

The Technocracy Trap

Innovation or Technocracy in International Mediation?

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Sidonia Gabriel, Head of the Policy & Platform Program and KOFF Project Director at swisspeace

Abstract: If we understand innovation as a new idea to improve a given situation, mediation processes are per se oriented towards an innovative outcome. However, international actors often limit innovation in mediation processes due to their technocratic process understanding. The author explains this phenomenon and makes a few recommendations for third parties working in the field of international peace mediation.

Keywords: Technocratic understanding, innovation and technocracy, decision-making power in mediation processes, role of third parties in mediation processes, international actors.

The Issue

Innovation in mediation processes lies in the reflection about a new and improved way of dealing with a conflict between two or more conflict parties. Mediation could thus lead to a wider political and societal process from which all parties could benefit and that would ideally bring an evolutionary step towards creating peace in a conflict-ridden society.

The international peacebuilding community often complains about the inefficiency of international mediation processes that take

place during or after armed conflict, like for example in Syria or Libya, but also in often forgotten conflicts such as in the Western Sahara. The question is whether the peacebuilding community needs new approaches to mediation in order to get better results, or whether international mediators must let the innovation inherent in mediation processes, happen.

In this article, I explore the second argument. I link the limited innovation in international mediation processes to a technocratic¹ understanding by intervening third parties and

¹ Technocracy relates to decision-making based on expert or technological knowledge (check also: www.encyclopedia.com). Institutions in development aid and peacebuilding maintain a selected number of experts and consultants to support and legitimize their decision-making. In this article, I make a link between technocratic

decision-making and bureaucratic governance as it bases part of its legitimacy on expert knowledge. (Weber, Max (1956), *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Tübingen, S. 129.)

Bureaucracy refers to a form of exertion of governance that is upheld by an administration with its rules and procedures; it is based on de-personalization, hierarchical

organizations. How does this understanding influence mediation processes and how might it hinder innovative solutions to a conflict?² Firstly, I explain what aspects of mediation processes could trigger innovation. Secondly, I refer to an example of bureaucratic influence on a mediation process in Mali. I then analyze this impact and close with a few recommendations.

Aspects of Innovation in Mediation Processes

Innovation stands for a new idea that helps to improve or change a certain condition or situation. Elements of transformation (change) and of something new are crucial to innovation. Conflict resolution or, more narrowly, mediation, aims at improving the situation of the conflict parties by tackling their conflict through a process of listening, joint discussion and joint search for alternatives. Whether finally the solution found is innovative or not is not a focus of our concern. However, the aspiration of coming up with something new that leads to a condition of coexistence between the parties is inherent in any process of mediation.

Some aspects of mediation processes that can support innovative solutions are the following:

order, discipline, predictability and continuity and operated by officers who follow respective tasks and competences. (Weber, Max *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*, 5. Rev. Auflage, Tübingen 1980, p. 126).

² After 1989, many bi- and multilateral organizations started to engage in peacebuilding activities. Since then, peace researchers observe a similar form of depoliticization and bureaucratization of peacebuilding like in the field of development aid. "*Peacebuilding not only penetrated the policy agenda of major diplomatic and aid organizations, it also materialized in new funding schemes and administrative units.*" Peacebuilding became increasingly implemented through administrative branches and mainstreamed through development agen-

Relationships

One of the most transformative powers lies in the person-to-person dimension of mediation processes. Eventually the conflict parties need to meet. Often, in such processes, participants are asked to put themselves in the shoes of the other. In many cases this is an eye-opening experience that triggers the willingness to understand the other's actions. Mediators then hope that this new relation and understanding effects a new positioning of the conflict parties that opens them up for a joint discussion about alternative solutions to their conflicts.³

Time

The time factor is of immense importance to any mediation process. If meetings take place in a hurry because of political pressure, and participants are not ready, the relationship dimension will not be ripe for creating the necessary trust. The process then becomes more of a window-dressing exercise for international media rather than serving the ultimate aim of finding a solution to a conflict. Mediators also speak of the "ripeness" of a process⁴. Mediators also need to be extremely patient and stay the course through "*pyjamas sessions*", as Julian Hottinger, an experienced international mediator, once called lengthy night sessions. For the parties to become more flexible and open concerning their previously fixed positions and gaining

cies. (Hagmann, Tobias, Goetschel, Laurent (2009); *Civilian Peacebuilding: Peace by bureaucratic means? Conflict, Security and Development*, 9:1, 55-73., p. 59.)

³ Mason, Simon (2007); *Mediation and Facilitation in Peace Processes*. ISN ETH Zürich, p. 7.

⁴ Zartman, William I (2001); *The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments*. *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, Vol. 1, No. 1, September 2001, p. 8-18. "Parties resolve their conflict only when they are ready to do so—when alternative, usually unilateral means of achieving a satisfactory result are blocked and the parties feel that they are in an uncomfortable and costly predicament. At that ripe moment, they grab on to proposals that usually have been in the air for a long time and that only now appear attractive." (Zartman 2011, p. 8)

space for new ideas, requires trust that is only built over time.

[Thinking Outside of Conventional Ideas and Tracks](#)

The confidentiality of mediation processes as well as the trust established and the willingness or pressure to find a solution ideally stimulates conflict parties to think and discuss outside the box, meaning outside of current political, economic, social and cultural structures. The mediator's task is to facilitate this discussion and sometimes to distill new emerging ideas. This is a crucial phase in a mediation process where innovation can take place if the conditions are given. Conditions are trust, space, time/ripeness and openness of the parties and the mediators, as well as courage to bring new approaches and personal ideas to the table.

[Openness and unpredictability of the process](#)

International mediation is always a process between different individuals and groups. The result of this process is not predictable and the entire process is subject to various dynamics: it can take a different pace at certain moments in time; it can be geared by other and changing alliances between participants and unforeseen events. Such processes are characterized by unpredictability, subjective judgements of the participants, spontaneous decision-making, instant reactions, emotional agitation, personal involvement and formal as well as informal power dynamics.

[International mediation processes are political](#)

The nature of international mediation processes is political. Often armed conflicts have broken out because of discriminatory behavior of one group against the other, because of exclusionary structures of (state) institutions, because of unequal access to basic needs and goods such as health care, education, land ownership, and due to exclusion from political decision-making processes etc.

The mediation process is ideally concerned with debating the handling of the common good in the interest of everyone at the table. The result of the process (the innovation) must therefore lie in the political sphere and must be feasible and doable. A technical solution will not satisfy the conflict parties and the populations affected by the conflict.

[An Example: Peace Mediation in Mali](#)

The aspects above describe an ideal mediation process that rarely plays out in reality. In the following I describe a recently observed example of an international mediation process:

Since the 1960ies ethnic groups in the North of Mali have claimed independence from the Malian state that in their eyes neglected their needs over years: development, education, infrastructure, participation in political decision making and good governance were just a few of their claims. Armed conflict erupted almost cyclically every 10 years, the last time in 2012. In 2015, once more a peace agreement was signed. It contains a chapter on the development of the North, as one of the priorities, to build lasting peace and trust between the independent movements, movements loyal to the government and the Government of Mali. The peace agreement does not spell out exactly how development measures should look like; but it stipulates that they will be assessed and further negotiated after the signature of the document.

It must be noted that the mediation process was guided by a mediation team and accompanied by various bilateral and multilateral actors. Each of these different actors were looking for their role to play. Before the negotiation of the development needs of the North one actor was selected by the mediator

and the conflict parties according to a set bureaucratic procedure⁵ to conduct a needs assessment study. Selection criteria for the actor, i.e. the organization, were amongst other:

- It had already undertaken similar needs assessments in other countries and thus had a proven and standardized procedure and methodology.
- It had the necessary qualifications, expert knowledge and experts (in terms of human resources) to fulfill the task.
- It had the necessary credibility and weight amongst the different actors that legitimized the results of this actor more than of others.
- It was able to conduct the study in a short period of time. Time was rather limited as the results were supposed to be presented at a donor conference.

The results of the study conducted were then presented to a small but representative committee of the conflict parties as well as to the mediation team. The presentation referred first to the methodological approach that was based on a quantitative survey. The representatives of the implementing organization demonstrated and confirmed that the data collected were valid and representative for the entire population of the surveyed area. This despite of the fact that they have not been able to visit the areas in question due to the sensitive security situation. Interviews have been conducted by phone and focus group discussions held in the few administrative centers of this vast region. The results were presented in the form of sophisticated tables that showed numbers and figures of water wells, school buildings, and health centers needed in each location. Finally, the financial volume of the assessed needs was estimated quite high. Funding was supposed to be committed by the Malian state with the support from international donors as soon as the priorities were agreed between the parties.

What happened next during the meeting was unexpected: The conflict parties, particularly the concerned ones from the North, were disappointed by the study despite the fact it clearly showed the need for infrastructural measures in their region. They criticized that over the past twenty years of several peace processes, many of these studies have been conducted but they have never been implemented. They also explained that they would rather prefer smaller financial sums but more commitment by the national and international partners. Another criticism referred to the methodology: They were upset that the implementing organization of the study did not make the effort to visit at least some of the areas outside of the administrative centers to talk to the population. They added that they would rather trust a study that was based on a small number of “real” interviews that on statistically valid numbers of anonymous interviewees. They also mentioned that the study would not have the necessary legitimacy in the eyes of the local population because no dialogue was possible with the authors of the study. To accommodate these concerns, the mediators asked for a feedback loop in written form as well as face-to-face at least between the authors and the representatives of the conflict parties present at the meeting. For the conflict parties the additional meeting was a modest but important compensation for their initial disappointment.

After the said feedback loops and political pressure from the different partners in the process, the conflict parties accepted the results of the study. However, the unease remained.

This example shows that the question of the development of the North was a highly political issue for the conflict parties but it has been tackled with a technocratic approach by the implementing organization of the study. The clash of these different understandings

⁵ An international call for tender has been issued and the study was conducted by consultants hired by the selected organization.

and approaches in mediation processes and the resultant misunderstandings that could emerge from this hampers innovation and creativity in the process.

Meeting the Challenges

In this section I link the Mali example to the elements of innovation mentioned above: relationships, time, thinking outside of conventional ideas and tracks, openness and unpredictability of the process and the political nature of the process.

De-personalization as a Challenge in a Mediation Process

At the level of relationships, the conflict parties felt deceived because the consultants who wrote the study did not meet with them and thus a personal recognition of their situation was missing. Instead of meetings, the experts conducted anonymous phone interviews and a few focus group discussions.

Politically, personal meetings between the authors and the population would have been very important for the conflict parties. It would have given them more weight and credibility in the process. The idea that a needs assessment had been produced without going to see the area in question was inconceivable to them. In their understanding numbers and figures could have been invented, contrary to the observable hard facts of life that one encounters in a remote household in the desert. In other words, for them it was not an expert's long-distance interpretation of data that counted but a face-to-face meeting with the population needed to understand local realities.

A similar thing happened in the mediation process: Changing experts who presented the study did not install trust in the conflict parties. They were unable to enter into what they understood would have been a real conversation. The discussion centered around the

numbers and figures on the table. This didn't allow for a deeper recognition of the realities of the conflict parties.

The Authority of Technocratic Knowledge in the Mediation Process

The study, validated in a quantitative methodology and thus incontestable also by non-scientists, established an authority in the mediation process that left the conflict parties with the feeling that their knowledge was of lower value compared to the data gathered by the experts. Consequently, they felt rather powerless. The needs assessment was of political value for them as they represented different groups or constituencies: therefore, one thing was to know the needs for each location; but the other thing was to participate in the decision-making about the priorities. This would have been the political discussion they expected. However, the study established a reality based on technocratic knowledge that made the debate futile. The technical logic stood in opposition to the political logic. This led to a blockage of the process and the parties lost – at least at a certain moment – trust in it.

According to Hannah Arendt, social (or infrastructural) issues are often tackled as non-political and respectively they are treated separately: The counting of missing water wells is a social or infrastructural issue; the right of a population to have access to water is a political question. In that sense, technocratic expertise escapes the democratic control of the majority of a population.⁶ This goes against the aim of a mediation process which should encourage participation of those present and of those represented at the table.

At the same time, the study indeed provided precious data and a comprehensive overview of the needs. It was therefore important to make use of it. However, in order to foster innovation, it would have been excellent to declare the study as a starting point open for

⁶ Becker, Michael (2013; Die Eigensinnigkeit des Politischen – Hannah Arendt und Jürgen Habermas über

Macht und Herrschaft, Imbusch, Peter (Hrsg) 2013; Macht und Herrschaft, S. 217-246. p. 228-229.

discussion and verification by the local population. A facilitated process that would have brought the data of the experts and the experience of the population together to find feasible ideas could have launched a meaningful process for all. By mixing the expert knowledge and the practical knowledge, the thinking outside of conventional boxes could have been worth a try. This would have called for an excellent facilitation and much more time that was not available due to an already scheduled international donor conference.

[Technocratic Knowledge Might Shortcut Participatory Processes](#)

Another issue concerned the unpredictability of the process: Bureaucratic institutions aim for predictability. They rely on administrative procedures, budgets, rules and regulations that are not flexible regarding their service provision and performance. The needs assessment study intended to calculate and to determine the needs in the North of Mali based on quantitative measures and scientific criteria. However, an open and political debate about the same subject would probably have come up with other, even changing results and decisions. How to overcome the dilemma between the institutional need for predictability and the required openness for the mediation process? The study as such was not a problem in the process, as it was part of the peace agreement and thus accepted by all parties involved. The problem was the handling of the results of the study in the process: a) the top down authority that technocratic evidence brought into the process; b) the attempt to determine the needs before the parties and the population got involved; and c) the subsequent justification of the attempt to shortcut the political and participatory debate. These factors contributed to a closure of the debate. The study could have been used by the mediators for the closure of the process once all else had been clarified, i.e. the timing would have been ripe.

⁷ The authors of a study about norms in mediation suggest a more open discussion about content-related and process-related norms in the process: *“A more thorough discussion about the nature of norms in mediation and how they are prioritized would add clarity and create mutual understanding about their relevance and appropriateness. Virtually all the interviewees underlined that such a prioritization should not be seen in terms of a dilemma with associated trade-offs, but rather as a chal-*

[Conclusions](#)

It is easy to criticize very messy and chaotic mediation processes from the outside. However, this is not the only case where we can observe the trade-off between the technocratic and the political dimension. I would argue that this often blocks international mediation processes as much as the lack of political will to make progress. Both, the technocratic and the political dimension have their value and place in international mediation processes. However, they should be complementary. To maintain the innovative potential of mediation, mediators need to be very vigilant and firm regarding the basic principles of mediation as described above. They could openly prepare the parties involved for this dilemma⁷. Technocratic knowledge can support mediation processes but it is not the essence. The conflict parties do not need to accept or reject a scientific study but they need to come up with an agreement on the use of scarce resources that goes beyond the acceptance of a document. Sometimes, political compromise stands in contrast to technocratic evidence. A politically sustainable solution has only a chance if the solution is supported by and adapted to a wide spectrum of the population.

[References](#)

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- Hagmann, Tobias, Goetschel, Laurent (2009): *Civilian Peacebuilding: Peace by bureaucratic*

lenge that can be managed. They broadly agreed that different norms are rarely mutually exclusive. It is often not an “either or” question (e.g., inclusivity vs. efficiency), but a question of how norms are sequenced, which mostly depends on what is most appropriate for a given context.” Hellmüller, Sara, Palmiano Federer, Julia, Zeller, Matthias (2015); *The Role of Norms in International Mediation*. Swisspeace/NOREF p.10.

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Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Die Technokratiefalle Innovation oder Techno- kratie in der internatio- nalen Mediation?

Mediationsprozesse sind grundsätzlich kreativ und innovativ, da die Konfliktparteien mit den Mediatorinnen und Mediatoren neue Lösungen, die für alle tragbar sind, finden müssen. Auch Konfliktlösungsexpertinnen und Experten auf internationaler Ebene haben ein entsprechend positives Verständnis von Konflikten, helfen diese doch Probleme anzusprechen, und im besten Fall können politische soziale Entwicklungsprozesse in Gang gesetzt werden, die letztlich zu einem friedlicheren Zusammenleben führen.

Gleichzeitig stellt die internationale Friedensgemeinschaft – eine Vielfalt von Organisationen und Individuen, die sich auf internationaler Ebene für den Frieden einsetzen – fest, dass Mediationsprozesse oft ineffizient sind. Hier werden Beispiele wie Syrien oder Libyen genannt. Für die Ineffizienz werden meist vertrackte politische Interessenslagen verantwortlich gemacht. Deshalb werden oft neue und innovative Konfliktlösungsansätze gefordert.

In diesem Artikel argumentiert die Autorin, dass es gerade in solch vertrackten Situationen wichtig wäre, die der Mediation inhärente Innovationskraft besser zu nutzen. Und dies bevor man nach neuen Ansätzen ruft. Der Artikel zeigt auf, wie ein technokratisches Verständnis von bi- und multilateralen Drittparteien, das Innovationspotential von Mediationsprozessen beeinträchtigen kann.

Die Autorin greift dabei auf eigene Erfahrungen in Mali zurück. Nach dem Abschluss eines Friedensvertrages im 2015 geht es anschließend um die detaillierte Aushandlung von Entwicklungsmassnahmen im Norden des Landes. Im Mediationsprozess gibt es nicht

nur Auseinandersetzungen zwischen den Parteien über die infrastrukturellen Bedürfnisse des Nordens, sondern auch darüber, wie diese Bedürfnisse festgestellt werden und wer diese festlegt. Im Artikel wird aufgezeigt, wie ein auf persönlichen Erlebnissen fundiertes Verständnis der betroffenen Konfliktparteien auf ein technokratisches Verständnis von Drittparteien stösst. Wenn dieser Zusammenprall von den Mediatoren nicht sorgfältig begleitet wird, erstickt dies die Diskussion und mündet letztlich in Unverständnis und einem Gefühl der Machtlosigkeit bei den Konfliktparteien. Für sie droht der Prozess an Glaubwürdigkeit zu verlieren und deren Engagement für eine potentiell innovative Lösung wird von einem Gefühl der Resignation überschattet.

Der Artikel schliesst mit der Feststellung, dass die Einflussnahme einer technokratischen Logik und Vorgehensweisen in Mediationsprozessen unter der Bedingung, dass diese im Prozess in die richtige Perspektive und an den richtigen Platz gerückt werden, eine unterstützende Rolle spielen können. Um die Innovationskraft und die Kreditibilität von Mediationsprozessen zu erhalten, muss jedoch die Wahrnehmung der Konfliktparteien ernst genommen werden und die Entscheidungsmacht klar bei diesen bleiben.