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PIONEERING THE DIGITAL FRONTIER: CMI's Approach to Future-Oriented Dialogues

Contemporary peacemaking is conducted in highly fragmented and multilayered conflict systems. In this context, structured foresight methods can significantly strengthen dialogue and mediation efforts. CMI has pioneered a digitally enhanced foresight methodology that combines real-world conflict analysis with futures thinking. This dual approach facilitates inclusion and provides fresh reference frames for envisioning shared futures.

Modern peacemaking takes place in highly fragmented and multi-layered conflict systems. Beyond engaging governments and armed groups, sustainable conflict resolution requires consensus building among diverse stakeholders ranging from international actors to local militias and the civil society.

However, greater inclusion also introduces more conflicting interests, narratives, and beliefs. The resulting increase in complexity and competition can stretch even the most sophisticated process design to its limits. It is therefore necessary to find new tools and methods of inclusion that allow for discussing both 'what is' and 'what could be.' The new tools should enable the participatory analysis of key issues and beliefs among conflict stakeholders, as well as the joint crafting of alternative futures. These envisioned futures function as shared and desirable scenarios that provide the foundation for detailed discussions about concrete actions and policy roadmaps.

In recent years, CMI has pioneered a digitally enhanced foresight methodology that has been applied in future-oriented dialogue processes in countries such as Yemen, Libya, Palestine, and Armenia. Central to this approach is the use of an online platform dedicated to data collection, analysis and visualization. CMI's tool of choice has been Inklus, a web application provided by a Finnish com-

pany by the same name.

The forward-looking dialogue process usually starts by jointly analysing the presence. The application, paired with expert facilitation, helps to collect, map out and display participants' diverse positions. This ensures comprehensive consideration of various stakeholder perspectives, thereby grounding discussions in the "world as it is". Participants engage with the factual realities of the conflict, such as gathering and examining data about past events, current conditions, and views of different groups. The primary goal of this fact-based approach is to establish a clear and shared understanding of the state of the conflict. Once key political, social, and economic indi-

cators have been collaboratively examined, the group moves into the scenario-building phase, crafting alternative futures of the "world as it could or should be" based on the previously established facts and figures.

Active facilitation of the process, combined with the use of the Inklus platform, provides a structured framework for participatory conflict analysis, scenario building, and enhanced policy planning. This approach was applied in a dialogue process with Yemeni stakeholders. Participants underwent a series of sessions, exploring key conflict drivers and alternative trajectories of the country's future development. Using the features of Inklus, par-

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Structured foresight methods can significantly improve peacemaking. They can help facilitate inclusion, challenge assumptions, and provide fresh reference frames for envisioning shared futures.
- Modern-day peace efforts require consensus-building among a broad range of diverse stakeholders. Digital tools for participation allow stakeholders to map perspectives and jointly envision diverse future scenarios.
- CMI's approach combines real-world conflict analysis with digital futures thinking and paves the ground for alternative visions of the future, overcoming fixated positions.

ticipants jointly identified the root causes of the conflict and their interlinkages. The resulting issue map and participants' positioning within it were visualized on scatter plots, illuminating the complex dynamics at play. A scenario-building and prioritization exercise followed, facilitating the co-creation of an action roadmap to address long-underappreciated conflict-driving issues. This methodical approach not only facilitated constructive dialogue between antagonized stakeholders but also enhanced decision-making and reduced misunderstandings. The approach fostered increased productivity and a strong sense of ownership among the participants.

While peacemaking is inherently forward-looking, the systematic application of futures thinking can provide significant added value to mediation and dialogue processes. Foresight approaches can help transcend traditional mediation by incorporating a temporal perspective that spans the past, present, and future. Futures thinking is unique in its capacity to envision multiple plausible scenarios, thereby challenging assumptions and exploring diverse possibilities for the future. It marks a shift from reactive to proactive conflict resolution, guiding parties to collaboratively shape a peaceful future.

CMI's participatory foresight methodology is grounded in the conviction that the challenges of conflict resolution stem less from a lack of 'objective' knowledge about the causes and dynamics of conflict and more from the conflicting values, narratives, and beliefs of the stakeholders. Simply adding more data to the process does not address the complexities of peacemaking. It is vital to adopt a longer-term perspective, collectively envision potential futures, and establish shared objectives. This shift in focus ensures that participants do not become mired and suspended in immediate disagreements but work towards a

common future. Well-designed future-oriented methods help to explore the stakeholders' subjective positions on various issues through participatory analysis. From there on, participants are guided in their combined efforts to reimagine an alternative future they can agree upon. With a shared vision in sight, detailed discussions regarding necessary actions and policy roadmaps become more manageable.

CMI's work has demonstrated that the systematic combination of future-oriented methods with the use of digital technologies presents significant potential for mediation praxis. Digital tools can enhance participatory conflict analysis by allowing not only inputs from dialogue participants, but also enabling wider audiences to share their views and perspectives through citizen consultations. Furthermore, the anonymity of participatory digital tools lowers the threshold for sharing controversial opinions. Anonymity can also contribute to levelling power dynamics among dialogue participants. As a result, such methodologies promote the development of a range of

tangible, alternative future scenarios that motivate and facilitate joint action.

Foresight methodology provides a structured approach for exploring alternative futures. It looks beyond the positions of involved parties and considers wider conflict drivers, such as economic and demographic trends, climate change, and global and regional politics. Foresight approaches challenge assumptions, offer fresh perspectives, and provide alternative frames of reference for envisioning a shared future, even when progress seems impossible.

This Insight paper draws on a research collaboration between CMI and Andreas Hirblinger from the Graduate Institute of Geneva, which explored the use of digital tools for forward-looking dialogue processes. The findings of the study have been published in a research article titled "Leveraging Digital Methods in the Quest for Peaceful Futures: The Interplay of Sincere and Subjunctive Technology Affordances in Peace Mediation".

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Leverage multi-stakeholder insights for effective policymaking:** Given the complexity in today's conflict settings, mediators should engage with a broad spectrum of stakeholders to craft policy roadmaps.
- **Use digital tools that bridge data and visualisation capabilities:** Participatory data analysis tools significantly enhance opportunities for inclusion. This advancement should go hand in hand with improved visualization functions to support collective decisionmaking.
- **Incorporate broader conflict drivers in scenario building with foresight:** Foresight approaches can broaden the scope of the discussions, challenge prevailing assumptions, and assess alternative perspectives with structured methodologies.