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Valuing peace: delivering and demonstrating mediation results

Dilemmas & options for mediators

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Centre for
Humanitarian
Dialogue

Mediation for peace

The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) is a private diplomacy organisation founded on the principles of humanity, impartiality and independence. Its mission is to help prevent, mitigate, and resolve armed conflict through dialogue and mediation.

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Foreword

The Mediation Practice Series

The Mediation Practice Series (MPS) was initiated in 2008 as part of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue's (HD) efforts to support the broader mediation community. The series draws on feedback from mediators, including HD practitioners, who tell us they and their teams often lack adequate insight into other peace processes. In the past few years, the international community has significantly strengthened the support available to mediators and their teams. HD is committed to contributing to this effort and to the improvement of mediation practice.

Based on the shared view that mediators often confront similar dilemmas, although mediation differs widely across peace processes, HD is producing a series of decision-making tools that draw upon the comparative experience of mediation processes. Each publication in the series will give readers a concise overview of relevant challenges and options, and help them prepare for the potential demands of mediation processes.

Although these publications cannot replace practical experience, it is our hope that they can contribute to a more systematic learning process. The forthcoming publications in this series will be made freely available on HD's website and will be disseminated through our network and that of our partners. *Valuing peace: delivering and demonstrating mediation results* is the seventh publication in this series.

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Essential points for practitioners and donors

- Mediation offers a cost-effective and proven method for resolving armed conflict. Between 1985 and 2015, 75 per cent of armed conflicts in the world were resolved through agreement rather than by force. In most cases these processes will have involved third party facilitation or support.
- Professional mediators understand the high stakes involved in their work to prevent, mitigate and resolve armed conflict. In addition, they and their financial supporters are increasingly required to demonstrate ‘value-for-money’ to ensure continued funding.
- However, traditional monitoring and evaluation (M&E) methods are not well suited to this task, typically imposing artificially linear project models on a dynamic conflict situation, as well as compliance reporting that moves attention away from real value.
- Traditional M&E methods tend to focus on documenting the past and generating vast amounts of data, rather than enabling timely adaptation of the project in the present.
- Traditional M&E approaches rely heavily on external evaluation consultants. Even in the best of cases this may interfere with the mediation process and impose a heavy time burden on the project team, leading to low acceptance of traditional M&E approaches by mediation practitioners.
- In contrast, an ideal M&E approach for mediation should deliver useful insights in even the most dynamic and sensitive mediation environments, impose a light reporting burden, and be readily accepted by mediation teams. It should protect discretion and trust, enable rapid adaptation, and also provide some assurance that donor funds are being well spent.

- The *Adaptive M&E Model* outlined in this publication seeks to move M&E practice towards this ideal, by pursuing three levels of inquiry, tailored to the specific circumstances of the project:
 - First – assuring the quality of professional judgements through peer review.
 - Second – assessing a project’s strategic logic and its implementation.
 - Third – measuring observable results wherever possible.
- This Adaptive M&E Model is founded on critical reflection through rigorous peer review. This method supports better decision-making by mediation teams, while also providing reliable insights, and a strong basis for more investigative evaluation methods where needed.

Valuing peace: delivering and demonstrating mediation results

Dilemmas & options for mediators

1 | **Mediation is effective in resolving conflict**

Mediation and facilitated dialogue offers a cost-effective and proven method for resolving armed conflict. Almost 75 per cent of the conflicts that ended in the period from 1985 to 2015 were resolved through agreement rather than by force.¹ These agreements took a variety of forms: bilateral negotiated agreements, multilateral negotiated agreements, and agreements that resulted from formal mediation processes. In all cases, various intermediaries can safely be assumed to have played a discreet supporting or catalysing role, in public or private. Even purely bilateral agreements typically rely on some kind of liaison or shuttle diplomacy, assurances from guarantors, or some other form of indirect support by intermediaries to enable the parties to begin communicating and to come to a final agreement. The need for trusted intermediaries is, therefore, a common thread in all of these agreements, including those which appear, at first glance, to be purely bilateral.

Mediation not only contributes to peacemaking, it is inexpensive compared with the two alternatives commonly relied on to address

the problems of fragile and conflict-affected states: the use of force, or the investment of development funds. Mediation and diplomacy can be estimated to have cost less than one ten-thousandth of the total global spending on military means in 2015,² and less than one one-thousandth of the global spending on development aid in the same year.³

Even allowing for a generous margin of error in the author’s rough calculations, the comparison is stark: mediation and other forms of dialogue in pursuit of peace have helped to resolve 75 per cent of the world’s conflicts over the past 30 years, while demanding less than 1 per cent of the resources committed to other means of preventing, mitigating and resolving armed conflict. Mediation represents excellent value-for-money in comparison with the alternatives.

However, this raw comparison is not enough to satisfy the accountability needs of donors, and it also does nothing to help ensure mediation practitioners exercise good professional judgement, and deliver the best possible outcomes in each case. This paper seeks to assist mediators, and the donors who support them, to deliver and demonstrate real peacemaking value more effectively.

2 | **The value-for-money imperative**

Professional mediators work to reduce the suffering caused by the scourge of war by preventing, mitigating, and resolving armed conflict. This motivation drives the mediator to obtain the best possible results for peace, and to find out what works and what does not. In recent years, this drive has been supplemented by another overarching goal: the obligation to demonstrate ‘value-for-money’ to donors.

The source of this value-for-money imperative lies in the increasing competition for public and charitable funds in the peacemaking sector. Governments, foundations and philanthropists supporting peacemaking increasingly allocate funds only to those efforts that

can deliver tangible and measurable results. This is, of course, understandable. Choices about which budgets to cut and which to maintain are based on which programmes are the most effective in pursuit of agreed objectives. The resulting competition for funding, coupled with a strong demand for increasing accountability, has led to a sharper focus on the results that mediation can offer.

For some mediators and donors, this focus on value-for-money, results, effectiveness and efficiency is a worrying trend. After all, mediation processes are often long term, high risk, and confidential. In response to this situation, some mediation practitioners have sought to avoid the value-for-money imperative, claiming that the value of their work is impossible to measure, or perhaps beyond measure.⁴ This response is not convincing for parliaments implementing austerity budgets.

The mediation sector needs to reform the M&E tools it employs to assess and report on the value of mediation.

The above reaction of both mediators and donors to the value-for-money imperative and its M&E machinery does not serve the mediation field well. Instead, the mediation sector needs to reform the M&E tools it employs to assess and report on the value of mediation. By embracing this challenge, mediation practitioners – and the donors who support them – will be in a better position to deliver and demonstrate valuable results which promote peace.

3 **Traditional M&E approaches are not well suited for mediation**

In recent years, donors who provide funding and practitioners who receive it have found that traditional approaches to M&E are poorly formulated for the dynamic, ambiguous and sensitive environments that characterise mediation efforts.⁵ Despite volumes of analysis on

Defining value-for-money in mediation

The two essential elements of the value-for-money equation are effectiveness and efficiency.⁶

‘Effective’ is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as “successful in producing a desired or intended result”⁷ In mediation, this directs inquiry towards whether the process has achieved its interim or final objectives for the prevention, mitigation or resolution of armed conflict.

‘Efficiency’ addresses whether the right resources were used in the right way, arriving at the optimal result with a minimum of wasted effort or expense.⁸ In mediation, this should direct inquiry primarily towards whether the mediation team used sound professional judgements in designing, adapting and facilitating the mediation or dialogue process.

For the purpose of this publication, value-for-money in mediation is therefore understood to mean: *The degree to which a mediation process achieves its objectives to prevent, mitigate or resolve armed conflict, while demonstrating the use of sound professional judgement in the design, adaptation and facilitation of the mediation process.*

The phrase ‘value-for-money’ is a technical term for monitoring and evaluation professionals working in the specialised practice of public sector performance audit (or value-for-money audit). During these authoritative evaluations, parliamentary auditors examine government agencies to determine whether the projects financed by the state treasury display efficiency and effectiveness in pursuit of agreed policy goals.⁹ Performance audits may consider any publicly-funded effort, using a variety of available measures, and examining all or part of the process from design to delivery.¹⁰

This paper will focus on examples of mediation work financed by the public sector, with particular reference to the practice of the UK and its parliamentary mechanisms for accountability. The analysis in this paper can, of course, be applied to non-governmental funders of mediation who follow similar results-based management principles, as well as to the many donor states whose oversight mechanisms reflect the UK’s parliamentary accountability structures.

measuring effectiveness in conflict situations, both mediation practitioners and donors report some level of dissatisfaction with the M&E ‘status quo’.¹¹

This dissatisfaction springs from the fact that many traditional M&E approaches pursue greater accountability through tighter compliance reporting. To ensure strict compliance, M&E technicians tighten the systems that prevent money being spent outside the agreed terms of a project, so that the donors receive exactly the outcome specified in the project agreement. While this compliance-oriented approach may be appropriate in the case of a manufacturing or mass production venture, it introduces problems when the objective is an intangible or dynamic goal such as improved social welfare, more effective public services, or peace.

The well-intentioned sharpening of focus on compliance leads to demands for greater precision in both measurement and reporting, imposing a heavy reporting burden on practitioners while also obstructing the fast adaptation of donor funding in changing conflict environments.¹² The development of specialised M&E tools to accompany this approach can be accessed only by specialised consultants, and often requires information that can only be collected through comprehensive stakeholder surveys and multi-day staff workshops. In the hands of M&E advisors, the drive for greater precision and certainty also tends to manifest itself in multiple categories of indicators to measure outputs, outcomes and impact. As a result, the logframe (which was originally both starkly simple and strategically useful) can become a multi-page compliance checklist, with endless cross-referencing potential. In projects where ultimate impacts are hard to assess, the resulting M&E anxiety produces an inexorable drift towards more detailed activity reporting, obscuring the clarity of vision required for strategic insights and the adaptation of the project.

The perverse effect for both donors and practitioners is that the vast quantities of M&E data obscure the important insights needed by the project: the noise surrounding M&E data eclipses the signal, and operational decision-making is weakened.

For some donors, increasingly heavy reporting regimes have obstructed their intention to support small, adaptive and rapid interventions. Greater volumes of reporting have delivered higher transaction costs per grant, but not necessarily more insight into the decisions taken by mediation teams or the quality of those decisions. The reporting requirements of some traditional M&E approaches have, in some instances, regrettably left no room for ‘honourable failure’, reducing donor and practitioner scope for calculated risk-taking and innovation.¹³

The evolution of these kinds of M&E regimes has, ironically, reduced efficiency and effectiveness.¹⁴ Both donors and mediation practitioners recognise the need for a course correction in M&E for the sector.¹⁵

Origins of weaknesses in traditional M&E models

How did the strategically simple one-page logframe evolve into the cumbersome and compliance-oriented M&E system frequently imposed on mediation practitioners? The history of this trend can be traced to the origins of traditional M&E in the linear production lines of industrial manufacturing.¹⁶ In that context, performance and value is reflected in a repeated and predictable cycle of inputs, actions, outputs, outcomes, and ultimately in the desired impact: profitable trading.

Some of these ‘production line’ M&E models may be usefully applied to development aid and humanitarian relief spending. However, in the case of mediation these approaches are rarely useful. Unlike industrial production cycles, each mediation intervention is a distinctly unique process. Interim effects may be observable by only a limited group of participants, while the ultimate outcomes may remain intangible for some time. Countries can take 15 to 30 years to move from armed conflict to a minimal level of stability and resilience,¹⁷ during which time many other elements will have influenced the ultimate outcome. Mediation is less like a linear production line, and more like a complex web of mutually interacting factors.¹⁸

Many of the reporting requirements developed by government donors since the 1920s have drawn on the ‘production line’ model of M&E, as they have been heavily influenced by the need to demonstrate financial accountability and technical compliance with regulatory regimes. The growth of public sector ‘results-based management’ approaches in the 1980s and 1990s built on the same foundation.¹⁹ This has created a preoccupation with retrospective data collection and analysis, and moved attention away from methods that assure quality while supporting rapid learning and adaptation.

The compliance-oriented M&E and reporting approach derived from this history also tends to obscure the information that end-users find most valuable: the ‘soundbite’ summary that explains what all the effort and expenditure has amounted to, and why it was worthwhile. Paradoxically, these insights can be swamped by the growing suite of indicators, data, targets and measures which practitioners are required to address to satisfy their reporting obligations.

The limits of external evaluation for mediation

Faced with the uncertainty of measuring results and impact, mediation practitioners and donors have typically looked to external evaluation consultants to provide a solution. The use of these consultants provides practitioners and donors with reassurance, while temporarily externalising the problem of measuring and reporting on value-for-money. However, reliance on external evaluation consultants does not resolve the challenge of M&E for the peacemaking sector, and may further complicate the situation.

Experienced mediation professionals should, of course, use an external evaluator whenever needed. An external evaluation may be required where an organisation or a donor identifies a need for an expert judgement or opinion on a mediation process. The certainty of an expert judgement can be useful when there are conflicting views within an organisation, or between a donor and a practitioner. For example, where a project team is unable to accept the need for adaptation in response to critiques from colleagues or to

feedback from stakeholders, an external consultant may confront them with a stark ‘reality check’. Similarly, where an organisation requires a more investigative evaluation approach, this is best undertaken by an outside consultant to avoid damaging long term relationships of trust within the organisation, and to separate the fact-finding process from subsequent decision-making.

However, external evaluations typically bring with them a number of well-recognised disadvantages. According to some studies, both practitioners and donors working in complex humanitarian emergencies find the process of ‘educating’ an external consultant time-consuming, costly and disruptive, while the personal knowledge and relationships generated by evaluation consultations are typically exported by the consultant at the end of the contract.²⁰ While the external evaluator is usually on a fast learning curve, his or her work is unlikely to generate new insights for practitioners, or to facilitate the transfer of knowledge across regional or project boundaries, and between senior and junior practitioners. External evaluators are retained to deliver findings and recommendations, thus removing decision-making responsibility from those closest to the mediation process, placing it, instead, in the hands of a less-informed outsider.

External evaluations may also reinforce the emphasis on data collection and analysis at the expense of lighter, more practical methods that build the organisation’s capacity to learn.²¹ And, in the process of collecting their obligatory supporting data, evaluation consultants may unintentionally compromise the delicately-balanced relationships constructed by mediators, unsettling conflict parties and diminishing levels of trust in the mediation process.

It is also often the case that the expertise of external evaluators is defined too narrowly, so that organisations rely on the opinion of a single individual with good credentials, without considering the risk of tunnel vision caused by over-reliance on a the view of a single individual.²² This kind of dependency on external experts can, therefore, blind an organisation to unforeseen or ‘inconceivable’ scenarios which might be readily-generated by non-experts.²³

External evaluations typically also provoke a defensive posture from project teams, which seek to protect their own reputation, and to present the project in the best possible light. The energy of the project team is therefore channelled towards defensive explanation, instead of self-critical reflection. This dynamic is an accepted part of adversarial investigative processes, but it does not help engender constructive relationships or transparency within a mediation organisation, or between a donor and practitioner.

While the final evaluation report may be technically correct, it may lack the necessary traction or coalition-building processes needed to promote incremental change. This ‘acceptance deficit’ between the team and the external evaluator may extend to the written recommendations generated by the evaluation process: management’s response may be one of ‘damage control’, and may be designed to diminish any grounds for criticism.²⁴

For external consultants, the ‘repeat player’ effect creates a perverse incentive. The need to protect an ongoing business relationship with the client will cause the evaluator to sub-consciously or consciously soften findings or lines of inquiry that do not serve the interests of the client. This dynamic will be even more pronounced where the consultant is selected and retained by the management of the project, organisation or donor, rather than by a more independent body. External evaluators are not exempt from the same biases which hamper the judgement of full-time staff seeking promotion and affirmation from senior management, and they may be even more vulnerable to manipulation given their short term contractual employment status.²⁵

Some donors, practitioners – and even evaluation consultants – acknowledge in private that final evaluation reports are frequently consigned to the paper recycling bin or electronic archives without receiving full consideration. The report becomes little more than documentary evidence of formal M&E compliance. The potential of the evaluation is wasted and the process ends as a simple box-ticking exercise, having usually been overtaken by events in the period between consultation and reporting.²⁶

4 Re-imagining ideal M&E for mediation

If mediation practitioners and donors were to re-imagine an ideal M&E framework, it would accept and embrace the real-world constraints faced by the mediation practitioner, rather than deny them. An ideal M&E approach would enable practitioners to learn rapidly and adapt their projects, impose a light reporting burden, and provide assurance to donors that public money was being well spent.

It would find credible ways of assessing mediation processes over the long term, and would value intangible or interim outcomes alongside tangible and final results. It would recognise the methods by which seasoned mediators instinctively assess the value of their own work and that of their peers. And it would avoid investing resources in debates about causation, attribution and impact. Finally, an ideal M&E approach for mediation would allow insights from the mediation process to be rapidly conveyed across project, organisational, and geographic lines to improve practice across the sector.

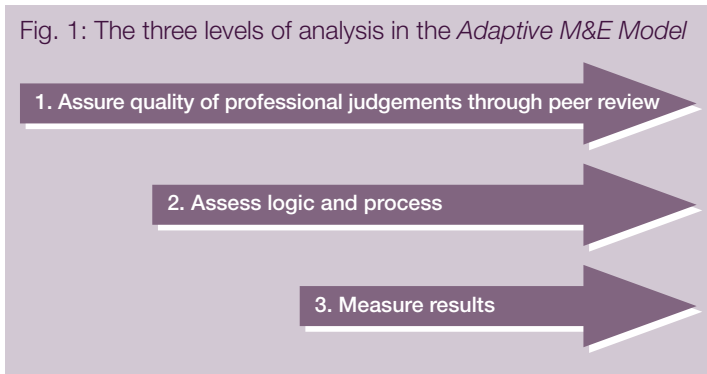
The *Adaptive M&E Model* outlined in this paper offers a framework which may come closer to meeting this ideal vision for M&E in mediation.²⁷

5 Proposing an *Adaptive M&E Model* for mediation

This paper proposes an *Adaptive M&E Model* which has been developed by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and applied to its projects since 2013, and which is well suited for measuring the value of mediation. This approach embraces the reality of mediation practice by recognising that both results and process are significant in determining value-for-money.²⁸

This *Adaptive M&E Model* has three levels of analysis. The first level focuses on assuring the professional judgements of the mediation

team which form the foundation of the project. This is done through a peer review process. The second level of analysis assesses the strategic logic behind the mediation and the planned process, while the final level of analysis focuses on evaluating and reporting results, where these are observable. This *Adaptive M&E Model* is illustrated in the simple diagram below:



5.1 The three-level *Adaptive M&E Model* explained

Some interventions to prevent, mitigate and resolve conflict produce clear results: signed agreements, formal national dialogue processes, or implemented ceasefires. Where tangible results can be measured, traditional outcome-oriented M&E approaches are useful. However, typically these final outcomes are only the tip of the ‘impact iceberg’ – below these outcomes the project may have had a significantly broader, but less measurable, impact on the conflict.

In more complex circumstances, the attainment of an ultimate goal may be difficult to observe or measure, but significant and measurable interim results may have been attained. Alternatively, in some cases results may not be measurable at all. This could include, for example, interventions which may be designed to build trust between conflict parties, but which may need a long term investment to generate a clear agreement or quantifiable effect. Some

interventions may produce smaller scale results such as increased interaction among parties, willingness to discuss face-to-face, and the ability to recognise the other side's concerns, while still not being close to resolving the conflict itself. Such results are harder to measure, especially by those who are not well-versed in mediation.

Where results cannot be clearly measured, evaluators can assess the value of a project by first examining its strategy, logic, or 'theory of change', and then by assessing the execution and adaptation of that strategy. If the project's logic is accepted as valid, then evaluators can measure progress towards the ultimate goal in the same way that the crew of a boat can determine their progress in bad weather by using 'dead reckoning' – measuring the wind, the currents and their speed against a map. If the project is advancing towards valid objectives, there will be some evidence of this progress, even if the objective has not yet been met.

In the most uncertain and fluid of situations, even this 'logic + process' approach may not be feasible. Results may not be measurable, and the peace-making process itself might be uncertain or highly dynamic, without a clear chain of causation. This would include, for example, preliminary interventions which simply seek to create better conditions for further action. Like venture capital investments, these projects may never produce more than valuable but temporary opportunities, exploitable only within a certain window of time. If the context changes rapidly, or if subsequent related interventions are not pursued, the high value of these opportunities may not be realised. However, the opportunity does not cease to have been valuable simply because no one seized it.

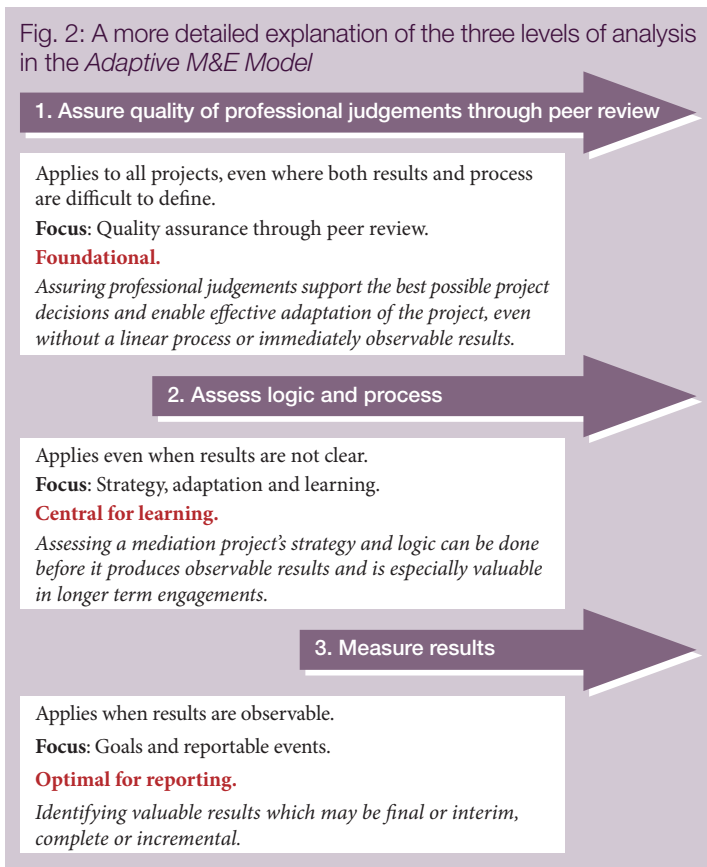
Sound professional judgements are the most fundamental element of all mediation projects, and essential for their success and sustainability.

Where results cannot be measured, and the process itself does not follow a consistent path, evaluators can still assess the value of the intervention by looking at the quality of the professional judgements made by the mediation team in adapting to the changing

circumstances. Sound professional judgements are the most fundamental element of all mediation projects, and essential for their success and sustainability.

This *Adaptive M&E Model*, therefore, allows for different analytical methods depending on the circumstances and constraints of each project. Informal consultations with key donors and practitioners in the mediation sector have indicated that this model may offer a credible evaluation framework for highly uncertain and complex situations.

Fig. 2: A more detailed explanation of the three levels of analysis in the *Adaptive M&E Model*



The expanded diagram above outlines the circumstances in which each level of the evaluation provides insight for mediation practitioners and donors seeking to deliver and demonstrate valued results.

6 | **The *Adaptive M&E Model* meets accountability needs**

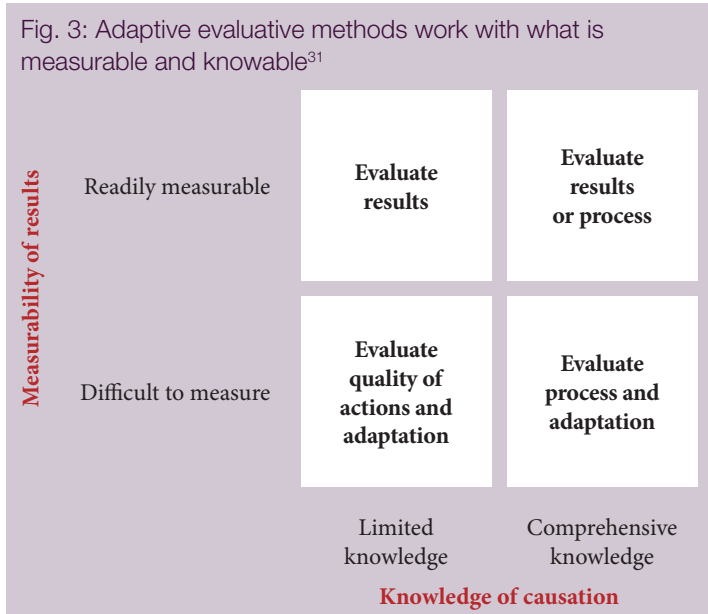
Both practitioners and donors should design their M&E models to meet the standards required by high-level oversight mechanisms such as review boards, performance auditors, or parliamentary committees. The *Adaptive M&E Model* set out in this paper more than satisfies this requirement.

A review of the evaluative methods adopted by these bodies reveals they diverge from the approach typically taken by most M&E practitioners, particularly in their willingness to consider both process-oriented and outcome-oriented approaches when needed.²⁹ Three key insights are noteworthy for both practitioners and donor agencies:

1. The M&E approach applied by parliamentary oversight bodies appears to be more flexible than the approach applied by donor agencies to their practitioner partners.
2. A parliamentary oversight body will seek to assess value-for-money and effectiveness by looking not only at ‘ultimate impact’, but also at the coherence of a project’s objectives, its strategy for delivery, and the ability of the project team to learn and adapt the project to changing circumstances.
3. Organisations which introduce credible systems to support their projects to learn and adapt are more likely to be regarded as delivering value-for-money and demonstrable effectiveness in their mediation efforts.

These three insights encourage mediators to adopt a more nuanced approach than that typically used by M&E practitioners. While evaluation consultants in the field typically pursue the elusive question of ‘ultimate impact’, the accountability mechanisms which oversee

government spending direct attention to the quality of the strategy and the process which contributed to that impact, particularly in situations where it is difficult to prove causation or to measure longer term changes.³⁰ This is illustrated in the matrix below:



Where final results are less measurable, or where knowledge of causation is incomplete, parliamentary auditors will adapt their evaluative methods to focus on the quality of processes and inputs, rather than searching endlessly for final results or proof of causation.³²

This blended assessment of results, process, and quality can be seen in the analytical framework used by the UK Independent Commission on Aid Impact (ICAI) in 2014 when assessing the effectiveness of aid spending in the development sector.³³ The Commission stated that the following four factors determined value-for-money, only one of which falls into the traditional M&E category of ‘impact’:

- **Objectives** – *Does the programme have realistic and appropriate objectives and a clear plan as to how and why the planned intervention will have the intended impact?*
- **Delivery** – *Does the programme have robust delivery arrangements which meet the desired objectives and demonstrate good governance and management through the delivery chain?*
- **Impact** – *Is the programme having a transformational, positive and lasting impact on the lives of the intended beneficiaries?*
- **Learning** – *Does the programme incorporate learning to improve future aid delivery? Is it transparent and accountable?*³⁴

This approach complements the sometimes elusive search for ‘ultimate impact’ with evidence concerning the logic and strategy for implementing the project, and the project team’s ability to learn lessons and adapt the project rapidly to changing circumstances.

In order to meet the standards of high-level accountability bodies, a balanced assessment of value-for-money and effectiveness needs to consider not only the results achieved, but also the quality of the strategy and the process which led to those results. Parliamentary auditors will take exactly this approach, looking for evidence of not only the ultimate impact of government spending, but also the quality of the intermediate outcomes and the processes which lead to those outcomes, depending on which information enables them to most effectively evaluate the project’s success.³⁵

The ICAI applied this approach to its July 2012 review of the of the UK Department for International Development (DFID) Conflict Pool.³⁶ In doing so, it did not call for additional suites of indicators, nor the collection of more exhaustive quantitative evidence, nor the use of randomised control trials to promote greater accuracy of measurement and a better analysis of causation. Instead, the recommendations of the ICAI report following the review focused on assessing strategy, learning, and quality assurance. According to the Commission, DFID needed to be consistent in ensuring there was a clear logical link between activities and high-level goals, while also demonstrating a greater ability to learn from projects and adapt to rapidly changing circumstances.³⁷

In March 2012, a similar review of the UK Conflict Pool funding mechanism by the UK National Audit Office (NAO) had resulted in a similar message, calling for a greater focus on project logic and strategic alignment, and less focus on simply measuring the execution of activities.³⁸ The NAO also notably observed that gaps in existing monitoring and evaluation practice could be filled by greater use of peer reviews.³⁹

7 Steps to implementing an *Adaptive M&E Model* for mediation

For practitioners and donors seeking an M&E approach that is well suited to mediation, there are some incremental and low-cost steps that can be taken which will place an organisation on a path towards more adaptive M&E. The mediation sector will be better placed to demonstrate value-for-money if both donors and practitioners begin experimenting with these steps – and other innovative methods – and progressively adopting any approaches which prove useful.

Adopt plain language

M&E jargon can be easily converted back into plain language, while retaining clarity and meaning.⁴⁰ In place of lengthy discussions on the definition of inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts, practitioners and donors can adopt a simplified approach that limits the use of specialised M&E jargon. The most pressing issues for both donors and practitioners can arguably be captured by posing five questions:

Fig. 4: Five key questions to encourage the use of plain language in M&E⁴¹

1. What change will we create with this project?
2. Why/how do we think the project will produce this change?
3. How will we know if we are succeeding?
4. How will we demonstrate or measure the project's success?
5. Why is our professional judgement reliable?

These simple questions correspond with the fundamental concerns of Members of Parliament, agency heads, parliamentary auditors and committees of inquiry: *were funds used for a suitable goal, and is there evidence that the funds were managed efficiently and effectively?*

Focus on strategic logic, rather than suites of indicators or causation

When judging the value of their own or others' projects, experienced mediators generally do not refer to multiple indicators for each sub-objective of the project. In contrast, they tend to start by considering the logic for a project, and the quality of the analysis on which it is based. This process is followed by a professional assessment of whether the project team has effectively pursued and adapted their objectives, exercising good professional judgement while learning from a rapidly changing context.

The project logic (or 'theory of change') is central to a well-informed evaluation of mediation efforts. Having outlined the logical argument that demonstrates the value of their mediation efforts, the practitioner can then seek evidence of a kind and of a quality to persuasively support this argument. This approach can be applied to all projects, as well as to an assessment of the whole organisation.

Seek sufficient persuasive evidence, not exhaustive proof

Both donors and practitioners need to resist the idea that value-for-money is only established if it is empirically proven using rigorous quantitative methods. Statistical analysis and expert opinion is not inherently more reliable than other, more readily available, sources of evidence, and is not always necessary.

To use an analogy from the legal field, in determining questions of causation and impact, courts not only hear expert opinions, they also hear evidence from multiple sources – including ordinary bystanders and witnesses. To extend this legal analogy further, once the available evidence has been gathered, the court makes

a determination based on standards of proof which vary according to the significance of the issue. Facts must only be proven ‘beyond reasonable doubt’ in the most serious cases, and in the majority of cases the burden of proof is based on lower standards such as the ‘balance of probabilities’ or ‘*prima facie*’ (i.e. the conclusion supported by a first view of the available evidence).

To apply this analogy to the field of mediation, rather than attempting to demonstrate success or causation ‘beyond reasonable doubt’, both practitioners and donors need to accept that using the ‘balance of probabilities’ standard of proof, or less, may be sufficient in most cases. A lower burden of proof in relation to both causation and final results would require the collection of less evidence and at less expense.

The expectation that donors require mediators to tick every box on a project logframe or to prove cause and effect may be misguided.

By taking this approach, practitioners will remain focused on providing a persuasive and transparent view of the project’s contribution to peacemaking, without absorbing massive M&E resources in attempting to fill in every blank space on a logframe.

The expectation that donor agencies – and the parliamentary committees which oversee them – require mediators to tick every box on a project logframe or to prove cause and effect may be misguided. Oversight mechanisms are typically looking, in the first instance, for ‘*prima facie*’ evidence that there are no significant issues requiring further investigation. Even where this preliminary level of investigation suggests the need for a more detailed inquiry, accountability bodies generally go on to look for persuasive evidence that public money has (or has not) been well spent in pursuit of a valid objective, rather than empirical proof of the success of every initiative undertaken within a project.

Comprehensive examination of a project against detailed logframes may reflect an excess of bureaucratic zeal, rather than a commitment to value-for-money.

Assure sound professional conduct through a charter of principles

Value-for-money can also be assured by practitioner organisations adopting a charter or code of conduct that clarifies the organisation's position on fundamental operational principles such as independence, impartiality and respect for humanity. Donors and practitioners in the mediation sector rely on these principles to provide the basis for decision-making by project teams operating in difficult environments.

The business sector has long recognised that a clear ethical framework helps enhance effectiveness, and can protect against operational and reputational risks.⁴² In recognition of the value of a clear statement of principles, some mediation organisations have adopted a charter or statement of operational values, outlining the ethical standards expected of the organisation and its staff.⁴³ These organisational principles can provide a legitimate standard against which a project can be evaluated, in addition to the usual focus on results.

Treat valued intangibles as real results

Mediation practitioners have traditionally not reported on the value of their networks and circles of influence or considered them to be a 'result'. However, in many cases, the cross-conflict network created by a mediation team is a project's primary asset, offering valuable potential for undertaking peacemaking interventions as soon as there are opportunities to do so.

New network mapping technologies are emerging which allow practitioners to simply and persuasively demonstrate the evolution of the networks they create. Some of these tools also allow mediators to examine how they can exert influence through a social or

political network. For those projects whose results are primarily described as ‘discreet channels of communication’, and ‘opportunities to avert crises’, these kinds of tools may help demonstrate value-for-money, and assure continuing support for peacemaking work.

Focus on learning and adaptation, not compliance

If an organisation wishes to improve the quality of its decision-making, and therefore its results, it must carefully cultivate a reflective learning process to support those decisions. However, despite the fact that learning is acknowledged to be an essential characteristic of effective organisations, it is frequently neglected, while priority is given to operational decisions, implementation and reporting.⁴⁴

Organisations wishing to break this self-defeating pattern can take steps to reinstate learning and adaptation as a priority within their M&E approach. Without deliberate efforts to promote professional reflection, mediation practitioners are likely to repeat their errors, make sub-optimal decisions, and implement strategies that have not kept pace with dynamic conflict settings.

Ideally, a mediation organisation’s M&E approach will reinforce the clear link between the evaluation, learning, and strategy formulation processes.⁴⁵ An organisation which is able to learn will be more effective at adapting, will also provide a deeper knowledge resource for donors and supporters, and will rapidly identify and discontinue activities which are unproductive. This kind of feedback-learning-adaptation loop can be accelerated by introducing critical reflection and opportunities for learning at frequent intervals, and on demand.

Foster critical reflection and divergent analyses

The essential recipe for rapid learning, adaptation, and better decisions is simple and proven: the illumination of blind spots, bias and unfounded assumptions through the introduction of divergent perspectives and analysis from trusted sources.⁴⁶ All practitioners suffer from these biases, and all should therefore seek effective methods for overcoming them.⁴⁷

Mediators can rapidly obtain a remedy through critical reflection, and improve the quality of their professional judgements and decisions, through rigorous peer review. This paper outlines a model for peer review which has been developed by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) since 2013, and which provides both evaluative and learning benefits. When reviews are structured to include peers from different projects and regions, this kind of learning process will support the quality of professional judgements both in the project reviewed, and in the projects represented by the peer reviewers.

Research suggests that these reviews offer the best means of assuring high quality professional judgements,⁴⁸ even providing a greater level of critical insight than expert advisors or evaluators.

8 **Critical peer review as the foundation of adaptive M&E**

The form of critical peer review for mediation processes outlined below recognises the fundamental importance of the mediator's professional judgement. This peer review process draws on methods which HD has been developing since 2013 in consultation with donors and counterpart mediation organisations.

A typical peer review process

The peer review process developed by HD typically involves a maximum of 8 to 10 participants, including at least one internal HD peer and one external peer, and one independent facilitator attached to the Strategy/Evaluation/Learning team within HD. The focus of the review is usually forward-looking, designed to shape and adapt the strategy of the project. However, the review can also have a retrospective focus if needed, assisting the project team to identify the value created by the project and sources of supporting evidence.

The peer review typically lasts between 4 hours to 2 days, depending on the number of issues to be examined. The review is supported

by minimal preparatory documentation. In the week prior to the review, the peers receive a short self-review note prepared by the mediation team, highlighting the project's objectives, logic, assumptions, as well as drawing attention to the key questions or challenges facing the team. This one or two page note also helps determine the focus of the agenda, which at HD is prepared by the Strategy/Evaluation/Learning team, ensuring the process addresses the project's real needs.

At the peer review itself, the project team meets in private with the peer reviewers and the facilitator. A pre-agreed agenda helps keep the process on track, but is adapted as the meeting progresses, to ensure that the conversation is focussed on the issues of greatest value: gaps in the project's analysis, assumptions, logic or strategy, or the development of new approaches to overcome obstacles or seize opportunities.

The facilitator seeks to move the discussion as quickly as possible from description to analysis, to ensure the review is a critically reflective and constructive process, and not simply an information-rich project briefing. This requires directive facilitation, and is achieved by the facilitator encouraging the participants to discuss the project's objectives and logic, rather than focussing on the context and the detailed project activities.

The origins of peer review approaches

As a method of promoting divergent analysis and critical thinking, peer review shares some characteristics with other methods, such as red-teaming.⁴⁹ It is a proven method of improving performance, learning and accountability, with a long history in various sectors. The use of this approach in the international public sector can be traced to the UK Office of Government Commerce's introduction, in 2001, of 'Gateway' review processes for major projects, aligned with the PRINCE2 project management method.⁵⁰ In 2012, a senior mediator and participant at the Oslo Forum, an annual retreat of peace process actors, also called for peer review to be used to improve learning in the field of conflict prevention, mitigation and

resolution. A number of peacemaking organisations already employ various models of peer-to-peer review as a key element of their M&E and learning frameworks.⁵¹

A combination of internal and external peer review also has a clear precedent in the approach adopted by Auditors General in assuring Parliaments of the reliability of their own opinions concerning the performance and value-for-money of government agencies. Given that the highest accountability bodies in the parliamentary system rely on peer review for quality assurance, mediation practitioners and their donors should not hesitate to rely on similar models.

What makes a peer review credible and useful?

For a peer review to be credible and useful for both donors and practitioners, the process must meet certain minimum standards. HD has been experimenting with peer review since 2013, and has openly shared its method with counterpart practitioners and donors for feedback. The model outlined below is one that HD and its donors have found to reliably provide credible insights while enjoying a high level of engagement from practitioners, as well as enabling rapid project adaptation. The minimum standards set out below can be modified and adapted as needed, but peer review models that do not meet these standards may fail to deliver credible insights or quality assurance.

The results of HD's experience suggest that a credible and useful peer review process for mediation should:

1. Be framed as a collegial trust-based reflection, not as a performance assessment.
2. Be capable of protecting confidential information where needed.
3. Be designed and managed independently of the project – to protect the integrity of the process, especially in relation to the selection, briefing and reporting of the peer reviewers.
4. Require only a light level of documentation and a short period of the project team's time.

5. Result in a brief and non-binding note of key insights and issues which is not circulated beyond senior management without the prior agreement of the project team, and which is not written for a donor audience.

The peer review team members should include:

6. At least one internal peer reviewer – a trusted person from outside the project team but inside the organisation (frequently more junior than the external peer, to create a diversity of views, while also enhancing mentoring and learning opportunities).
7. At least one external peer – from outside the organisation and with the right personal attributes to win the confidence of the project team (typically a seasoned professional with deep knowledge of the context or of analogous mediation processes).
8. An appropriate mix of expertise, seniority and objectivity among the other review team members, preferably including both experts and non-experts in the conflict context.

The peer review team as a whole should:

9. Only exercise ‘soft’ authority and not attempt to advance binding opinions, make determinations, or propose findings from the exercise.
10. Include one member who acts as a facilitator and helps to focus the discussion, as well as one member who takes responsibility for producing a one or two page note of the review immediately after the process, highlighting key insights and questions.

How does peer review include stakeholders and beneficiaries?

Evidence from stakeholders, beneficiaries, and close donor partners can be built into a peer review by the facilitator inviting them to participate in designated parts of the process. This allows the peer reviewers and the project team to hear stakeholders’ voices directly, and therefore to validate or challenge their own views. This may be essential in cases where project team members need to learn more about how stakeholders perceive their work. Considering

the views of stakeholders also provides a way to ensure the discussions within the peer review process do not simply reflect the project team's own assumptions.

Similarly, the review can be preceded by preliminary field research or interviews to gather more detailed information or conduct authoritative fact-finding where necessary. The facilitator of the peer review should ensure that contributions from external stakeholders are clearly defined and contained within the agenda for the peer review. This avoids the external stakeholder input eclipsing the opportunity for authentic critical reflection between peers.

The output of a peer review, and its audience

The primary benefit of a peer review is more effective decisions resulting from the insights generated during the review. The purpose is not to generate additional project documentation or proof of compliance, but to address the needs of the project.

The peer review should generate valuable insights and key questions for the mediation team, but not decisions, recommendations or findings. In one published study, an organisation found that its critical review methodology generated better outcomes when the review team held no formal decision-making authority or capacity to make determinations, but only 'soft' collegial influence. The organisation reported that when a review team has only soft authority, the recipients of the review are less likely to be defensive, and more likely to engage constructively with divergent or confronting ideas.⁵² It is tempting for organisations to do the opposite – hire a consultant to formulate a binding expert opinion, deliver recommendations, and propose a fully costed implementation plan – but this distorts the strategic and managerial decision-making process, and disempowers the team.

Peer review should, therefore, be positioned as a decision-support mechanism rather than a decision-making tool. Special care should be taken to avoid the peer reviewers becoming entangled in managerial decision-making.⁵³

The brief written record of the peer review is valuable as a catalyst for immediate action, and as an anchor point for subsequent critical reflection and accountability. With this in mind, the one or two page note of the process should aim to record only the insights and questions raised. Notes on the context and methodology of the peer review should be kept to an absolute minimum, while providing enough information about the participants and agenda to demonstrate the integrity of the process.

The primary audience for the review note is the project team itself. However, the insights gained during the process will be of interest to the organisation’s management, and potentially to project donors. As a general rule, the note of the review should not be circulated beyond the participants and the organisation’s senior management. If this rule is to be varied, for example to include donors, this should be agreed between the facilitator and the project team in advance of the peer review.

Using a demand-driven approach to introduce peer review

Many new M&E approaches encounter resistance from practitioners when introduced in a ‘top-down’ fashion. A central key to the success of peer review is its introduction on a ‘demand-driven’ basis, to support better decision-making by the project team, provide colleagues with the critical insights they need, and offer the space for reflection and support that isolated field teams typically seek. By taking a ‘demand-driven’ approach to the introduction of peer reviews and tailoring them to the team’s own needs, the organisation can be more certain of a successful launch.

As in any change process, a key part of this success will depend on the active participation of ‘champions’ within the organisation, who see the value of peer reviews (for both the peer reviewers and the project teams) and who are willing to share the burden of assuring its success. Support from senior management is essential, preferably at the CEO or Board level. Equally important is enthusiastic demand from project managers seeking improvements in their own effectiveness. This implies a healthy organisational culture that

emphasises the value of critical divergent thinking, and which rewards individuals who generate valuable critical insights, regardless of their rank within the hierarchy.

If these elements are assured, then resistance from ‘late adopters’ will not derail the introduction of peer review, even if this is unfamiliar territory. Once the demand-driven introduction has succeeded, the organisation can gradually shift to a more risk-responsive approach, directing the focus of peer reviews to the highest value and highest risk projects, and avoiding project teams ‘opting out’ to avoid critical scrutiny.

Maintaining a low-burden peer review approach

Having established the demand for peer reviews within an organisation, the natural tendency is for management to over-engineer the process while seeking to perfect it. This tendency should be strenuously avoided, because a key advantage of the peer review model is that it offers a low-burden means of delivering rapid and reliable critical reflection, at low cost. Organisations should avoid inventing additional preparatory or documentary steps, except where this proves to be absolutely essential. The model should remain audaciously light, and err on the side of being under-engineered rather than over-engineered.

A key advantage of the peer review model is that it offers a low-burden means of delivering rapid and reliable critical reflection, at low cost.

The risk of over-engineering peer review is real. In one reported case, the critical review method adopted by a large European electricity company became so comprehensive and time-intensive (and, therefore, expensive) that the organisation was able to use the approach in only 30 per cent of the decisions that might have benefited from deeper critical reflection.⁵⁴

The mediation sector will benefit most from a low-burden, low cost method of promoting rapid incremental change and adaptation for practitioners in the field.

Using peer review alongside external evaluation

Where necessary, a peer review can be complemented by an external evaluation. This may be required where authoritative ‘fact-finding’ is required due to a strong divergence of views within the project team or the organisation (or with key donors or stakeholders) regarding the project’s objectives, strategy or results. External evaluation may also be required after a peer review if that process reveals causes for concern which cannot be addressed by a collegial and non-binding process: professional misconduct, strongly conflicting views within the project team, or activities that run counter to the mission and values of the organisation. In such cases, an external evaluation or appraisal may help to address these concerns by providing an ‘expert determination’ on which management and donors can take strong action.

However, an external evaluation may not, in fact, provide the elusive promise of ‘objectivity’,⁵⁵ and may risk further complicating the outcome of the review unless the evaluation process can somehow address the root sources of contested facts or strategies, and how the project and the wider organisation should address these issues.⁵⁶ An external evaluator’s report will typically require some ‘interpretation’ by management before it can be translated into operational decisions, and some organisations may need to convene a collective dialogue with the project team (perhaps a return to the peer review model) in order to convert the external expert’s opinion into real strategic action.

How does a peer review avoid self-serving bias?

Some may object that peer review simply promotes self-serving bias, and lacks the credibility and rigour necessary for effective M&E systems. After all, people are typically predisposed to view their own efforts, analysis and accomplishments in an optimistic light.⁵⁷

Five simple controls can reduce the risk of self-serving bias in a peer review process to an acceptable level. The first, and most important, is the creation of an organisational culture that emphasises excellence and innovation, deliberately seeking divergent viewpoints.

If a peer review is presented as a creative search for alternative perspectives, peers will pose novel or confronting questions in the search for an insight which may have otherwise remained hidden. This minimises the risk of a bland, self-congratulatory review process.

The second control is established by retaining the peers in the right way, thus creating a clear role and a line of professional accountability for the peers when they are briefed on the task. While it is important that peers are trusted and respected by the project team, it is even more essential that they are answerable to a central Strategy/Evaluation/Learning focal point within the organisation, rather than to the team or its direct line management.

The participation of close and trusted peers from within the organisation or the mediation sector is a third control, as this can help minimise the likelihood of self-serving bias by both peers and the project team. A 1998 study found that self-serving bias actually diminished when a peer was a ‘close partner’ as opposed to a ‘distant other’ or clinically disinterested technician.⁵⁸ This suggests that a properly convened peer review involving trusted colleagues may, in fact, produce a more frank and self-critical reflection than a process conducted by a relatively distant external consultant or investigator.

A diverse peer review team is more likely to produce an array of divergent analyses and questions, and it can consequently provide a fourth control since it is less likely to align readily with a single optimistic, self-serving view. A strong peer review team will provide a mix of objectivity and expertise by combining senior and junior practitioners, along with expert and non-expert participants from different regions. This combination is more likely to offer robust critical discussion challenging the accepted wisdom of expert advisors, and the dominant cultural biases prevailing in the project team. The different types of experience brought by each peer can improve the understanding of a problem and assist in creating a well-crafted solution.⁵⁹

As a fifth control, the peer review system itself can be assessed by an external expert, to determine whether it is delivering the right level

of challenge and quality assurance for the organisation. This kind of external review should verify that the peer review process is working properly, posing difficult questions, and delivering useful insights.⁶⁰ By entrusting this ‘system review’ to an external evaluator, a mediation organisation can make less use of evaluation consultants at the project level, except where absolutely necessary. The high-value work of reflecting on project judgements, strategies and obstacles/results can then be entrusted to peers from inside and outside the organisation.

9 Conclusion

Mediation and facilitated dialogue offer conflict parties, victims of violence, and concerned stakeholders an effective way of preventing, mitigating and resolving armed conflict. Even a cursory assessment shows that mediation demonstrates an impressive return on investment: facilitated dialogue is essential to the resolution of the majority of armed conflicts globally, but costs several orders of magnitude less than the alternative mechanisms of armed intervention or development assistance. Despite this impressive record, it is difficult to demonstrate the impact of an individual mediation project with precision, or to establish clear causal chains.

There are a number of challenges associated with attempting to determine value-for-money in mediation processes, and traditional monitoring and evaluation methods are not necessarily well suited to the task of establishing their value. In these circumstances, using an *Adaptive M&E Model* offers a way to examine the value of a mediation project on three levels, tailoring the focus of inquiry towards the most salient and evaluable aspects of the work.

The primary and foundational level of oversight provides greater assurance of quality professional judgements among the project team through a credible system of peer review. At the second level, a mediation project’s value can be determined by assessing the coherence and adaptation of the project’s strategy. At the third

level, any measurable results should be identified and reported whenever possible, including interim or partial results. The three levels of analysis are required because not every mediation project offers readily measurable results within a given project cycle, and very few projects are characterised by the predictable implementation of a pre-determined strategy.

The *Adaptive M&E Model* is capable of delivering valuable insights for both donors and practitioners in even the most dynamic or sensitive mediation environments, clarifying the value and the challenges of any mediation effort. It enables those closest to the project to better articulate progress, even when the chances of achieving a final resolution seem very remote. And most importantly, the *Adaptive M&E Model* outlined in this paper allows mediation practitioners and donors to increase the project's chances of success. As a result, mediation efforts could become both more effective at bringing peace, and more highly valued.

Endnotes

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- 5 See commentary in Chigas et al, *Evaluating Impacts of Peacebuilding Interventions*, (London: DFID, May 2014).
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- 14 See Blum, Andrew, “The Peace Bridge to Nowhere”, *Foreign Policy*, 22 September 2014.
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- 26 See Ellis and Gregory, (2008) and also Owens, J.M., *Program Evaluation*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 2007).
- 27 The main emphasis of this publication is on the elements of M&E which are generally under-developed in the mediation sector. These include using an *Adaptive M&E Model*; evaluating a combination of quality, process and results-oriented issues; combining learning, evaluation and strategy; and taking steps to assure the quality of professional judgements through peer review. This publication does not consider in detail other interesting issues relating to the development of indicators; sources of evidence; quantitative versus qualitative methods; or causation, attribution and contribution to impact.
- 28 Since 2013, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue has been testing and refining this *Adaptive M&E Model* through informal consultations with donors and organisations working for the prevention, mitigation and resolution of armed conflict and the consequences which result from armed conflict.
- 29 For a comprehensive review of value-for-money and performance audits, see Lonsdale, Ling, and Wilkins, (Eds.), (2011).
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- 31 Matrix adapted from Put in *Norms Used: Some Strategic Considerations from the Netherlands and the UK*, in Lonsdale, Ling and Wilkins (Eds.), (2011), pp.85-87.
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- 50 Peer reviews are also used to assess the reliability of the evaluation function in various UN organisations: see the *UNEG Framework for Professional Peer Reviews of the Evaluation Function of UN organizations*, available at <http://www.uneval.org/document/detail/945> and *DAC/UNEG Joint Task Force on professional peer reviews of evaluation functions in multilateral organizations*, available at <http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/103>.
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