Since 2010 the number of violent conflicts has more than tripled and the number of people affected by conflict has increased dramatically. Violent conflicts have become complex and protracted, involving more non-state groups and regional and international actors, often linked to global challenges from injustice to climate change to transnational organized crime. Peace agreements that formally end wars have, by most measures, become rarer since the 1990s. A growing number of civil wars seem to drag on indefinitely - as in many cases do the official diplomatic efforts to resolve them. A variety of informal mediators have stepped into this perceived void, often in cooperation with private individuals who are close to the various rivals and belligerents. In fine, today's armed conflicts are often characterised by complexity, the fragmentation of parties and, despite repeated appeals to the contrary, incoherent responses from the international community.

At the same time, the peace agenda has gradually grown in prominence and has been marked by a noticeable degree of democratisation, inasmuch as it is no longer the exclusive realm of states and statesmen. Given the importance of conflict prevention and resolution – both in terms of blood and treasure - efforts to professionalise and optimise the field of international conflict resolution are high on the agenda of governments and multi-lateral agencies alike.

Coherence and vertical consolidation

The most commonly used classification in conflict transformation and peacebuilding processes consists of three main tracks (official, unofficial and grassroots), highlighting the importance of complementary levels of intervention, ensuring that stakeholder efforts are coordinated and mutually reinforcing.

Since long, and in partially in response to the ever-growing multitude of conflict resolution actors, the need for joint efforts using different types of diplomacy has been frequently noted in conflict resolution literature. Research demonstrates that lasting solutions to intractable conflict requires complementarily of conflict resolution efforts.

At the same time, across a myriad of policies of international organisations and governments (UN, WorldBank, EU, AU, ECOWAS, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Swiss, Turkey), there is broad consensus on the importance of coherence and complementarity between stakeholders and partners to successful conflict prevention and resolution, as well as longer-term peace building processes.

Closely linked, is the concept of inclusivity, where the needs, concerns and incentives of all sections of society and the affected population are taken into consideration, and to the extent possible, addressed. It is widely recognised that lasting peace requires more than an agreement between warring factions and that conflict prevention strategies should be as comprehensive as possible. This is further evidenced with the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.

Analysis and incentives

As a natural corollary, and perhaps as a reflection of the sheer complexity of modern inter- and intra-state conflict, a systemic approach to conflict analysis with an explicit focus on the relationships between and incentives of different actors in a given system underpins best practice in international conflict resolution. A deep understanding of conflict dynamics is then used a basis to define and design relevant conflict resolution strategies, targeting multiple levels of society and decision-making simultaneously, in an inter-connected (or at best coordinated) manner.

It is also widely recognised as essential when promoting linkages between different initiatives to consider sensitivities around a conflict, based on an in-depth conflict analysis, in an effort to keep negative unintended consequences to a minimum. It has been found that a multitude of competing third parties may counter otherwise shared objectives, and even prolong conflict.

Skills, neutrality and independence

The growing number of mediation support entities illustrates a broadly recognized need to further professionalize mediation practice. Investments are focused on building institutional and individual capacities through mentoring, training, coaching and research, documenting practices and developing guidance, while improving organizational preparedness to maximize opportunities for effective conflict resolution.

Much ink has been spilled about the importance of individual mediators – and this as much about their competence and skills and cultural appropriateness, as their gravitas "commensurate to the conflict context" and authority with conflicting parties. It is also well recognised that mediators require technical support and resources to deftly manage a given peace process. Furthermore, the requirement that a mediator be both impartial and objective is considered sine qua non in both the academic and practitioner literature. The necessity of negotiation training for conflict parties and conflict resolution training more broadly is also well recognised and documented. The efficacy of third-party mediation efforts and support services is however still mostly unmeasured.