

# The AU and the drive for mediation support

Manuel Bustamante and Gustavo de Carvalho



In the past 15 years mediation support structures have proliferated throughout the world. While mediation is effective in preventing and peacefully resolving conflicts there has been little focus on building the capacity to develop a unified approach to it. The AU must ensure that the African Union Mediation Support Unit, which was established in 2016, responds effectively to increasing demands for mediation. This report recommends ways in which the AU can make the best use of the unit.

## Key points

- ▶ Africa's unique mediation environment is driven by a combination of demand and supply factors. Demand stems from a fragile environment marked by increased political violence as well as Africa's prioritisation of the prevention, resolution, and management of conflicts on the continent through peaceful means including preventive diplomacy and mediation. Supply is provided by the expanding availability of mediation capacity.
- ▶ The establishment of the AU MSU presents a unique opportunity to strengthen the institutionalisation of the AU's mediation efforts. This goal can be reached through continuous efforts to build capacity, enhance expertise and provide reliable support to mediators.
- ▶ Although the international community has learned much about ways of strengthening and supporting mediation services, there have been insufficient efforts to pass these lessons on to existing and future mediators.
- ▶ The decision to build an infrastructure conducive to increasing the AU's mediation support capacity is mainly political.
- ▶ Challenges to strengthening mediation support capacity are rooted within broader political factors.

## Recommendations

- ▶ *Explore entry-points to enhance the MSU's utility:* While the world has seen a proliferation of mediation support structures in the past, the AU needs to identify its comparative advantages and acquire the necessary political buy-in (from both inside and outside the organisation) to ensure the success of its MSU. Since mediation often occurs in a crowded space the AU can play an essential role in coordinating the efforts of local, sub-regional and global actors.
- ▶ *Take advantage of African evidence-based approaches:* One way of providing the AU MSU with the advantage it requires to succeed is a firm reliance on evidence-based approaches. A vital component of the AU MSU is its knowledge-management capacity. The introduction of African analyses and views on mediation could increase belief in its ability to offer the necessary expertise and support.
- ▶ *Expertise alone is not sufficient:* The AU should take the necessary steps to ensure that the right expertise can be deployed at the right time. While the creation of a roster is a possibility, the benefits of developing roster systems should be weighed against their cost. Bringing experience and developing partnerships, especially with other African organisations, is key to ensuring the development of sustainable systems.

## Introduction

Despite hard-won political change and economic growth between 1980 and 2016, Africa accounted for nearly 87% of all civilian conflict-related fatalities.<sup>1</sup> The loss of life and the destruction of institutions, human capital and infrastructure caused by conflict are a central impediment to development.

The African Union (AU) Commission's goal of 'silencing the guns', embedded within its Agenda 2063, is thus a welcome and urgent effort to address the continent's conflict-prone state. Since the development of Agenda 2063 the AU has focused on creating structures that can assist it to become more effective in preventing conflict and sustaining peace in Africa.

Ultimately, meeting this target depends largely not only on the AU's ability to strengthen its technical expertise, it is also linked to its ability to provide reliable and sustainable funding for structures that might prevent and de-escalate conflict in the region. To this effect, one of the main tools it has at its disposal is its mediation capacity.

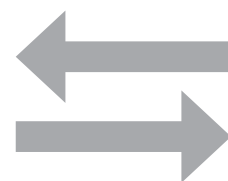
Africa's unique mediation environment consists of a combination of demand and supply factors. On the demand side there is increasing political violence, the rise of political militias, marginalisation and poverty, continuing processes of democratisation, a proliferation of small arms and light weapons and an increase in sectarian warfare and terrorism and secession.<sup>2</sup> These factors make it necessary for the AU to prioritise the prevention, resolution and management of conflict, thus creating the demand for preventive diplomacy and mediation.

African third-party mediators were more likely to conclude peace agreements than non-African third parties

On the supply side there has been a proliferation of responses to the complexities of and changes in conflict trends. This has resulted in a 'multiparty mediation environment' involving a plethora of actors, among them regional organisations. This proliferation has led to overcrowding in the mediation field that has reduced the monopoly of the United Nations (UN), a fact acknowledged by its Secretary-General to the General Assembly in 2012.<sup>3</sup>

As Allard Duursma's statistical analysis reveals, from 1960 to 2012 African third-party mediators were more likely to conclude peace agreements than non-African third parties, and these agreements were also more likely to be durable.<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, the AU has been quite an active player, using mediation as a tool in its efforts to prevent conflict and create conditions for sustainable development. As at October 2016 there were approximately 20 AU envoys, representatives and mediators deployed in conflict and post-conflict countries across the continent.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, as a leading actor in the mediation field in Africa, the AU is often reliant on informal and ad hoc missions built around prominent personalities and



AFRICA'S UNIQUE MEDIATION ENVIRONMENT CONSISTS OF A COMBINATION OF DEMAND AND SUPPLY FACTORS

former heads of state.<sup>6</sup> This practice has, to some extent, reflected African-owned responses, which, on the one hand, have been flexible and adaptable. On the other hand, however, it has also exposed the need to strengthen the institutionalisation of regional and sub-regional organisations, particularly with regard to the way they deploy their structures in conflict situations.

This paper examines key trends in mediation support in the light of current challenges and opportunities for the AU. After analysing some mediation support structures (MSSs) globally it outlines key takeaways that may elucidate the ongoing process of putting the AU's mediation skills into practice. The research draws on an extensive desk review of the academic literature on mediation support, primary data from the AU and other MSSs and the insights of practitioners, scholars and AU staff based in Addis Ababa, interviewed in August 2019.

The study argues in favour of seizing the opportunities offered by the growing political momentum to augment the AU's mediation capacity to prevent and manage violent conflicts. Particular attention should be given to enhancing the political will of AU member states, shown by their commitment, coordination and cooperation, ultimately the key enablers of building support for mediation.

## Hopes for the AU MSU

In an effort to strengthen its mediation capacity in 2016 the AU established a Mediation Support Unit (MSU) as part of the Crisis Management and Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development Division (CMPCRD) of the Peace and Security Department (PSD) of the AU Commission. This support structure is intended to supply the organisation with coherent, predictable and reliable technical and operational expertise for its envoys.

At the launch of the AU MSU in 2016 the Commissioner of Peace and Security stated that the unit's immediate priority would be to develop technical skills and institutional capacity and recruit the staff needed to draw lessons from the experiences of past and present AU mediators.<sup>7</sup> The MSU would interact with mediators to exchange views, insights and perspectives. It was also given a key role in training mediators, mediation support teams and protagonists in the field.

The establishment of the AU MSU was preceded by several initiatives. A critical starting point was the 2009

Plan of Action to Build the AU's Mediation Capacity, which led to the development of standard operating procedures (SOPs), a knowledge-management framework and the demand for the establishment of the body's own MSU.<sup>8</sup>

However, despite being formally created in 2016, the MSU was 'subject to' a lengthy period of 'intense internal scrutiny and debates regarding its location, tasks and goals'.<sup>9</sup> From 2016 to 2019 the AU dealt with a long bureaucratic and political process of staffing the new unit, engaging with member states for political buy-in and creating internal and external sources of funding and partnerships that would ensure that the MSU was ready for service.

In 2020 the commission is still reforming its structures, a process that started in 2017

The MSU has recently gained traction, particularly as it has become increasingly apparent that mediation, often dealt with in an ad hoc manner, needed to find a specific home within the AU Commission.<sup>10</sup> In a critical step towards putting it into operation effectively, new staff were appointed in 2019.

In 2020 the commission is still reforming its structures, a process that started during Rwanda's chairmanship of the AU in 2017. The process is expected to result in a clear role for the MSU after a potential merger of the Peace and Security Department and the Department of Political Affairs. This provides an important window of opportunity for guiding policy considerations that can inform the implementation of the unit.

## Origins

The process of embedding the MSU in the AU is ongoing. While AU mediation efforts date back as early as 1964, one year after the inception of the union's predecessor, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the first attempts to harness its mediation support abilities can be traced to 2008.<sup>11</sup>

In that year the AU launched a series of consultations with the collaboration of the UN and other stakeholders to reflect on lessons learned from mediation processes

in Africa. Those efforts culminated in a seminar held at the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa in October 2009, titled 'Towards Enhancing the Capacity of the African Union in Mediation'.<sup>12</sup>

While that initial impulse lost steam, it allowed the AU to start developing a strategic approach to mediation.<sup>13</sup> The approach was primarily based on the recommendations of academic and mediation specialist Laurence (Laurie) Nathan in his 2009 working paper, 'Plan of Action to Build the AU's Mediation Capacity', which emphasised such aspects as establishing and coordinating mediation relationships among the AU the African regional economic communities (RECs) and their partners. Such efforts should include clarifying who should take the lead in a mediation process, defining a set of guiding principles for mediation processes and establishing a mediation unit and rosters within the AU Commission.<sup>14</sup>

Building on the 2009 action plan, in early 2012 the AU adopted its SOPs for Mediation Support.<sup>15</sup> Two years later, in 2014, the AU launched its *Mediation Support Handbook* as part of its Mediation Support Capacity Project. The handbook describes the key structural dimensions of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and provides guidance for conducting a standard AU-mandated mediation process.<sup>16</sup> These documents will eventually have to be amended to account for a new institutional framework that now includes the AU MSU.

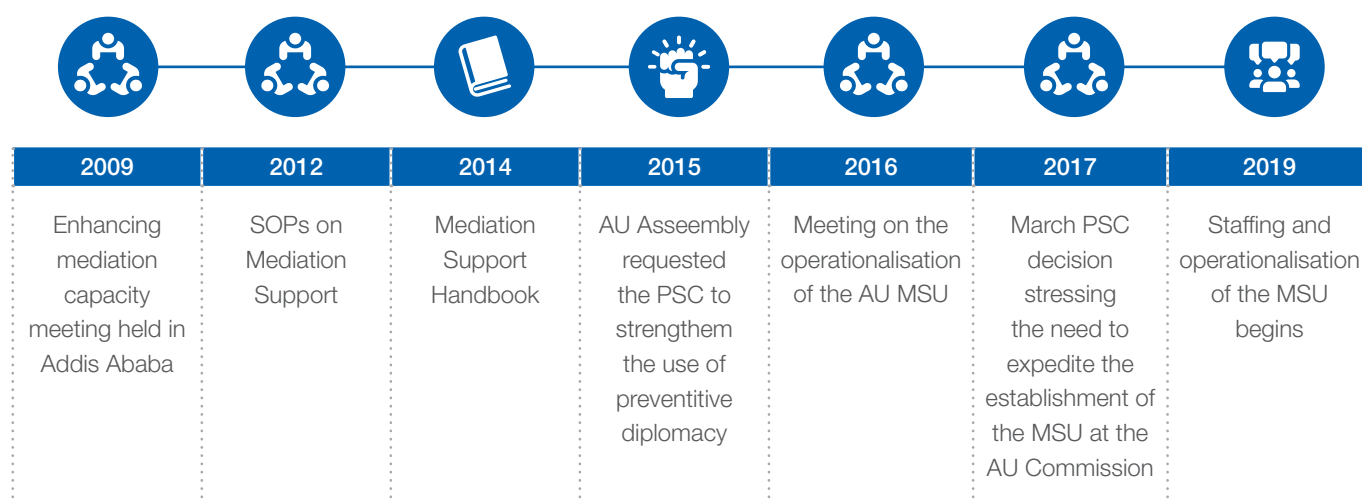
In 2015 the AU Assembly asked the Peace and Security Council to consider Egypt's suggestion that the use of preventive diplomacy within the AU be strengthened. In particular, Egypt requested the establishment of a Mediation Support and Preventive Diplomacy Unit and invited the Peace and Security Council (PSC) to come up with appropriate recommendations together with an evaluation of the legal, structural and financial implications of establishing such a unit.<sup>17</sup>

As a result, the incorporation of mediation support in the AU's processes regained traction after a high-level 'Meeting on the Operationalization of the AU MSU' was held in September 2016. That meeting assembled staff from the AU, the RECs, the UN and the European Union (EU) as well as academics and civil society organisations, to discuss how to best structure the MSU.<sup>18</sup>

The process gathered momentum after receiving political support from the PSC, which called on the commission to expedite the establishment of the MSU in order to provide the relevant technical support for African mediation efforts at different levels, including through the Panel of the Wise.<sup>19</sup>

In early 2019 the process again gathered momentum when the MSU's newly hired staff began undertaking a process of internal reflection and capacity building.

**Figure 1: Key milestones for AU MSU**



Source: Authors

## Current structure

At present the staff of the MSU comprises a coordinator, a senior policy officer, a political analyst and mediation expert and a knowledge management and resource mobilisation expert.

Much of the focus thus far has been on building the skills of mediators and their teams. This process has involved developing an advanced training manual for mediation support together with a *Facilitators' Guide*, aimed at strengthening the capacity of mediation support staff at the AU and others involved in mediation on the continent.<sup>20</sup> At the time of completion of this report the MSU was also finalising a strategic plan with a results-based framework to guide its operations in the coming years.

In 2019 the MSU started engaging in some of its first knowledge-management initiatives. For instance, in collaboration with the UN and the Training for Peace Programme, it documented lessons learned from AU mediations in Sudan, the Central African Republic, Burundi and the Great Lakes Region on the margins of the Tenth AU High Level Retreat of Special Envoys, Mediators and Other Senior Officials in Djibouti on 28 October 2019.

More actors and organisations are leading mediation processes today than perhaps at any other point in history

Other aspects prioritised during the September 2016 meeting are still pending.<sup>21</sup> For instance, the unit has not yet hired the ten thematic experts expected to provide support to mediators, nor has the advisory group of distinguished former envoys and mediation experts from universities and research centres been created.

Building this internal capacity must go hand in hand with strengthening the political and institutional links between the MSU and AU mediation engagements, led by AU special envoys, representatives and mediators and by members of the Panel of the Wise, the Pan-African Network of the Wise (PanWise)<sup>22</sup> and, more recently, the Network of African Women in

Conflict Prevention and Mediation (FemWiseAfrica). This requires an analysis of how AU and non-AU actors operate and how their interactions shape mediation processes.

The AU MSU must also strengthen its comparative advantage within a global and regional arena that is becoming increasingly crowded. For instance, the UN has made increasing efforts to create mechanisms to support mediation, particularly through its own MSU.

But particularly, organisations like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which are already building blocks of the AU, have much to contribute to the coherent establishment of mediation efforts in Africa.

## Towards establishing mediation support

More actors and organisations are leading mediation processes today than perhaps at any other point in history. According to a recent study, between 1989 and 2013 states led 59% of the reported mediation processes globally, intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) mediated 30% of the cases and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and individuals acted as lead mediators in the remaining 11%.<sup>23</sup>

MSSs, the institutions that carry out 'activities that assist and improve mediation practices',<sup>24</sup> are an important emerging feature of this widening trend, as evidenced by their recent appearance within IGOs, foreign ministries and NGOs.

In the past 15 years MSSs have emerged within the UN, the EU, the Organization of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the AU and RECs such as SADC, IGAD and ECOWAS. Moreover, countries like Germany, Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, Norway, Belgium, Turkey and South Africa have begun to include MSSs in their foreign ministries.<sup>25</sup>

Some practice-oriented NGOs have also established MSSs to promote and improve mediation processes. These organisations collaborate under the umbrella of the Mediation Support Network (MSN), a global network of NGOs that encourages discussions, training and the exchange of information about mediation.<sup>26</sup>

## Mediation support within IGOs: A mushrooming trend

The UN MSU, the pioneer in mediation support globally, was established in 2006 as one of the outcomes of the World Summit held the year before.<sup>27</sup> It is located within the Policy and Mediation Division of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), where it is responsible for three main activities: 'to provide strategic technical and operational support for peace processes; to strengthen the mediation capacity of the UN, its partners and parties in conflict and to develop knowledge products including mediation guidance, lessons learned and best practices'.<sup>28</sup>

Five years later, in late 2011, the EU established a Mediation Support Team (MST) as part of the European External Action Service (EEAS), its diplomatic branch. The MST was based on a 'Concept on Strengthening EU Mediation and Dialogue Capacities', adopted by the member states in 2009. The EU MST's primary functions are operational support and expert deployment, coaching and training, knowledge management, and partnerships and outreach. EU MST experts have provided technical mediation support in conflicts in Mali, Myanmar, Lebanon, South Sudan, Central African Republic and Ukraine.<sup>29</sup>

In December 2011 OSCE participating states adopted Decision 3/11 on the conflict cycle, including a paragraph devoted to mediation support.<sup>30</sup> Paragraph 10 defined four main functions for a new MST that was to be part of the OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC): 'training and capacity-building within the OSCE structures; knowledge management and operational guidance; outreach, networking, co-operation and co-ordination with relevant local and national actors, as well as with international, regional and sub-regional organizations and operational support to Chairmanships, their special representatives, heads of field operations, and other relevant OSCE mediators.'<sup>31</sup>

The IGAD MSU was formally established in 2012, after a High-level Consultative Meeting on Mediation. The meeting was followed by a resolution taken by the Council of Ambassadors in September 2012, which effectively put it into operation.<sup>32</sup> The primary function of the IGAD MSU is 'to assist mediation processes both in inter and intra-state conflicts'.<sup>33</sup> In pursuit of this aim its first duty was to carry out country-level consultations to explore national strategies for conflict resolution and create links and synergies with other IGAD programs.

Other African MSSs followed, starting with that of SADC, which was formally established in November 2014 after a series of consultations that included the development of a concept of Mediation, Conflict Prevention and Preventative Diplomacy.<sup>34</sup> The Mediation Facilitation Division (MFD) of ECOWAS was established in June 2015 and upgraded to a directorate within the Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security several months later.

## Understanding the emergence of MSSs

According to Teresa Whitfield, former director of the UN MSU, 'the establishment of support mechanisms represents a shift in the manner in which peacemaking is conceived and conducted'.<sup>35</sup> The interaction of several factors could explain this shift.

First, there is a renewed interest among international actors in the mediation practice. Mediation, or the 'process of dialogue and negotiation in which a third party assists two or more disputant parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage or resolve conflict without resorting to force',<sup>36</sup> is increasingly seen as one of the most useful tools for preventing and managing violent conflicts.

Indeed, in 2011 the UN labelled mediation ‘a promising and cost-effective tool in the peaceful settlement of disputes and conflict prevention and resolution’,<sup>37</sup> underscoring the need for more and better support. The 2017 Report of the Secretary-General on the UN Activities in Support of Mediation renewed this call, highlighting the need for increased ‘support to regional and sub-regional organizations that are seeking to strengthen their mediation capacities’.<sup>38</sup> The landmark 2018 ‘Pathways for Peace’ report, produced jointly by the World Bank and the UN, similarly asserted that the ‘growing confidence in mediation has resulted in expanded capabilities to support such processes’.<sup>39</sup>

These remarks place mediation in the category of operational prevention, which encompasses all ‘actions taken to address or reduce the immediate risk of violent conflict, when its outbreak or escalation threatens’.<sup>40</sup> This is in contrast to the notion of structural prevention, which refers to the underlying factors, such as building strong public institutions and increasing the resilience of communities and the state, that can reduce the likelihood of an outbreak of violent conflict.<sup>41</sup>

Mediation is increasingly seen as one of the most useful tools for preventing and managing violent conflicts

A focus on mediation as a central element of prevention is backed by recent research, which shows that it can improve the likelihood of a peace settlement being reached.<sup>42</sup> While some studies dispute the long-term effectiveness of mediated settlements, as mediators tend to trade off more durable stability for short-term peace, those same analyses acknowledge that this is not necessarily a failure of mediation itself, but of the post-mediation environment.<sup>43</sup>

Robust peace agreements, such as the 2000 settlement that ended the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, featuring 4 200 UN peacekeepers, a demilitarised border, prisoner exchange and other post-conflict measures, shape the post-mediation environment in a way that makes it more unlikely that wars will recur.<sup>44</sup> Electoral crisis mediations rarely feature such additional protocols, making it

easier for parties to resume conflict after an initial agreement is reached.

These findings underscore the need for better prepared and supported mediation teams and an increased focus on the post-conflict environment. However, as a starting point, it is essential to note that even when they fail, negotiated settlements have transformative effects on conflict dynamics resulting in significantly fewer fatalities than before the settlement.<sup>45</sup>

Another factor that explains the recent emergence of MSSs is the evolution of understanding of the mediation practice. According to this concept, mediation should emphasise ‘generic and depoliticized expertise’,<sup>46</sup> placing technical and specialised knowledge above traditional non-transferable diplomatic approaches. This has enabled emerging MSSs to claim a position of authority, both within their organisations and externally, by leveraging their professionalised and technical methods.<sup>47</sup>

The third element is the community of peace and conflict scholars, NGOs, think tanks and donors, which exerts considerable influence over IGOs and has also been instrumental in the recent proliferation of MSSs. The cooperation between these actors and many IGOs has resulted in an expertise-focused approach to violent conflict.<sup>48</sup> This approach can be partially explained by the need of IGOs to make sense of the feeling of uncertainty posed by today’s violent conflicts, represented in an increase of ‘topics, stakeholders and cross-cutting issues involved in peace processes’.<sup>49</sup>

These factors, together with the internal institutional dynamics of the organisations conducting mediation processes, have all led to a rapid emergence of MSSs.

## Comparing mediation support structures

Given that the intention of this paper is to inform the ongoing process of putting the AU MSU into operation, the analysis that follows will only contrast MSSs that are embedded in IGOs. It will, therefore, exclude those MSSs that exist under the foreign ministries of some countries or as NGOs.

To ensure the comparison is among similar international organisations’ MSSs, the paper will contrast the UN MSU, the OSCE MST, the EU MST, and the IGAD MSU.



Figure 2A: Evolution of peace agreements in Africa, 1975–2018

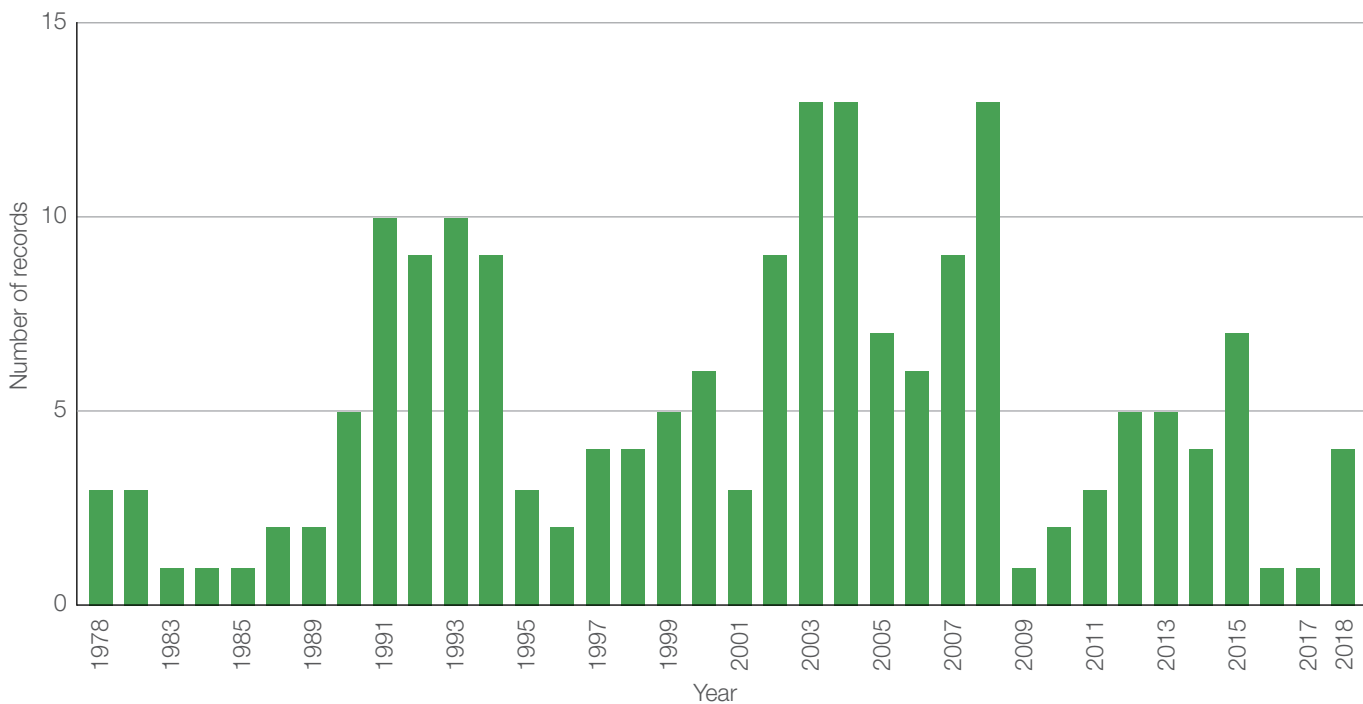
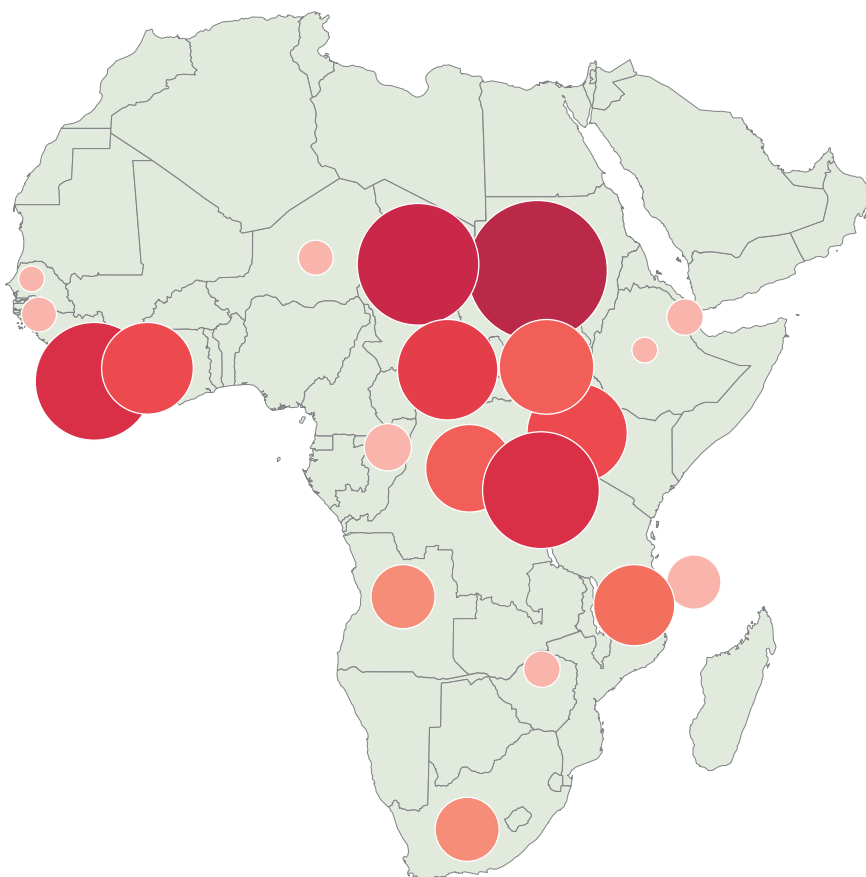


Figure 2B: Peace agreements by country



Source: Data from Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), UCDP Peace Agreement Dataset v19.1

While the study acknowledges that other MSSs play an essential role in mediation in the continent, especially those of SADC and ECOWAS, and have influenced our considerations, they are not included in this section due to space limitations.

Two main features of the structures of these MSSs are compared. The first is their functions and activities and the second their operational structure and its components.

## Functions

Stine Lehmann-Larsen identifies four types of activities that are generally carried out by MSSs: (i) operational support, (ii) institutional capacity building and training, (iii) knowledge management and research and (iv) networking and experience sharing. Operational support can, in turn, be subdivided into: (i) direct support through field deployment and (ii) substantive desk support.<sup>50</sup>

### *Operational support*

Operational support is the most direct way in which MSSs can have an impact on the mediation process. It involves the deployment of experts who can address the technical issues that arise during a peace negotiation (fieldwork) and the behind-the-scenes support for mediators and their teams, including research and analysis, process and briefings and de-briefing sessions with mediators (desk support).<sup>51</sup>

The technical issues addressed by operational support include, among others, ceasefire and security arrangements, constitutional reform, gender issues, wealth sharing and technical advice on process design. Field support requires the deployment of experienced mediators to assist the lead mediator and his or her team and the provision of on-site secretarial assistance for the mediation process.<sup>52</sup>

The UN MSU features a Standby Team of Senior Mediation Experts (SBT), which was established in 2008 and is expected to be deployed at short notice (generally within 72 hours) to a particular location for up to one renewable month. The SBT is currently composed of eight experts in a wide range of issues, including process design, constitution making, power sharing, problems of gender and inclusion and security arrangements.<sup>53</sup>

The SBT, which was initially managed jointly by the UN MSU and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), has enabled the UN MSU to follow through with its mandate

to 'get the right expertise to the right places at the right time, both by deploying personnel and providing remote analytical support'.<sup>54</sup>

Following a similar path, the EU MST set out to put in place a roster of mediation experts who could be deployed at short notice.<sup>55</sup> However, due to the financial burden of such a roster, the EU decided to outsource this practice to external service providers.<sup>56</sup> The initiative was delegated in 2014 to a consortium of four leading European NGOs for three years, with funding from the EU's EEAS.<sup>57</sup> The consortium received ad hoc and tailored assignments as requested by the EEAS, including the 'deployment of an expert or a team of experts for technical or process support on conflict prevention or mediation'.<sup>58</sup>

Operational support is the most direct way in which MSSs can have an impact on the mediation process

For its part, the OSCE has funded and provided subject-matter experts to support its mediation processes. These experts are deployed to support the mediation efforts conducted directly by the OSCE and its members, fulfilling its mandate to provide 'operational support for the chairmanship and field operations'.<sup>59</sup> However, as one study notes, 'the role of primary support for special representatives remained largely with the geographic desks'<sup>60</sup> of the OSCE CPC, implying that the field deployment of experts is not centralised within the MST.

IGAD's MSU has both a roster of mediators and a group of experts tasked with providing advice to mediation teams on technical issues. While the roster of mediators is currently in operation, the team of experts is not yet active and the process of selecting and hiring its members appears not to have been defined. Mediators on the roster are chosen by IGAD member states, each of them appointing three mediators, one of whom should be a woman.<sup>61</sup>

At the AU the need to include within the structure of its nascent MSU a team of experts who can provide support to its mediation envoys has been widely acknowledged. Indeed, during the meeting in September 2016

participants proposed enlisting ten thematic experts. The experts would be hired by the AU as short-term consultants up to 40 days every six months, when needed, to provide the technical support required by AU mediators at a given time.<sup>62</sup>

It was also proposed that an advisory or reference group be created, consisting of mediation experts from universities and research institutes around the world and it was further suggested that during the first year of operation of the MSU five experts should be integrated in the support structure for AU-led mediation processes.<sup>63</sup> The proposals for enlisting thematic experts and creating an advisory or reference group essentially reiterated the recommendations of the AU SOP for Mediation Support.

As the case of the UN MSU shows, political support and backing is essential to long-term success. Setting up a team of experts requires substantial political backing from specific member states, as evidenced by the creation of specific Groups of Friends of Mediation.<sup>64</sup>

This further highlights the importance to the AU of strengthening its own mechanisms with continuous political buy-in from member states and enhanced coordination and complementarity with RECs. It also showcases the need to establish a sustainable and predictable internal funding flow, including from the AU Peace Fund (Window 1 – for preventive diplomacy and mediation).

### Capacity building and training

Most MSSs operate in an area devoted explicitly to institutional strengthening, capacity building and training. This area encompasses activities such as the design of SOPs, the creation of training curricula and rosters of mediators and the design and dissemination of templates for mediation plans as well as human resources, communication and logistical processes.<sup>65</sup>

As the case of other MSUs shows, political support and backing is essential for long-term success of mediation support structures

The UN MSU, for instance, is equipped to provide coaching for mediators, as well as training in mediation skills and techniques, strategy, process design and thematic issues.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, at the request of the mediator it can provide coaching activities that facilitate the engagement of the conflicting parties during peace processes.<sup>67</sup>

The EU MST has largely focused on the coaching and training aspects of capacity building. Among the services it offers are one-on-one, team and group coaching sessions covering a wide range of issues that have an impact on peace processes.<sup>68</sup> These coaching and training exercises are delivered by the EU MST team itself or by external partners. This highlights the fact that, with regard to capacity building and training, as with the delivery of



IT IS VITAL THAT THE AU STRENGTHEN ITS OWN MECHANISMS WITH CONTINUOUS POLITICAL BUY-IN FROM MEMBER STATES

operational support, the EU relies on the secondment of staff and the contracting of external advisors.

The OSCE also features training and capacity building as one of its four pillars.<sup>69</sup> It focuses both on strengthening its mediation capacity and on supporting the strengthening of the mediation capacity of other regional organisations.

With regard to its internal capacity, the OSCE has prepared handbooks and reference guides offering practical guidance to representatives involved in mediation engagements in the field.<sup>70</sup> Some of these documents make recommendations in relation to the UN Guidance for Effective Mediation as they pertain to the OSCE context.<sup>71</sup>

As part of its contribution to the mediation capacity of other regional IGOs, OSCE has co-organised meetings at which participants identify and share lessons and best practices that can be extrapolated to their own regions.<sup>72</sup>

Although the IGAD MSU is still being set up it has already held multiple meetings and training workshops to increase the capacity of its mediators and those of member states. For instance, it has developed training courses for mediators and consulted with member states on the development of mediation capabilities and the harmonisation of national policies on this issue.<sup>73</sup>

More efforts should be undertaken to capture, organise and pass lessons learned on to future mediators

In January 2019 the IGAD MSU and the EU MST met in Kampala for a two-day peer-to-peer experience-sharing and knowledge-transfer workshop.<sup>74</sup> The IGAD MSU also engages regularly with the national governments of member states to enhance their mediation capacity. In October 2019 IGAD, in partnership with the ISS, organised a three-day workshop that brought together experts with practical experience in South Sudan and mediation. Such workshops have been developed with the aim of creating a platform where mediation processes can be debated and discussed, bringing theory closer to practice.

Participants in the AU meeting held in September 2016 recommended that it should work closely with the UN

DPPA and other international partners to build its internal capacity to provide mediation support.<sup>75</sup> Participants also suggested that the AU should 'enhance and build internal capacity to analyse origins of conflicts and the nature of belligerents, interests of the various actors, mediation strategies and design, forms of political solutions and compromises to crisis, among others'.<sup>76</sup> Some of these recommended capacity-building initiatives are being carried out through the revision of the African Union *Mediation Support Handbook* and the development of the *Facilitators' Guide* and a strategic plan with a results-based framework.

The number of training sessions and meetings held each year and the productive exchange of information among support structures, scholars and NGOs is evidence of a widespread interest in capacity building. However, despite this interest and plans to enhance their mediation capacity, most MSSs are still 'understaffed and overstretched'.<sup>77</sup>

This is why, according to Teresa Whitfield, 'the institutional capacity to provide effective support has not yet caught up with the collective aspiration to offer it'.<sup>78</sup> While Whitfield's statements are not directed at the AU, it certainly alludes to the political nature of the need to build conducive infrastructure to increasing AU's mediation capacity. As Stine Lehmann-Larsen emphasises, 'a mediation support unit requires management capacity, but also a political mandate'.<sup>79</sup>

### Knowledge management and research

Mediation processes generate a significant amount of information that needs to be systematised and classified to inform and improve future undertakings. Hence the concern voiced in the 2009 UN Secretary-General's report on 'Enhancing Mediation and its Support Activities' that 'although we have learned many lessons, there has been insufficient effort to capture, organise and pass these on to future mediators'.<sup>80</sup> The frequent use of ad hoc envoys and the high rotation of staff makes it even more essential for MSSs to find institutionalised mechanisms for gathering and disseminating mediation information.

To address these issues most MSSs include a department specifically devoted to managing and disseminating knowledge and to building institutional

memory of mediation. According to Lehmann-Larsen, this area can be divided into two sub-categories: (i) knowledge-management and related activities, which comprise briefings of newly-appointed staff, debriefings, lessons-learned exercises, evaluations for mediators and the dissemination of best practices through handbooks, guidelines and reports and (ii) a research component, which includes both, analyses produced specifically to inform a particular mediation process upon a request from the field, and studies conducted independently of one specific process.<sup>81</sup>

One of the pillars of the UN MSU is the development and dissemination of mediation guidance, lessons learned and best practice.<sup>82</sup> To accomplish this objective the UN implemented the Peacemaker website ([peacemaker.un.org](http://peacemaker.un.org)) to provide actors involved in mediation processes with material to make their work more effective.<sup>83</sup> The site features UN documents, mediation guidance on a range of topics, a digital toolkit, a database of more than 750 peace agreements and the *UN Guidance for Effective Mediation*, which was developed in 2012 by the office of the Secretary-General in response to a request by the General Assembly.<sup>84</sup>

### The MST decided to include local decision makers and institutions in its conflict-mitigation efforts

The publication draws on inputs from member states, the UN system and regional and sub-regional IGOs and NGOs to define some fundamentals of an effective mediation process, making it an essential source for mediators and their teams.<sup>85</sup>

Knowledge management is another pillar of the EU MST, which has been engaged in producing documents containing lessons learned and internal evaluations. In that regard, the EU EEAS requested the ECDPM think tank to conduct two external studies: a compendium of lessons learned through EU mediation and dialogue<sup>86</sup> and a review of the EEAS MSPP.<sup>87</sup> These documents are available on the EEAS website.

The OSCE has also made efforts to compile and systematise its research into mediation. Examples of these analyses are the *OSCE Support to Insider*

*Mediation*, which sets out considerations for a multi-level engagement with conflict actors,<sup>88</sup> and a lessons-learned document setting out challenges to mediation in the OSCE area.<sup>89</sup>

Some of these studies were conducted by external organisations such as the Geneva Centre for Security Policy or the German Berghof Foundation, confirming the reliance of the OSCE on the community of NGOs and academics formed around mediation. For instance, the OSCE's MST analyses of its engagements in Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine focused specifically on the role of insiders. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, the MST reflected on the value of engaging with local mediators and informal leaders as a way of preventing potential conflicts at a local level. Based on those reflections, the MST decided to include local decision makers and institutions such as courts of elders or women's committees in its conflict-mitigation efforts.<sup>90</sup>

The IGAD, together with its NGO partners, has also engaged in the production and dissemination of knowledge. Along with the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD), it publishes the *Peace Mediator Newsletter*, focusing on 'good practices, lessons learnt, challenges and recommendations on mediation support'.<sup>91</sup> The newsletter is part of the AU Mediation Support Capacity Project, funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, which is aimed at strengthening the mediation-support capacity of the AU, RECs and non-state actors. As of 2018 IGAD has also been engaged in consultations with legal experts and member states to adopt the decision to draft a protocol on mediation.<sup>92</sup>

Knowledge management and research are two of the AU MSU's main priorities. In fact, at the meeting in September 2016 the AU Commissioner for Peace and Security, Ambassador Smail Chergui, stressed that one 'key objective of the AU MSU is knowledge production and management including the collection and analysis of the stock of information capable of serving as conceptual and practical reference for the AU MSU'.<sup>93</sup>

In accordance with that mandate the MSU prepared the *Mediation Support Handbook*, as part of the AU Mediation Support Capacity Project Phase II (2012-14). The handbook is a practical tool that serves as a reference and field study guide for mediation teams and AU envoys.<sup>94</sup>

While significant efforts are being made by all MSSs to enhance their knowledge-management and research abilities, there is still a way to go when it comes to making sure that the guidelines produced by their technical staff make their way into the field. This involves presenting the information in a way that speaks to the complex situations faced daily by mediators and their teams, underscoring the importance of initiatives like the handbook and its forthcoming revision.

### Networking and experience sharing

The emergence of a community of mediation experts has allowed for a fluid exchange of information and experiences among MSSs, NGOs and academics.<sup>95</sup> These exchanges, which have been instrumental in the rapid emergence of MSSs, often take the form of retreats, conferences and the joint production of mediation material.

The AU MSU is expected to play an important role in this regard. Of particular importance is the organisation of the AU high-level retreat for special envoys and mediators that, since 2009, has brought together mediation experts and practitioners in an attempt to address common challenges and opportunities for mediation in Africa. One of the key roles of the MSU since its establishment has been to serve as the secretariat for this annual retreat.

Another type of collaboration, between mediators and country experts, is of particular importance. As Laurie Nathan explains, exchanges with country experts are 'needed to ensure a deep understanding of the parties and their internal factions, the cultural practices of local communities, the key groups in civil society and the history and dynamics of the conflict'.<sup>96</sup>

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The UN MSU has made it part of its core mission to foster these dialogues, enabling the exchange of ideas about mediation support and advising on the establishment of other MSSs.<sup>97</sup> In this capacity it has, for instance, hosted staff from other IGOs and regional organisations.<sup>98</sup>

Other MSSs have also been actively involved in planning networking and experience-sharing events. The peer-to-peer workshop between the EU MST and the IGAD MSU, referred to above, was a successful example of networking and collaboration between two MSSs that face different challenges and opportunities.<sup>99</sup>

The OSCE MST has also participated in several experience-sharing processes. Among the first steps taken by the OSCE's CPC in order to establish its MST was to organise, together with the newly-formed UN MSU, a two-day regional consultation exercise in Mont Pellerin, Switzerland, in May 2007, titled 'Operationalizing Mediation Support: Lessons from Mediation

Experience in the OSCE Area'.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, it participated in a meeting in 2011 with the UN and 12 regional organisations to discuss best practice for preventive and quiet diplomacy, dialogue facilitation and mediation.<sup>101</sup>

Hosting events with stakeholders such as the UN, the RECs and development partners gives the AU MSU an important opportunity to build on a range of entry points based on existing collaboration, strengthening its standing as a mediation support provider in Africa.

Some of the major themes that have been discussed in the meetings between African MSSs are the nexus between the different early warning systems and mediation efforts, how to conduct a mediation process from design to exit, navigating the geo-political context and promoting local ownership of peace-making interventions.<sup>102</sup>

Main areas of expertise within MSSs include process design, security arrangements and constitutional or legal support

However, as mentioned in the previous section, there has been an insufficient effort to publish the conclusions drawn from these networking engagements. For instance, only a brief press statement emerged from the 2019 IGAD-EU meeting in Kampala. The AU MSU should strengthen its capacity to identify and discuss some of the major topics that have emerged from such engagements, how the issues discussed were resolved and how their possible tangible impact on the AU's mediation approaches.

### Structure and components

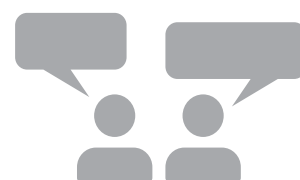
An environment of increased cooperation and an influential and knowledgeable community lead most MSSs to adopt a similar structure.<sup>103</sup> However, MSSs vary in (i) the services that they provide, (ii) the quantity and expertise of their staff, (iii) whether they use rosters or not, (iv) their location within the structure of the IGO and (v) the nature of the recipients of their services.

### General structure and activities

As described above, MSSs maintain a diverse set of tools to support IGOs in their mediation efforts, each with their complementary advantages and goals. These tools are not equally distributed to all MSSs; internal institutional and political factors determine the activities of each MSS.

These activities largely define the success of an MSS. The assessment of success is not a simple process; if it is measured in terms of effective support for a mediator, the extent to which an MSS is effective can be determined on the basis of its core functions.<sup>104</sup>

In that respect, Lanz et al posit that MSSs of IGOs whose member states retain a large degree of control over mediation processes are more likely to



THE AU MSU IS EXPECTED TO PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN NETWORKING AND EXPERIENCE SHARING

focus on knowledge management and on capacity building and training. MSSs in organisations which, themselves, carry out mediation processes are more likely to invest in operational support to assist their own mediation teams.<sup>105</sup>

While the former group of activities 'intrudes' less directly on the mediation process and thus presumably has less impact on it, it plays a key role in strengthening the role of mediators. Conversely, the latter group has a direct impact on mediation efforts and can thus more easily influence their outcome.

A balance between capacity building, knowledge management and training, on the one hand, and operational support on the other, is desirable for the successful support of mediation processes. These key institutional distinctions are synthesised in Figure 3.

### Staffing

MSSs vary in terms of the size, expertise and nationality of their staff. While data on the current composition of most MSSs are not readily available, configurations range between three and 30 staff members.

For instance, the UN MSU features four layers of expertise: (i) its core staff at headquarters, comprising about 20 people, (ii) the SBT of mediation experts, currently comprising eight members, (iii) a roster of about 200 thematic experts and (iv) partnerships with think tanks and NGOs.<sup>106</sup> Other MSSs, such as the OSCE MST, which is composed of three mediation support officers, have considerable smaller teams.<sup>107</sup>

Some of the main areas of expertise within MSSs are process design, security arrangements and constitutional or legal support. The permanent staff of an MSS rarely

**Figure 3: Factors limiting IGOs' mediation capacity – 'competition' between member states and IGOs' hypothesis**



Source: Figure created by the authors. Interpretation of hypothesis in Lanz et al 2017: 5



includes experts in more specialised areas and such experts can be brought in as consultants. Seconding staff and hiring external organisations is a common option for MSSs in need of specialised expertise.

## Rosters

A widely discussed issue is that of rosters of mediators or technical experts. As Christina Stenner puts it: 'Rosters are an easy-to-maintain way to gather a broad range of expertise that is officially pre-selected based on specific required criteria.'<sup>108</sup>

However, while they solve the problem of the ad hoc availability of experts, rosters are costly. As a result, several MSSs have opted either to rely on external service providers to manage their rosters or not to have rosters at all.

The former is the case with the EU EEAS, which entered into two contracts for roster-type support with a consortium of NGOs: the European Resources for Mediation Support (ERMES) and the EEAS Framework Contract for Conflict Prevention and Mediation Support.<sup>109</sup>

The AU MSU has a dedicated team that is currently engaged with strategic plan

Even when costs are higher, an experienced mediator interviewed for this paper described an SBT of experts as an added value that is greatly appreciated, since trying to locate and hire experts on an ad hoc basis often results in MSSs '[losing] out on important opportunities'. Moreover, if SBT members are members of staff rather than external advisors, this adds to their legitimacy and greatly facilitates their interaction with mediators in the field.<sup>110</sup>

## Location

Another issue is the location of the MSU within the structure of the IGO. While this clearly depends on the specific internal configuration of each organisation, it is nonetheless useful to compare different cases.

Some MSSs are located within departments that are mainly responsible for political affairs, such as the DPPA in the case of the UN MSU, while others are in departments devoted specifically to the prevention and

resolution of conflicts, such as the CPC in the case of the OSCE or the PSD in the cases of the AU and IGAD. The EU MST is, in turn, situated within the Division of Conflict Prevention, Peacebuilding and Mediation Instruments of the EEAS, the EU's diplomatic service.<sup>111</sup>

It is important to note, however, that in line with ongoing reform processes at the AU, the PSD is scheduled to merge with the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) in 2021.<sup>112</sup> It is difficult to assess the full impact this will have at the operational level. However, it can potentially enable the resulting new department to address both the root causes of conflict and the immediate triggers of crises, generating an opportunity for the AU MSU to fully realise its potential to be the AU's system-wide focal point for mediation expertise, support and analysis.

## Recipients or 'clients'

It is not always clear who should receive the services offered by an MSS, it often depends on the definition of mediation adopted by a particular IGO. If mediation is broadly defined, MSSs might be able to render support to a larger group of actors, encompassing not only track-one but track-two processes.

For instance, the AU formally employs four types of mediators: Special Envoys, High Representatives of the Chairperson, Special Representatives of the Chairperson and High-Level Ad Hoc Committees.<sup>113</sup> In addition, the AU also engages with mediation formally or informally through the Commission and particularly through the role played by the Commissioner for Peace and Security, Panel of the Wise, PanWise, and FemWise-Africa.

The multiplicity of actors hinders the identification of entry points for conflict prevention, calling for a more flexible MSU that is capable of engaging with multiple actors and supporting different styles of mediation.<sup>114</sup>

This can assist the AU to navigate a space that is often crowded and competitive. This means it can aid coordination, particularly in light of growing efforts on the continent to support mediation. In pursuing its own strategy for mediation support it is able to bring a variety of actors together, including RECs, civil society organisations, member states and international organisations.

Some MSSs do not merely provide mediation support services for IGOs they also do so for their member

states or regional organisations. For example, the UN MSU not only supports all components of the UN system, it also supports its member states, regional organisations and NGOs. Similarly, the IGAD MSU supports the mediation bodies of member states.

While potentially stretching their resources, the provision of support for actors outside IGOs enables MSSs to better coordinate responses to crises, acquire useful experience and gain a broader understanding of the root causes of conflict.

**Table 1: Summary of the main findings of the preceding comparative study**

MSS	Functions	Structure and components	Recipients or clients
UN <sup>115</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing technical and operational support for peace processes</li> <li>• Strengthening mediation capacity within and outside the UN</li> <li>• Producing and spreading knowledge about mediation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Core staff (~20 members) at headquarters</li> <li>• Standby team of mediation experts (~7–8 members) who change every year</li> <li>• Roster of mediators and thematic experts (~200 persons)</li> <li>• Partnerships with external think tanks and NGOs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All components of the UN system</li> <li>• Member states</li> <li>• Regional and non-governmental organisations</li> </ul>
OSCE <sup>116</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training and capacity building for OSCE structures</li> <li>• Knowledge-management and operational guidance</li> <li>• Outreach, networking, cooperation and coordination with national actors and international organisations</li> <li>• Operational support for the chairmanship and field operations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Core staff (~3–6 members) as part of the Mediation Support Team</li> <li>• Partnerships and continuous support for certain participating states</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• OSCE mediation teams, on an optional basis</li> </ul>
EU <sup>117</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Four pillars:</li> <li>• Operational support and deployment of experts</li> <li>• Knowledge management</li> <li>• Partnership and outreach</li> <li>• Roster of experts (under service contracts with external NGOs)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mediation support experts (~3 members)</li> <li>• Senior mediation advisor</li> <li>• Experts working on particular processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EU special representatives, special envoys and heads of delegation</li> </ul>
IGAD <sup>118</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assisting mediation processes relating to inter- and intra-state conflicts in the region</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One coordinator</li> <li>• Programme officers (three)</li> <li>• Roster of mediators</li> <li>• Technical experts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for national mediation bodies</li> <li>• Support for IGAD roster mediators</li> </ul>
AU <sup>119</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting mediators through briefing materials and serving as the secretariat for the annual retreat of African mediators and special envoys</li> <li>• Serving in an analytical and early-warning capacity in collaboration with AU and external actors</li> <li>• Providing technical expertise in designing, supporting and conducting mediation and related activities</li> <li>• Serving as a centre for documenting African peace-building efforts</li> <li>• Maintaining a roster of mediation experts and support staff</li> </ul>	<p>Current structure, as at June 2020:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MSU Coordinator</li> <li>• Senior Policy Officer</li> <li>• Political analyst and mediation expert</li> <li>• Knowledge management and resource mobilisation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration with RECs and member states</li> </ul>

## Findings and recommendations

The fact that the AU MSU has a dedicated team that is currently engaged with strategic planning is an important milestone in enhancing the capacity of mediation support at the AU.

The following considerations are intended to be broad guiding ideas that contribute to supporting the strengthened role of the AU's MSU. They are based on the experience of other MSSs, feedback from interviewees and an assessment of ongoing discussions at AU level. They are primarily directed at concerned stakeholders in the AU, and particularly at the members of its MSU.

### Finding entry points for mediation support

While not unique to the AU, one of the most pressing challenges for its MSU is the ability to insert itself within the complex political environment of the union and become known and trusted by mediation teams on the continent.

The AU MSU is in a unique position to deliver long-term targeted assistance and evidence-based research

It is critical that the MSU is not merely strengthened technically, key political stakeholders from within the commission and member states must continuously support the strategic drive required for the success of the unit. Only then can the unit make progress in harnessing the entry points, political backing and internal support needed to integrate itself fully within the APSA.

The comparative analysis shows that these challenges are not unique to the AU MSU and are rooted within broader political factors that challenge effective conflict prevention efforts. As Teresa Whitfield puts it: 'If at a rhetorical level all can agree that conflict prevention is a good thing, when it comes to practice, sensitivities related to sovereignty and the contestation of international norms reduce the space for preventive diplomacy and mediation.'<sup>120</sup>

The UN MSU faced similar challenges in its early years. An evaluation report of its SBT concluded that the main challenge was to show that it did not compete

with but complemented existing mediation efforts within the UN. In doing so, the MSU only deployed members of its SBT when requested by its clients to do so.<sup>121</sup> In fact, the SBT played a key role in positioning and establishing the profile of the UN MSU within the existing structure of the UN DPA as it became a trusted and widely utilised mechanism for the provision of technical operational support.

Some ways in which the AU MSU can find entry points, ranging from short- to long-term engagements, include:

- Using its strategic plan as a key cornerstone document to define its priorities in its first years, setting the tone for the way in which it will insert itself into the APSA.
- Organising events such as briefings or de-briefings with mediators in anticipation of missions and after a mediation mission has been finalised.

### Evidence-based approaches and long-term engagement

Mediation processes that are rooted in evidence and have longer timeframes are more likely to succeed. The AU MSU is in a unique position to deliver long-term targeted assistance and evidence-based research products, increasing the AU's impact on the ground.

To harness the full potential of the AU's mediation efforts its MSU must build on its internal capacity to produce targeted research. A non-exhaustive list of insights from recent studies that could be considered by the unit when rendering support or designing mediation material includes:

- Mediation is more effective and can reduce the chances of the recurrence of violence when it is combined with peacekeeping operations. The MSU can support mediators to plan for enhanced peacekeeping;<sup>122</sup>
- Sustained monitoring of the post-mediation environment, including allowing for the possibility of renegotiations during non-crisis situations, may increase the chance of long-term success;<sup>123</sup>
- Mediated agreements that include justice, military, territorial and governance provisions are less likely to lead to recurring conflict;<sup>124</sup>

- The MSU can work on building links between operational and structural conflict prevention. For instance, strong political institutions may force parties to commit to following through on their part of a mediated settlement;<sup>125</sup> and
- The MSU could draw on the networks of senior mediators such as the members of the Panel of the Wise to coordinate and reinforce anticipatory engagements with actors in countries that are vulnerable to conflict.<sup>126</sup>

### Rosters

Rosters of mediation experts have been mentioned repeatedly in the specialised literature<sup>127</sup> and by the experts interviewed for this paper as a key step that may give the AU MSU an edge in engaging with mediators in the field and may increase the impact of its support.<sup>128</sup>

The number of conflicts that have recurred after a negotiated settlement has decreased since the end of the Cold War

Since sustaining a SBT may be costly, one option is to follow the path of the UN MSU. In that case, the NRC initially acted as the employer of the SBT members and was responsible for their recruitment and hiring, organising deployments, paying salaries and other logistical matters, in close cooperation with the UN.<sup>129</sup>

This not only largely decreased the financial and logistical burden of the UN MSU, it provided the flexibility needed for the work of the SBT during its first years of operation, when it most needed to prove its utility. Once it had done so it was included in the regular budget of the UN.

### Conclusion and reflections

Since the end of the Cold War military victories have ceased to be the predominant means of terminating conflicts, giving way to peace agreements and ceasefires. At the same time the number of conflicts that have recurred after a negotiated settlement has markedly decreased, suggesting that improvements in conflict resolution mechanisms have led to more lasting peace.<sup>130</sup>

However, research has shown that the lack of technical and operational support for AU mediators has led in the past to ‘delayed, unclear and uncoordinated’ responses to conflicts in the region.<sup>131</sup> This reality underscores the importance of the AU MSU and the opportunity its consolidation brings to the table.

As this paper attempts to show, institutionalised forms of mediation support must be analysed within the context of the growing global trend in which they are immersed. While the structure of most MSSs is similar, factors such as their institutional setting, their activities and the disparities in conflict environments shape the way in which they are able to respond to increasingly complex conflicts.

One of the main concerns when designing a MSS and putting it into operation thus consists in aligning the political agenda of its organisation (its institutional setting) with a structure that is equipped to offer and capable of providing meaningful support for its mediation efforts.

This is particularly important in view of the potential merger of the AU PSD and DPA in the ongoing effort to reform the AU Commission structures. Only then will it be able to build on its capacity to provide targeted evidence-based support to mediators in the field. To do that a clear first step would be to use its forthcoming strategic plan to provide much needed clarity on the specific role that it will play within the AU peace and conflict architecture and how it will coordinate with other key actors within and outside its institutional setting.

## Notes

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### About the authors

Manuel Bustamante holds a Master's in Public Policy from the University of Chicago, US, where he was a fellow of the Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflicts. His work with ISS was part of the Open Society Internship for Rights and Governance.

Gustavo de Carvalho is a Senior Researcher at the ISS. He holds a Master's in African Studies from the University of Oxford.

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