they secure access, facilitate aid delivery, and legitimize local arrangements. The challenge is to avoid co-optation while using these corridors of influence to build a minimum level of cooperation.

Working on internal fractures

No NSAG is homogeneous. It is necessary to map the fracture lines (leadership, finances, territorial presence, ideology), identify open currents, and create targeted incentives (limited visibility, access to expertise, concrete benefit for the civilian base) that make the choice of dialogue rational. The mediator maintains neutrality by making these incentives transparent and reversible.

Local forums in fragmented contexts

When no structure is stable enough for a national framework, community forums on non-polarizing themes such as access to water, safe corridors, markets, coexistence, re-accustom actors to speaking with one another. These modest spaces create coordination routines and minimal rules, often the first stones of a more ambitious dialogue.

Still, the effectiveness of these techniques always depends on the context. Openings rely not only on the existence of intermediaries, but also on the ability to navigate internal group uncertainties, legitimacy issues, external pressures, and legal constraints. It is in this grey zone, made up of tensions and risks, that the central difficulty lies : moving from first contact to real engagement.

From Theory to Practice : Developing Entry Points

Entry points are not abstract ideas. They take shape in concrete, often modest practices that allow either to initiate a dialogue or to revive a stalled process.

Initiating a negotiation space

Opening almost never begins with a frontal discussion on the causes of the conflict. It starts through indirect paths and peripheral issues.

- **Accessing a conflict through indirect routes or trusted individuals** : Relying on respected figures such as religious leaders, former teachers, or diaspora notables, whose proximity helps break down mistrust and establish an initial breach of communication.

➡️ *Example* : In Afghanistan, humanitarian workers were able to organize a vaccination campaign in Taliban-held territory thanks to a former religion teacher respected by a local commander. This detour made dialogue possible where direct contact would have failed.

- **Addressing different issues or targeting broader interests** : Peripheral themes like mobility, trade, certificates, or services directly affect populations and, indirectly, armed groups. By tackling these “practical” issues, discussions progressively open political space.

➡️ *Example* : In Somalia, mediators chose to start with essential economic issues, such as the export of racing camels, before addressing state reconstruction. This detour brought all actors, including armed ones, back into institutional debates.

In practice : Start small, on ground where everyone has an immediate interest, then expand. These first exchanges mainly serve to test the willingness to cooperate and to reduce mistrust.

Reviving a frozen process

When discussions are at a standstill, different creative levers can breathe new life into them :

- **Identifying the parties’ needs to target the easiest to satisfy** : Sometimes, when everything is blocked, one must start with what seems simplest. The idea is to find a concrete need shared by both sides, which can be met without reopening the most explosive political questions.

➡️ *Example* : In Ukraine, after the Minsk agreements, everything was blocked. But a common need – access to water – forced the government and separatists to cooperate. This technical arrangement reopened a minimal channel of dialogue.

- **Focusing efforts on technical aspects** : Redirecting the discussion toward manageable, less politically charged issues helps build trust and accustom parties to collaboration. By breaking down problems into practical components, mediators create entry points that reduce symbolic tension and gradually prepare the ground for more substantive negotiations.

➡️ *Example* : In Syria, in 2017, the political deadlock was bypassed by organizing technical discussions. This allowed opposing factions to cooperate on concrete issues, reducing animosity and preparing the ground for more political discussions.

- **Changing the venue and atmosphere** : Moving discussions to a neutral and secure place, away from the symbolic pressures of the field.

➡️ *Example* : The Doha negotiations between the Taliban and the United States showed that a neutral venue could revive a stalled process. Far from Kabul, the meeting became possible in an environment perceived as more balanced.

- **Modifying the agenda** : Starting with humanitarian issues or local emergencies to prepare for a return to politics.

➡️ *Example* : In South Sudan, severe floods served as a pretext to bring political leaders, communities, and armed groups to the table. By working on humanitarian emergencies, the parties regained a habit of dialogue.

- **Organizing reflection sessions** : Workshops or brainstorming sessions can help harmonize positions, clarify red lines, and create a space for constructive dialogue.

➡️ *Example* : In Colombia, reflection sessions between the government and the FARC helped defuse a deadlock on the ceasefire. Each was able to express their concerns, which smoothed the formal negotiation.

- **Setting up financial mechanisms :** Establishing trust funds or shared management arrangements can provide a neutral space for cooperation. Agreeing on how funds are used forces parties to negotiate practical issues together, building initial trust and preventing deadlock.

➡️ Example : During the Colombian government–ELN talks in 2016, an international trust fund was created to cover participation costs. This solution avoided a dispute over “who pays what” and created a first space of cooperation.

In practice : Do not seek an immediate global compromise. The objective is to reintroduce the habit of talking by demonstrating that tangible, even limited, results are possible.

From Potential to Outcome : Turning an Entry Point into an Operational Lever

Finding an entry point is a key step, but it must still be transformed into a **real lever of mediation**. The difference lies in preparation, posture, and the ability to sustain momentum.

🔹 **Reading the terrain** : An entry point only makes sense if it matches the reality of the moment. This requires **continuous analysis** : who are the key actors, what are their alliances, motivations, and evolutions? Revisiting past attempts (successes/failures) helps adjust the strategy. Without this work, there is a risk of relying on an outdated image of the conflict.

🔹 **Adopting the right posture** : The mediator's posture is itself a tool, requiring **flexibility**, **patience**, and the ability to **test** and to **bounce back**. Credibility is built through modest but fulfilled commitments. Even small gestures — constant listening, regular contact, keeping promises — matter more than grand speeches. The right balance is to remain **open** while maintaining a **clear direction**.

🔹 **Creating and seizing the opening** : Windows of opportunity do not appear by themselves, they are **cultivated**. This involves **local networks**, **neutral spaces**, or **concrete proposals**. An entry point becomes operational when it offers a **clear gain for each party** and when this **commitment is respected**. Trust is built on **consistency** : each fulfilled promise strengthens credibility.

🔹 **Sustaining momentum** : A process must remain **in motion** ("bicycle theory"). Securing a **tangible result** quickly helps maintain motivation. Momentum is sustained by **varying formats**, **introducing new actors**, and **prioritizing approaches to avoid dispersion**. The mediator's role is to revive, adjust, and manage dilemmas — allowing each side to save face and unblocking without humiliating.

🔹 **Anchoring in a broader framework** : An entry point, even well exploited, is not enough. To last, it must be connected to a wider framework : coordination between mediators, complementarity of approaches, institutional continuity. Informal innovation then becomes part of a **collective strategy**.

An entry point is not a miracle solution but a **lever to be transformed.** Preparation, credible posture, quick small successes, and broader coordination are the keys to moving from a fragile opening to an operational dynamic.

The Paradox of Private Actors: Influence and Vulnerabilities

NGOs and private actors occupy a unique place in engagement with non-state armed groups. Their **independence** from states allows them to open informal channels, perceived as more credible and less partisan. Their methods, based on listening, trust, and proximity to the field, often make them effective facilitators, capable of **initiating dynamics** later taken up by others.

But these strengths are fragile. The **lack of resources** limits the continuity of their actions and makes them dependent on external donors. Their legitimacy may be contested, and their results are difficult to measure, especially since their processes often rely on individuals, leaving them vulnerable to ruptures or security threats.

At a broader level, the **absence of coordination with states and international organizations** reduces their impact. Parallel or contradictory initiatives provide NSAGs with room for manipulation, while some strategies merely restore a pre-conflict order without building a lasting balance.

In sum, NGOs and private actors bring valuable neutrality and credibility, but their action only gains real significance when embedded in a **collective and coordinated approach.**

From Fragmentation to Coherence : Rethinking Mediation as Collective and Contextual

Researchers and practitioners now agree on the need to move beyond **fragmented approaches** to mediation. Three priorities emerge: developing **hybrid mediations** that combine internal and external actors, **improving implementation**, and **strengthening coordination**. As Véronique Dudouet emphasizes, peace processes are never linear : they rely on **multiple overlapping levels** that must be considered together to produce lasting results.

In this logic, cooperation between **“formal” and “informal” actors** is central. Without it, the risks are well known : **duplication of efforts**, **manipulation** by NSAGs, and **competing initiatives** that cancel each other out. Conversely, greater **coherence** makes it possible to advance more effectively and **reduce violence**.

NGOs, through their proximity to the field, play a valuable role here. They can **support Track I** through projects financed by states, **share their local knowledge**, or even **be entrusted with sensitive mandates** — such as Geneva Call on anti-personnel mines. Their ability to **anticipate security risks** remains underutilized by state and intergovernmental actors. Humanitarian negotiation, for its part, would also benefit from greater **professionalization** : expertise in law, capitalization on experience, and stronger coordination are needed to prevent divisions exploited by armed groups.

Yet peace agreements remain fragile in the face of **unstable alliances** and the influence of **transnational support**. Some actors even choose their mediator strategically to prolong the conflict, producing what has been called **"peace in conflict"** — a temporary stabilization without durable transformation.

It is in this context that **multimediation** emerged : a **plurality of parallel processes**, each addressing a **specific aspect** of the conflict. The example of **Yemen** illustrates this dynamic, with official UN talks (Track I), a technical advisory group (Track 1.5), dialogue spaces facilitated by NGOs (Track II), community forums (Track III), and regional mediations (Oman, Saudi Arabia). None of these processes sufficed on their own, but their coexistence maintained dialogue and prevented a total breakdown. Peace was constructed there as a **polycentric assemblage** of local, national, regional, and international initiatives.

Other innovations confirm this logic : **local mediations** in areas where a national process is unrealistic, "**mediation constellations**" around specific themes (resources, humanitarian corridors), **intra-party initiatives** to overcome internal divisions, and the **multiplication of parallel efforts** led by states, international organizations, and private mediators. The question remains : should multimediation be seen as a temporary **stopgap** or as a **genuine strategy** adapted to fragmented conflicts? Its relevance is proven, but it remains fragile, dispersed, and rarely coordinated.

Finally, the **private sector** must not be overlooked. Its **resources and networks** give it real weight, as in Mozambique in 1992, when a company facilitated RENAMO's participation in the Rome negotiations. But its involvement carries risks — **impatience**, **conflicts of interest**, **suspicion of partiality** — which require **strict regulation** and a **clear definition of its role**.

Ultimately, thinking of mediation as **collective and contextual** means accepting **complexity**. No single actor — state, NGO, or company — can act alone when dealing with NSAGs. The key lies in **complementarity** and **coordination**, so that peace becomes a **web of plural initiatives**, adapted to the shifting realities of contemporary conflicts.

Conclusion

This research aimed to understand how mediators, particularly informal ones, manage to engage in dialogue with non-state armed groups and integrate them into conflict resolution processes, by analyzing the practices, dynamics, and interactions that structure these engagements.

Far from being a simple procedural tool, mediation appears as a **relational**, **hybrid**, and **contextual process**, situated between official and unofficial, strategy and ethics. It relies on flexibility, the co-construction of a specific temporality between actors, and always reflects a certain conception of the conflict and its objectives. Its success cannot be measured solely by an agreement or a ceasefire but must be assessed through relational transformations, the opening of dialogue spaces, and the perceptions of the actors involved.

Engaging with NSAGs proves to be an **essential strategic lever**, but also a **perilous exercise**. It raises constant dilemmas between operational necessity and the risks of legitimization or instrumentalization. It requires prior guarantees — minimum willingness to interact, clarity of demands, the mediator's capacity for influence, security, and legal framework — and follows a **gradual progression** : discreet pre-negotiations, experimentation with compromise through "talks about talks," and then, when conditions allow, evolution toward a more public and inclusive framework. Within this trajectory, humanitarian negotiation emerges as a **pragmatic modality** : it maintains a space for dialogue, protects civilians, and creates openings when political mediation is not yet possible.

Finally, contemporary mediation appears as a **mosaic of initiatives**. Creative entry points, local intermediaries, humanitarian or technical strategies, hybrid configurations : all are modest mechanisms that help circumvent blockages, test willingness to compromise, and gradually build trust. Informality and the diversity of actors thus become genuine assets, provided they are embedded in a **cooperative architecture** that avoids the cacophony of approaches and reinforces collective coherence.

Three dynamics thus structure mediation with NSAGs : **contextualization**, since each engagement is situated and specific; **progressivity**, since openings are built from discreet to visible, from local to global; and **hybrid cooperation**, since no mediation succeeds in isolation. In practice, mediators engage NSAGs through a **combination of pragmatic and creative strategies** : preparation, humanitarian negotiation, entry points, mobilization of intermediaries, and construction of collective architectures.

Ultimately, mediation with NSAGs is not a fixed technique but an **art of adaptation**. Its strength lies in the creativity and plurality of actors capable of transforming the impossible into openings. Maintaining a fragile but vital space at the heart of violence remains its main achievement and its true legitimacy.

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