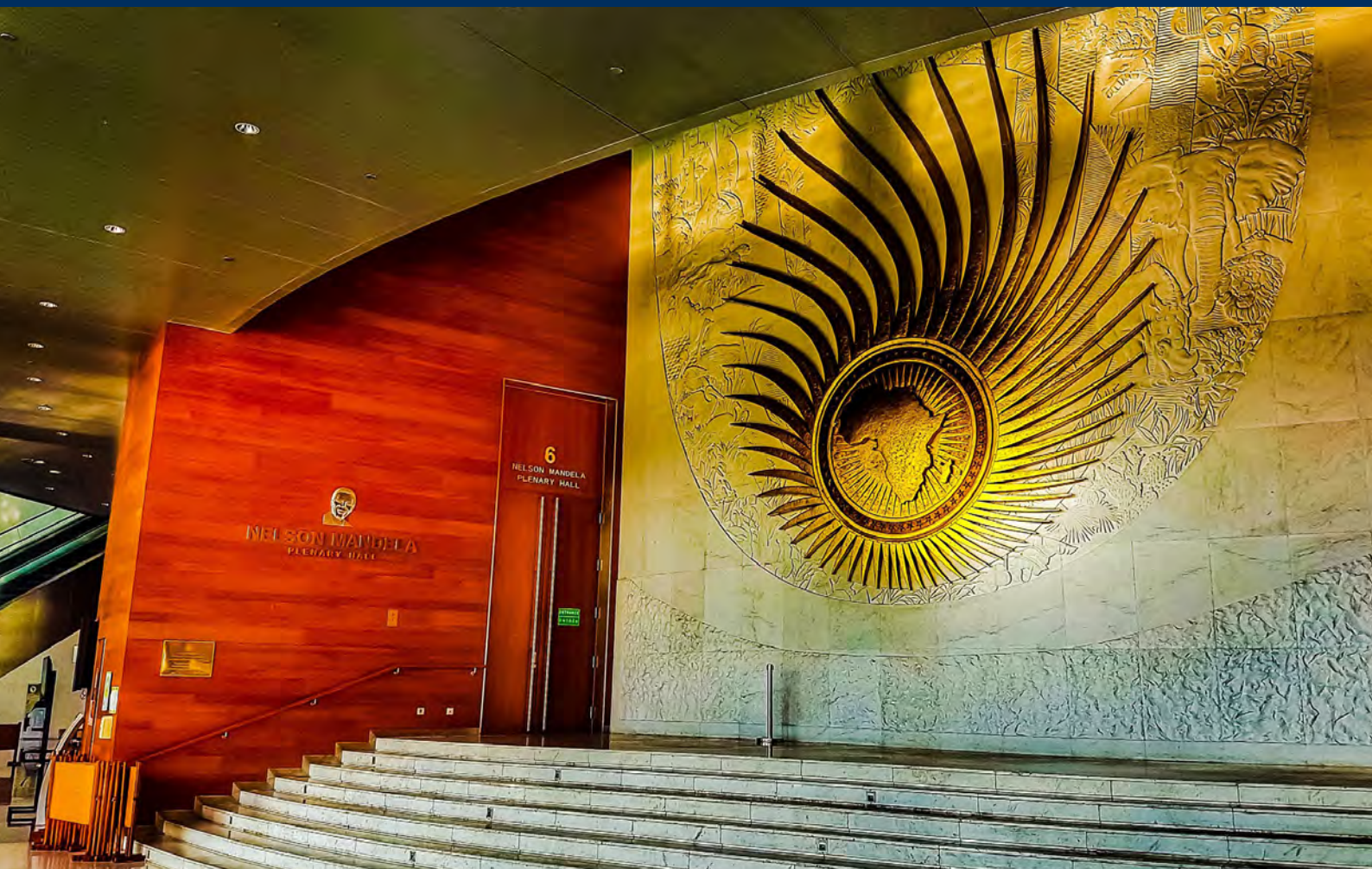# Looking for a home
Mediation and the AU

Gustavo de Carvalho

The African Union (AU) has often used mediation as one of its key approaches in its efforts in conflict prevention. As a result, mediation has become a flagship initiative of the organisation, and is undertaken by various actors within the AU. In order to become more effective, the AU now needs to clarify its approaches, roles and responsibilities.

Key points

▶ Timely and ongoing analysis is critical in identifying underlying causes of conflicts and windows of opportunity for early responses.

▶ It is critical to identify the conditions that can lead to further understanding the way forward and sustained dynamics.

▶ It is vital to ensure there is flexible and predictable funding of mediation responses.

▶ The AU must be able to identify the right time to intervene, and it must have appropriate and clear internal mechanisms.

▶ There must be clear collaboration between the different AU actors for the success of sustained and effective mediation initiatives.

▶ Identifying the limitations and strengths of the process can help manage the internal and external expectations of different roles and responsibilities, as well as support the resource-mobilisation processes.

▶ Ensuring a more direct, constant and sustained interaction between the AU Commission and member states could ensure increased buy-in that leads to better-tailored and -supported mediation processes.

Introduction

The persistence of conflicts in Africa has led to several debates among policymakers questioning the effectiveness of continental and international approaches to achieving the fundamental goal of preventing conflicts. Between 2015 and 2016, policymakers in organisations like the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU) acknowledged that international responses to crises and conflicts required a paradigm shift, moving away from reactive approaches so that prevention could become more effective.[1]

While the idea of conflict prevention is currently being reformed within the policy realm, there is still a lot of uncertainty regarding its practical implications. The concept remains vague and broad. This is a result of a dichotomy that's difficult to resolve, where expanding the concept of conflict prevention provides a powerful rhetoric, which is however still weak in implementation.[2] It is hardly disputed that preventing conflicts would be a more cost-effective and morally correct approach when dealing with conflicts. But the implementation of conflict-prevention initiatives is still not fully documented and its effects understood, and there are uncertainties on how these initiatives can make peace more sustainable.

> The AU has long advocated for the use of mediation and facilitation as a critical conflict-prevention approach

This dichotomy is particularly important in the context of mediation, which has historically been one of the flagship initiatives developed by the international community in the process of preventing conflicts. While mediation isn't the only conflict-prevention tool used by international actors, it is often recognised as one of the most important – and is widely used by international organisations like the UN and AU as an entry point in their responses. Thus it is critical to further understand the role mediation plays in preventing conflicts, and in helping to sustain peace.

In this context, it is important to analyse in further detail how global and regional organisations – some of the most important actors in mediation – respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by developing and implementing mediation initiatives that aim to prevent conflicts.

The AU, one of the key global players in matters of peace and security, has long advocated for the use of mediation and facilitation as a critical conflict-prevention approach. Since its creation in 2002, the AU has engaged in numerous mediation processes in Africa, including in Burundi, South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia, Comoros and the Central African Republic. While UN mediation roles have been better documented and analysed, there is still little understanding on how mediation is structured within the AU, and what some of its challenges and opportunities are.

This report argues that mediation processes, including those designed and deployed by the AU, need to be better tailored to address the long-term

challenges faced by countries in conflict. In particular it questions a number of key challenges and opportunities faced by mediation at the AU, especially its definition, application and its location within AU's bureaucracy. The report will describe mediation in a way that not only includes formally mandated processes, but also those that are more informal.

The report is divided into three sections. Firstly, it provides an overview of the African Peace and Security Architecture and the role that is played by mediation. Secondly it provides an institutional assessment of mediation as part of the broader dynamics of AU conflict-prevention mechanisms and its impact on the conceptual, normative and practical approaches taken by the AU. The report concludes by providing an analysis of gaps, strengths and opportunities for the AU to identify key factors to enhance its mediation approaches.

The report is based on the following methodological approach. First, a bibliographical review was conducted to identify current thinking and analysis on the topic. Second, primary data was assessed, including communiqués and documents from the AU summits and Peace and Security Council (PSC) meetings. Third, interviews were conducted in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, with AU Commission (AUC) staff, practitioners and academics. This gave invaluable insight into the research, providing better context for some of the policy approaches and bureaucratic decisions as a means to broaden the understanding of mediation at the AU.

Finally, an earlier version of this article was presented at the Third Academic Conference on International Mediation in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 17 to 19 July 2017. The conference, organised by the Global South Unit for Mediation, Centre for Mediation in Africa and swisspeace, provided the author with extensive feedback to help strengthen the report's argument and link it to relevant developments in the mediation field.

The place of mediation within the African Peace and Security Architecture

The creation of the AU in 2002 brought a great deal of optimism regarding the role of African actors in intervening to resolve and prevent conflicts in Africa. The AU Constitutive Act of 2000 provides the principles of the AU's engagements, as a means to ensure that the continent plays a non-indifferent role in African conflicts. It is advanced by the PSC Protocol of 2002, which was

able to provide more clarity on its specific mandate and goals.[3]

Being the primary African decision-making organ on peace and security matters, the PSC Protocol lists a series of mechanisms that can be used to prevent, resolve and manage conflicts in Africa. These mechanisms, collectively referred to as the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), are based on the following pillars: Peace and Security Council; Panel of the Wise; Continental Early Warning System; African Standby Force; and the African Peace Fund.

> AU Agenda 2063 acknowledges that conflict and violence are a major threat to development

APSA was created based on the understanding that the perceived ownership and political legitimacy of the AU[4] would give Africa comparative advantages in its conflict-prevention approaches. This was because of the perception that the international community was often unwilling or unable to respond to crises in Africa.

As a result, the AU has engaged in developing a range of tools that enable the continent to promote 'peaceful resolution of conflicts among member states of the Union'.[5] Each APSA pillar has different conflict-prevention roles. The pillars' increasing maturity, achieved through better institutional capacity of the AU, provides the space in which the AU can be more effective in conflict prevention, early warning and early responses, as a means to prevent full-blown conflicts in Africa.[6]

More recently, the AU has engaged in developing a set of strategic policy documents that will provide guidance to the institution in its future endeavours. The most prominent of all, AU Agenda 2063, acknowledges that conflict and violence are a major threat to development.[7] This, by default, implies that conflict prevention is a critical step to 'silencing the guns' in Africa.

The AU has also developed specific roadmaps that aim at the better implementation of its overall goals. One in particular, the APSA Roadmap 2016-2020,[8] highlights the different conflict-prevention approaches taken by the AU. The roadmap shows that AU conflict-prevention approaches involve simultaneously a direct and operational focus of intervening before violence occurs.

The roadmap also approaches conflict prevention through systematic responses that aim to address the root, immediate, and structural causes of conflict.[9] This idea highlights the two key approaches – operational and structural – taken by the AU when dealing with conflict prevention.

Conceptual underpinnings and trends of mediation at the AU

Conflict prevention at the AU: structural and operational

In the AU context, operational prevention can be seen as actions designed to address the proximate or immediate causes of conflicts, normally taken during the escalation phase of a given conflict, where immediate, dynamic factors come into play.[10] Structural prevention is identified by the AU as an approach that aims to reduce the likelihood of conflict and violence with positive incentives for societies that strengthen their resilience and provide access to political, economic, social and cultural opportunities.[11]

Mediation and dialogue responses are most frequently seen through operational preventative responses, where the main focus of the AU is to address the proximate or immediate causes of conflicts. However, structural links can in principle be found, considering that structural prevention often deals with issues related to political inclusivity, the development of justice systems, public administration, governance and economic development – matters often dealt with in mediation and dialogue processes.

Structural conflict prevention at the AU is still mostly at a policy level. Despite some developments, especially through governance and socio-economic initiatives conducted by different parts of the AU, further clarity is still needed on some of its practical approaches.

The AU's structural conflict-prevention vision is highlighted in the AU Structural Conflict Prevention Framework. This framework mostly describes the Continental Structural Conflict Prevention Framework (CSCPF) and the potential development of Country Structural Vulnerability Assessments (CSVAs).[12] While these could bring important elements on long-term direction, the CSCPF and CSVAs are still being developed, with Ghana being the first country of implementation. It is expected that further developments

will provide clarity on their links to other conflict-prevention tools, including early warning and mediation.

While the AU's roadmaps, frameworks and plans provide clarity when dealing with operational approaches, they don't offer practical steps for effective structural conflict prevention.[13] This has an impact on mediation efforts that still suffer the AU challenge of being designed and implemented with limited temporal scope.

The challenge of defining mediation at the AU

There is still no standardised definition of mediation at the AU, so the traditional meaning of the word can't always be applied. Broadly speaking, traditional mediation can be defined as a process of dialogue and negotiation in which a third party helps two or more disputant parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage or resolve a conflict without resort to force.[14] It has particular links to international facilitation, which is understood by international law as a type of intervention in disputes of an organ that doesn't possess a formal political authority, but benefits from the trust of the parties, leading to the proposal of solutions that are not compulsory for the parties.[15]

Even with the lack of a clear definition of mediation at the AU level, there are particular principles and approaches that can help categorise its initiatives. While the definitions of mediation and facilitation are somehow similar, the idea of a formal mandate by the parties is something critical to understanding the AU's roles. Facilitation becomes, then, a less directive type of approach, where the focus is less on decision-making and more on enhancing the interests and needs of the parties, and preparing for potential joint action.[16]

> Mediation and dialogue responses are most frequently seen through operational preventative responses

This is of particular importance to the AU, as much of the work of special envoys is done through informal approaches (not as visible) rather than formally mandated mediation processes.

Nevertheless, the AU has developed a variety of mediation structures, practices, protocols, guidelines and standard operating procedures (SOPs), often in

parallel with each other or without great formalisation.[17] During 2009, the AU engaged in a wide process of developing structures and systems for better mediation, including its Plan of Action to Build the AU's Mediation Capacity[18] and the AU Mediation Support project. By 2012, the AU developed SOPs for mediation support,[19] and a Mediation Support Unit (MSU) has been under development since 2016.

The AU Peace and Security Department describes the following early response and mediation initiatives conducted by the AU by April 2017:[20]

Mediation efforts of the AU Peace and Security Department	
20	Conflict resolution processes
13	Liaison offices countries
11	Ongoing early-response efforts
8	AU woman mediators/envoys
280	Panel of the Wise members since 2013
9	Current special envoys and high representatives

Within this context, an attempt to define mediation at the AU could be loosely characterised within a wide range of approaches intended to help parties identify measures that reduce the likelihood of a conflict arising and/ or continuing. Within these approaches, AU engagements in mediation are also based in the context of facilitation, good offices, informal interactions, and others.

Mediation approaches at the AU

The idea of the informality of AU approaches to mediation is not only because of the lack of a clear definition. Informal approaches to mediation are often seen at the AU as a way to deal with topics, issues or countries in ways that avoid the political sensitivities that could arise.[21]

One of the problems with structured mediation, says an AU staff member, is the challenge of sustaining efforts and establishing entry points.[22] Considering that mediation requires acceptance (and a mandate) from the different parties, informal approaches enable the AU to engage with a wider range of actors without necessarily being constrained by the mandating aspects.

The mandating of mediators also reflects the political dynamics between the AU Commission and its member states. There is a strong role played by the AU Summit as the main decision-making authority at the AU, and some interviewees say there is often an unclear and unstructured understanding of roles, boundaries and responsibilities between heads of state and the AU Commission itself.[23] Two examples of such tension came from the crisis in Ivory Coast (2010) and Burundi (2015). Therefore, in many cases there are clashes of interest between the governments and the AU Commission, indicating a space for less structured or formalised approaches and creativity.

However, it is important to note that while the informal (and often discreet) approach in many mediation cases may bring dialogue with different parties, it also provides challenges regarding its entry point. This is especially relevant

THERE IS STILL NO STANDARDISED DEFINITION OF MEDIATION AT THE AU

in the context of relying on engagement with governmental parties as a means to expand the AU's initiatives. This makes it hard to ensure that the AU provides the perception of an entirely neutral approach to mediation, as it may be perceived as prioritising the role of government.

Mediation categories and functions

Even though definitions and boundaries and the different mediation roles are not very clearly articulated by the AU, there are specific functions that are often deployed as part of the AU's mediation processes. AU envoys and mediators are appointed by the chairperson of the AU Commission, often based on the request of the PSC or the Assembly of Heads of State.[24] Dimpho Motsamai describes four types of mediators mandated by the AU, while another AU staff member provides a description on how each type is usually described:[25]

AU categories of mediators[26]	General description of functions[27]
Special Envoys	Generally have a more limited mandate in terms of mediation, and often attempt to bring different parties together. A special envoy doesn't have as deep a mandate as an officially appointed mediator, but does have more freedom of action than a special representative of the chairperson (SRCC).
High Representatives of the Chairperson	High representatives often have a more robust mandate and are able to engage more directly with the conflict parties.
Special Representatives of the Chairperson	Especially through the role of liaison offices, they have the specific role of interacting regularly with the government and providing a connection between the AU and the government. They have a more limited approach as a mediator.
High Level Ad Hoc Committees	Despite not being explicitly mentioned in the PSC Protocol, these normally comprise sitting or former heads of state. They are generally created to ensure that governments bring support to processes, for example in cases such as Libya, Ivory Coast and South Sudan.[28]

The different engagements of the AU in mediation don't necessarily provide more clarity regarding their specific roles and functions in relation to each other. Mandates of special envoys and high representatives of the chairperson are often interchangeable, and their placement and selection are not always clearly specified. This is also the case in terms of the approaches taken – these can range from more formal mediation processes (e.g. an AU mediator in South Sudan) to more informal approaches.

Facilitation roles are often also undertaken by the leadership of the AU Commission. The Peace and Security Commissioner, for instance, often engages in dialogue with countries, especially when it is identified that there are specific emerging pressure points coming from those countries.

Regardless of the category of mediators engaged in conflict situations in Africa, it is clear that there is a heavy reliance on the continent's major political figures, including members of the Panel of the Wise. The roles of former heads of state – like Joaquim Chissano from Mozambique and Thabo Mbeki from South Africa, through their mediation roles in Zimbabwe and Sudan – are examples.

THE AU'S PANEL OF THE WISE HAS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN MEDIATION

It was mentioned during interviews that using important political figures comes with advantages and disadvantages.[29] From an advantage point of view, it can provide further political legitimacy and political capital to send someone of such calibre. However, using high-level mediators often comes at the cost of their mediation skills and their ability to deal with the mediation process itself in a neutral manner.

The Mozambican case is an example of AU engagements through informal approaches. While the AU hasn't played a major role in preventing the violence that has emerged in the country since 2013, or served as an official mediator, it has engaged in informal talks in the country, including during a visit by the AU Peace and Security Commissioner to the country in 2016. The commissioner used some of the approaches of the AU in dialogue and mediation, including by incentivising Mozambican parties to secure peaceful solutions to the problems.[30]

This kind of approach, where AU engagements are not widely publicised, consist of an important aspect of AU's approaches in dialogue in the continent, according to interviews conducted at the AU.[31] While this is important in the context of the AU being able to operate in sensitive situations, it also creates a challenge regarding effectively identifying where and how its approaches are being deployed.

The AU Commission turf battles: looking for a mediation home

Albeit in an ad hoc manner, the AU has increasingly dedicated its structures and senior leadership to mediation and facilitation processes. Since 2002, for instance, the AU has often used the role of the chairperson and commissioners, as well as the Peace and Security Department (especially through the Conflict Prevention and Early Warning, and the Crisis Management and Post-Conflict Reconstruction divisions), and the Department of Political Affairs. Each of these structures has used mediation as a response to perceived challenges in imminent or ongoing conflicts in Africa, through the above-mentioned formal and informal approaches.

Within this context, several actors of the AU have played a direct or supportive role in the deployment of mediators. The Panel of the Wise has an important role in mediation, especially through the use of special envoys.

Specific divisions, such as Crisis Management and Post-Conflict Reconstruction (CMPCRD) and Conflict Prevention and Early Warning (CPEW), play particular roles in the development of mediation initiatives. AU liaison offices also often play an important role in political dialogue in countries where they are deployed, although results and impact are often inconsistent.[32]

Finding the correct relationship among the AU's different divisions is a key challenge that needs to be resolved. The division of labour among divisions such as CPEW, Panel of the Wise and CMPCRD shows that while those divisions are interlinked in principle, in practice they often engage in mediation independently of each other.

> Finding the correct relationship among the AU's different divisions is a key challenge that needs to be resolved

Between CPEW and CMPCRD there is a need for collaboration and interaction. This is mostly related to the uncertainty of when the responsibility for an issue or country is transferred between divisions or is seen as part of either the crisis-management or conflict-prevention mandate. Cases like Gambia, Liberia, Burundi and Guinea-Bissau all show that the placement of countries in specific divisions is not always straightforward, where the line between the roles of CPEW and CMPCRD is blurred.

Coordination between the AU and other mediation actors is a challenge that must be addressed. The Regional Economic Communities (RECs) for example have actively played a role in mediation processes. Many RECs have also been at the forefront of linking mediation with the development of sophisticated early-warning systems. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) for instance has developed an early-warning system that rivals (if not exceeds) the quality and capacity of that of the AUC.

The idea of subsidiarity, as a principle that would regulate the relationship between the AU and RECs, is not welcomed by all, and challenges between them are frequent. This is particularly because while the idea of subsidiarity is present in the Memorandum of Understanding between the AU and all RECs signed in 2008, in practice there are different interpretations

of who takes precedence when there is a conflict of interest between the AU and the regions.[33] Some see subsidiarity as a top-down hierarchical approach between the AU and its respective RECs. Increasingly there is an understanding that the relationship between the AU and the RECs is guided not by a hierarchical relationship, but rather that their roles are complementary.

Examples of such disputes between the AU and RECs are many. In Madagascar in 2009, the AU, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the UN all had different views and approaches to the mediation process. Whereas SADC demanded the unconditional reinstatement of Marc Ravalomanana as president (including through threat of force), the AU preferred the option of negotiations without preconditions.[34] Similar challenges of coordination and views can be found in Guinea-Bissau in 2012, Cote d'Ivoire in 2010, the Central African Republic in 2013, and more recently, Burundi in 2015.

> Despite certain challenges, there are attempts to increase coordination and mutual understanding between the AU and RECs

It is important to note, however, that despite certain challenges in defining roles and responsibilities, there are attempts to increase coordination and mutual understanding between the AU and RECs. The AU Mediation Support Capacity Project, led by the Panel of the Wise secretariat,[35] focuses not only on supporting the capacity of the AU to plan and deploy mediation interventions, but also on supporting different RECs' mediation capacity. The AU for instance in 2017 engaged in providing support to the Economic Community of Central African States' (ECCAS) mediation capacity, particularly relating to ECCAS's role in the peace process in the Central African Republic.[36]

However, the work on mediation support must not only be concerned about capacity building of this support and the mediators themselves. It is important to create mechanisms that empower and enable the expertise of mediation support to effectively influence mediation in its design, implementation and follow-up processes, including sustained engagements.

Considering that mediation per se, either more or less formalised, is part of a systematic and specialised process, a critical challenge faced by the AU has been its heavy dependency on ad hoc processes. In the past few years there have been attempts to increase the predictability and technical approaches to mediation at the AU. This is probably because mediation processes and conflict-resolution mechanisms are largely still reactive in nature.

The creation of the Mediation Support Unit (MSU) within the AU Commission is worth mentioning. In 2016, the MSU was established within the CMPCRD to begin a systematic approach to help envoys and other mediators, including through serving the secretariat for the annual retreat of African mediators and special envoys and analytical briefing for mediator processes.[37]
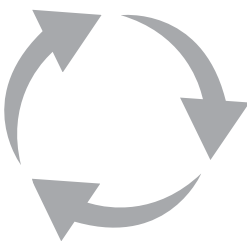
MEDIATION IS PART OF A SYSTEMATIC AND SPECIALISED PROCESS

It was created as a mechanism to provide systematic and sustained support to the mediation work of the AU.[38] In order to do so, it is not only expected to provide technical and logistical support to mediators, special envoys and special representatives, but also to document AU mediation practices and support monitoring and evaluation of AU mediation processes.[39] The MSU should, in principle, work closely with the AU's early-warning system and with other units within the Peace and Security Department and other institutions.

However, the MSU has been subject to intense internal scrutiny and endless debates regarding its location, tasks and goals. Despite its creation in 2016, by November 2017 the unit had not yet been set up, with staffing and definition of practical approaches still pending. This challenge in a way provides an indication of how difficult it is to create a new structure at the AU that by design overlaps and requires day-to-day collaboration among several different actors.

To some extent, the Panel of the Wise has performed some of the responsibilities envisaged for the MSU. The panel has since its creation in 2010 led and hosted the AU High Level Retreat for Special Envoys and Mediators. The retreat has served as an opportunity to take stock of current developments, challenges and opportunities of mediation at the AU, including practical and conceptual issues regarding mediation practice in Africa.

During the Addis Ababa July 2017 summit, new members of the panel were elected. These new members, including former heads of state, could help the panel consolidate its responsibilities as a political facilitator and engagement in conflict-prevention and mediation initiatives. Past members have engaged in several mediation processes, including in Burkina Faso and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

> Preventive diplomacy and mediation would be covered by the first window of the funding, potentially reducing the AU's reliance on external funding

Funding for AU mediation initiatives is also a challenge, like for the rest of the AU Commission. For instance, considering the reliance of funds from voluntary bilateral donors, it decreases the degree of predictability that AU mediation will be properly funded and continued.

The discussions to revitalise the AU Peace Fund in 2017 as proposed by the fund's high representative Donald Kaberuka provides a space to ensure predictable and sustainable funding for AU operational responses, through the proposed 0.2% levy on imports from outside Africa.[40] Preventive diplomacy and mediation would be covered by the first window of the funding, potentially reducing the AU's reliance on external funding. However the continued commitment of African member states to implement such a proposal to increase self-funding is still uncertain.

THE MEDIATION SUPPORT UNIT WAS ESTABLISHED IN 2016 WITHIN THE CMPCRD TO HELP ENVOYS AND OTHER MEDIATORS

What are the critical challenges and opportunities for AU mediation?

Mediation processes need to respond to specific conflict dynamics in order to be effective; taking into account the positions, interests and needs of the parties and the broader society, as well as regional and international environments.[41] Three issues are particularly relevant in linking structural prevention to mediation: how the process is managed, including through the presence of adequate expertise; the sustained implementation of peace agreements; and the role of the mediator.

In its 2009 Plan of Action, the AU directly states that there should be no quick-fix solutions in conflicts, and that mediators should help parties address the root causes of conflicts.[42] More recently, in 2016, the High-Level Retreat of Special Envoys and Mediators acknowledged the need for long-term commitment for prevention and mediation.[43]

> The High-Level Retreat of Special Envoys and Mediators acknowledged the need for long-term commitment for prevention and mediation

While there is some understanding that structural causes have a direct impact on how conflicts start, there is less understanding of the practical steps to ensure that planning is included. Also, the AU still needs to show it has capacity to remain active in supporting the implementation of agreements that aim, beyond stopping imminent or ongoing violence, to address the structural and root causes of conflicts.

One AU staff member mentioned that an important way in which the AU could become more active was to see the opportunity for the structural impact of mediation through inclusivity.[44] In this context, the idea of bringing wider societal groups, including civil society organisations, to the negotiation table could provide the opportunity to move beyond addressing issues more relevant to the elite or political groups. It also brings the understanding that mediation can build towards ideas of reconciliation and social cohesion, critical aspects regarding structural prevention.

Another AU staff member mentioned the example of the Bangui National Forum, a process that brought together a wide range of actors from the Central African Republic as part of a process of national reconciliation and dialogue.[45] The interviewee shared that linking the national dialogue with a mediation process enabled a clearer connection between mediation and the identification of priorities. It also offers communities avenues to take ownership and become more relevant interveners.

The Panel of the Wise, in particular, has started interacting with the issue by engaging with women in mediation processes, including through the establishment of the Pan African Women in Mediation Network. This is based on the understanding that including more women's voices at the negotiation table can provide the space to focus on priorities essential

IN ITS 2009 PLAN OF ACTION, THE AU STATES THAT THERE SHOULD BE NO QUICK-FIX SOLUTIONS IN CONFLICTS

for the empowerment of women, and help support the sustainability of peace processes.

As such, the AU still faces several issues regarding its effectiveness and ability to respond to emerging challenges in Africa. In 2007, Laurie Nathan shared some key problems within the context of mediation in Africa: insufficient expertise in mediation; inadequate institutional support for mediators; no institutional memory and learning; and no viable concept of mediation.[46] Today, despite progress made with stronger institutionalisation of certain approaches, most of the challenges remain – especially regarding institutional support for mediation, expertise and a viable concept of mediation.

While there is a technical aspect regarding the capacity of the AU Commission, the role of member states should not be understated. The commission's role includes responding to certain challenges, but the main decision-making still lies with heads of state, especially during the AU summit.

If member states want to see more effective mediation and conflict-prevention processes, both in the short and long term, they need to ensure that the AU's mediation processes are more fit-for-purpose. They need to provide further clarity to the AU Commission, especially through structures that are clearer in terms of its own mediation goals.

To be more effective in dealing with structural causes of conflict, AU approaches in mediation would benefit from further addressing the following gaps, as presented by a senior AU official:[47]

Gaps	Description
Understanding	Timely and ongoing analysis is critical in identifying the underlying causes of conflicts and windows of opportunity for early responses.
Benchmark for success	Beyond bringing various parties to the negotiation table, it is critical to identify the conditions that can lead to further understanding the way forward and sustained dynamics. This would help mediation processes in identifying the mediation process own benchmarks for success, further than the signing of agreements.
Funding	This is a particularly serious issue. Flexible and predictable funding is needed for mediation responses. If resources are allocated early enough, and sustained throughout the cycle, this can ensure continued support.
Timely and intensive intervention	The question of the right time to get involved is essential for the AU. The AU must not only be able to identify the right time to intervene, but must also have the correct mechanisms. This ensures that intervention happens not just when an issue is 'hot', but also that there are sustained responses in terms of intensity.
Collaboration	There must be clarity regarding the collaboration between institutions for the success of sustained interventions. Therefore the AU, UN and RECs can further collaborate while ensuring that complementarities are strengthened and fostered throughout the cycle of responses.
Clarity of expectations	Identifying limitations and strengths in the process can help manage internal and external expectations. It can help ensuring that the mediation process is tailored for its expected results, and help mobilise complementary support.
Engagement with member states	Member states need to be able to engage with issues early enough to ensure their understanding of the process, and the long-term implications. Ensuring a more direct, constant and sustained interaction between the AU Commission and member states could ensure increased buy-in that leads to better-tailored and -supported mediation processes.

Conclusion and reflections on the future of mediation for the AU

The general goal of mediation is to reach agreements that the parties are willing to implement,[48] but this requires clarity in terms of the roles and responsibilities of the mediator – in this case the AU. Therefore the AU needs to be able to provide further clarity on the role it plays in mediation, including through its own internal structures.

There are several challenges to further clarify the role of the AU and ensure this materialises. First, while the AU acknowledges the need to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to mediation,[49] it has also faced challenges to ensure that there are predictable structures and mechanisms that can effectively respond to the identified issues.

Second, part of the challenges regarding the AU's roles may be in terms of its own management of expectations and understanding how much its mediation processes can effectively contribute to long-term solutions. AU mediation processes should also come with the correct links between actors who are able to follow up and support the process, but also being realistic regarding its own expectations.

Mediation is a long-term process,[50] therefore coordination between the different AU actors is an essential part of being able to sustain efforts and engagements at different levels. Providing further clarity can help avoid turf battles between different departments at the AU. This uncertainty brings not only bureaucratic limitations to the organisation's reach, but also creates a direct barrier in terms of conceptual interaction.

Ensuring inclusivity of process, including the full participation of women and other socially differentiated groups in civil society, is not only a bonus for the institution. It is a critical step in ensuring that the parties of mediation processes can identify and address the long-term effects of peace agreements, and the roles regarding broader groups in society, including those that are often marginalised.

By helping parties in seeing a crisis beyond the short-term impact of decisions, the AU could become a champion for long-term planning. Rather than simply focusing on the development of further mediation activities, it requires a strong sense of restructuring its own mindset, making more deliberate connections between mediation and long-term results.

And while better using Agenda 2063 and its goals to silence the guns is an important step, it has to become part of the entire organisation's approach and mindset.

Only then will it be able to provide stronger evidence of its support to the sustainability of peace processes.

Notes

1   At the UN level, the key reflection processes on conflict prevention between 2015 and 2017 have been the reports from the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, available at http://peaceoperationsreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/HIPPO_Report_1_June_2015.pdf; the report on the Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture, available at http://www.un.org/en/peacebuilding/pdf/150630%20Report%20of%20the%20AGE%20on%20the%202015%20Peacebuilding%20Review%20FINAL.pdf; and the Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325, available at http://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/UNW-GLOBAL-STUDY-1325-2015%20(1).pdf; at the AU level, Agenda 2063, especially through its goal of silencing the guns, is a key driver of reflection on the importance of more effective conflict prevention, available at https://www.au.int/web/en/agenda2063.

2   De Carvalho, G, Conflict prevention: what's in it for the AU? Institute for Security Studies, Policy Brief, May 2017, p.2, available at https://issafrica.org/research/policy-brief/conflict-prevention-whats-in-it-for-the-au.

3   PSC Protocol.

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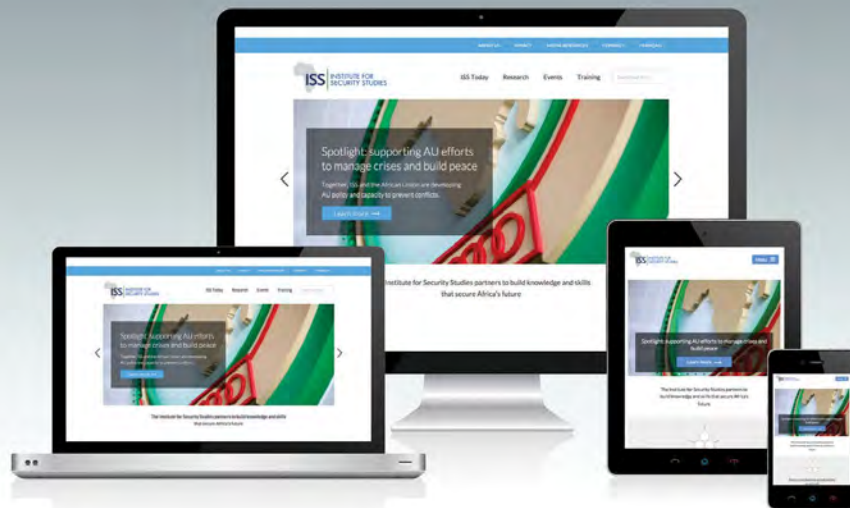
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About the author

Gustavo de Carvalho joined the ISS in 2014 as a senior researcher in the Peace Operations and Peacebuilding programme in Pretoria. Before joining the ISS, he worked as a coordinator at the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes in Durban, and as a researcher at Global Witness in London. De Carvalho is experienced in capacity development, policy support and peace and security research in Africa. He has a master's degree in African studies from the University of Oxford and a bachelor's in international relations from the University of Brasília.

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