Bridging Worlds: Culturally Balanced Co-Mediation

Abstract
This article outlines culturally balanced co-mediation as one strategy to improve the mediation of conflicts dealing with religiously inspired political actors. Co-mediation can lead to greater acceptability because cultural proximity between a party and individual mediators is possible without threatening the overall process, content or outcome impartiality of the mediation team. Culturally balanced co-mediation is also a powerful tool in bridging cultural or religious gaps between the parties in a dispute, as the cultural proximity of the mediators to the parties allows for deeper understanding between the parties and the mediators, which in turn helps the mediators facilitate communication and understanding between the parties. If culturally balanced co-mediation is aimed at, it is important that the constellation of the co-mediation team should adequately represent the key cultural or religious differences separating the parties, but that these are not mirrored one to one. Parties tend to test any mediation team, so the distinction between tactical challenges to the impartiality of the mediation team, and genuine concerns about lack of balance has to be assessed.

Introduction
Co-mediation, sometimes also referred to as team mediation, has been defined as “the cooperation of mostly two (or sometimes more) mediators in a mediation”. By including different competences in the team, co-mediation can be used as a strategy to overcome some of the challenges commonly encountered by mediators, e.g. lack of leverage, arrogance, partiality, ignorance, inflexibility, haste, and false promises. The benefits of the co-mediation process are wide-ranging. On the one hand, there are practical advantages that can be realized in a wide range of disputes. These include sharing the workload, facilitating training settings, and diversifying, as well as complementing expertise within the mediation team. On the other hand, there are specific strategic advantages to be gained in conflicts that involve religiously inspired political actors, or conflicts where cultural factors play a key role. In conflicts with religious dimensions, co-mediation can be used to increase the acceptability of the mediators, and to bridge different worlds through an understanding of those worlds within the mediation team.

Besides its advantages, there are also potential shortcomings in the co-mediation set-up. One of the main criticisms of co-mediation is that if a single person is running a mediation meeting, it can be conducted more clearly, more decisively and more flexibly than with a team of mediators. Single mediators can adapt to the unfolding dynamics without having to be concerned about whether they are upsetting their co-mediator.

Footnotes:
1 Senior Researcher, Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich, www.css.ethz.ch
2 Intern at the Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich, www.css.ethz.ch
Thanks to Julian Hottinger for helpful comments on a draft of this text.
3 Mediation is understood here in the broadest sense, including neutral low-powered mediation and dialog facilitation.
4 Mediation is a process of dialog and negotiation in which a third party assists two or more disputant parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage or resolve a conflict without the use of force. The general goal is to enable the parties to reach agreements they find satisfactory and are willing to implement. Mediation should be regarded as a specialized endeavor, encompassing a body of knowledge and a set of strategies, tactics, skills and techniques.” See Nathan, 2009.
5 Co-mediation is also a useful technique for mediator training. In this sense, there may be one, more experienced mediator and one apprentice involved in the mediation of a dispute. This approach serves as a training ground for the novice and allows the novice to gradually gain more and more responsibility. It is important to evaluate the complexity, escalation and power balance of the conflict so as to avoid doing more harm by using a novice. See Love and Stulberg 1996.
6 Whilst some mediation cases are faced with a dilemma of either giving priority to an extremely skilled and experienced mediator or choosing one who is highly knowledgeable on the case in question, co-mediation avoids this issue and allows for both assets to be represented in the mediation team. See Love and Stulberg 1996.
Co-mediators that are not in sync with each other tend to be clumsier in a mediation process than a single mediator. Nevertheless, there are ways around some of the shortcomings of co-mediation: getting to know each other well, and a clear division of roles either according to functions (e.g., engaging in the fray versus keeping track of the broad picture) or according to phases of a meeting (e.g., one person starts the meeting and the other takes over after the break, or when the other mediator reaches an impasse). Furthermore, besides weighing the pros and cons of co-mediation, in reality it is very rare to have only one mediator in a dispute. Due to the complexity and multiplicity of mediation tasks involved, most conflicts use some form of co-mediation rather than single mediators. This text does not focus on co-mediation in general, but specifically on co-mediation where members of the co-mediation team come from different cultural or religious backgrounds and these are relevant to the conflict they are mediating.

Strategic Advantages of Culturally Balanced Co-mediation

The strategic advantages of culturally balanced co-mediation include an increase of acceptability of the mediators, and the potential of the co-mediation team to bridge worlds more effectively.

Co-mediation allows for greater acceptability by combining cultural proximity and impartiality. By definition, mediators have to be accepted by the parties, else they cannot mediate. Acceptability depends on various characteristics on the part of the mediator, such as impartial behavior and attitude, leverage and the ability to muster resources to deal with the conflict, the mandate, and the mediator’s cultural or religious proximity to one or both parties. Particularly when issues of power, identity, or values are at stake, parties may feel more comfortable with a mediator who partially reflects their individual or collective background.

However, how can impartiality coincide with cultural proximity? In order to answer this question, the concept of partiality has to be unpacked. There are three types of partiality: process, content, and outcome partiality. Partiality always refers to being closer to one actor than another. The question is if this affects how the mediator shapes the process, the way the mediator deals with the content, and finally, if it has an impact on the outcome of the negotiations. Process partiality prevails when the mediation process is not left up to the parties. This can either mean that the mediators strongly shape the process (even against the will of all the parties), as is the case in heavy or high-powered mediation, or it can mean that the process is guided in favor of one party to the detriment of the other (which would just be simply bad mediation). Most mediators shape the process to a certain degree, but the difference between facilitative or neutral-low-powered mediation and high-powered mediation is precisely the degree to which a mediator will direct and shape the process (see also Anne Isabel Kraus contribution illustrating how facilitative and low-powered mediation can be used in a culturally-sensitive manner). Content partiality refers to the tendency of actors (be they mediators or negotiators) to look for the same solutions that are limited to their range of cultural thoughts and know how. Outcome partiality, where the mediators actually influence the final decisions and agreements, is a no-go in mediation, and would mark the difference between mediation and heavy-powered diplomacy.

As it is often difficult, if not impossible, for one mediator to be equally close and equally impartial to all sides, culturally balanced co-mediation can be used to create a balance at the level of the mediation team, rather than at the level of the individual mediator. In this respect, the individual mediator may be relationally partial, closer to one group than the other, which might be useful in the mediation process, without compromising process, content or outcome partiality across the team. Thus, the constellation of mediators in the co-mediation team can be used strategically to reflect a balance that is specifically useful for the conflict in question. A diverse representation along different cultural lines can ensure that no one party feels outnumbered or disadvantaged. This can lead to greater

8 McCartney 2006, 14.
10 Svensson and Wallensteen 2010.
12 Fechler (downloaded 2011).
13 See Elgström 2003, 38-54.
14 Zariski 2005.
acceptability and trust and thus a more effective mediation process. Nevertheless, if a balanced cultural representation is not guaranteed (see question one below), it may be better to have complete outsiders, or insiders working together with outsiders, than an unbalanced insider mediation team.

In summary, culturally balanced co-mediation – understood as a team of mediators from different cultural backgrounds relevant to the conflict they are working on – can often balance cultural proximity and impartiality better than a single mediator, or a co-mediation team that is culturally biased towards one or the other side, or culturally an outsider.

Culturally balanced co-mediation allows for greater understanding by combining cultural proximity and detachment: When social groups refer to values and worldviews that are foreign to other groups they are in contact with, it can make the interaction more difficult. Even if this does not mean that peaceful co-existence is impossible, it does pose challenges to the mediation of the conflict in question. One of the key requirements of mediators working in such conflicts is a ‘deep understanding of both worlds’ so that they can ‘create channels of communication and translate the divergences’. As this may not be possible for an individual mediator, a culturally balanced co-mediation team made up of individuals that together can understand the different worlds and translate divergences can be extremely effective. Simply having a greater diversity of perspectives within the mediation team, based on the diverse cultural backgrounds of the mediators, can lead to a better assessment of process related questions.

Empathy is one of the pre-requisites of a mediator. Having different degrees of cultural affinity to the different parties allows the team overall to have greater empathy, relate better to the parties, and thereby build relationships and trust. Here, it is also important to differentiate between empathy (i.e., “To a certain extent, I understand your positions, interests and logic; I am sorry for the pain you are going through”) and sympathy (empathy plus the last step of stating: “I agree with you and your cause”). For mediators, empathy is absolutely necessary, while sympathy is catastrophically detrimental. In some cases, cultural proximity that leads to acceptability and empathy may also mean that the mediator can be more critical towards the party of her or his culture, which may advance the process.

The mediators do not need to mirror the conflict of the parties in a one-to-one manner, because if they did so, they would be plagued by the same lack of trust, goodwill, and understanding as the parties. The co-mediation team has to bridge the worlds of the parties within the team by mirroring some aspects of the parties’ culture and conflict, but not all of them. The mediators must to some extent remain outside the fray of the conflict to be effective. The metaphor of the bridge is useful: rather than standing in the river between the parties, the mediators have to stand on the bridge, somewhat removed or detached from the divide. As in impartiality, the mediator treats both parties equally. Unlike impartiality, a degree of detachment entails some emotional distance to the conflict to remain effective.

Different techniques can then be used whereby the mediation team interacts in a way that mirrors the parties, yet at the same time reframes certain aspects of this relationship. Through the mediation team, the ‘respect, forms of communication and problem solving’ that the disputing parties are

---


16 Wehr and Lederach 1991 draws attention to the difference between ‘insider partial’ mediators, whose main attributes are trust relationships with the parties and personal incentives for assisting the conflict resolution, and ‘outsider neutral’ mediators, valued for their impartial stance and personal disassociation with the conflict in question. The difference between different types of partiality developed by Elgstöm 2003, seems to allow more flexibility.

17 Ambassador Claude Wild, spoken in the occasion of the FDFA DP IV Annual Conference, Bern, 14 October 2010.


19 Ibid.

20 Hottinger 2011.


22 See the case study below related to the Danish “Face of Mohammed” Caricatures.

23 Zarisky 2005.
expected to develop can be demonstrated through the mediators’ dialog, attitudes, and relationship with each other.\textsuperscript{24}

In the culturally balanced co-mediation cases outlined below, this combination of cultural proximity with detachment from the conflict occurred in different forms, e.g. professional training of the mediators, having lived in a different cultural area for some time, or personal experiences highlighting the benefits of co-mediation over unilateral conflict resolution approaches. Due to the need of balancing cultural proximity and detachment, the mediators do not always have to be of the same religion or culture as one of the parties. In some cases, a deep understanding of the culture, either acquired or experienced from living in a certain culture without having origins there, is sufficient.\textsuperscript{25} Similarly, a combination of mediators close to the various cultures as well as total cultural outsiders may also be helpful.\textsuperscript{26}

In summary, culturally balanced co-mediation can help bridge the worlds of the parties by having mediators from different cultural backgrounds bring in a deeper understanding of the different worlds and facilitate communication between these worlds.

**Questions and Challenges Related to Co-mediation**

Various questions and challenges\textsuperscript{27} arise when using co-mediation, be these referring to co-mediation in general (all the following points), or culturally balanced co-mediation specifically (last two points). These have to be addressed on a case-by-case basis:

- **Do the mediators have a sense of competition between them?** It is extremely important that the mediators should not feel they are in competition, especially when some have a more dominant role than others. In this sense, they must be flexible, have a ‘whatever works best’ approach, and leave their ego detached from the mediation process.

- **Has the mediation team discussed and clarified the goals, strategies, plans and tasks involved in the mediation meeting?** Although variety in terms of perspectives and strategy ideas within the mediation team may be of value, and there can be disagreement on these matters outside the meeting room, it is important to consider where the focus will be and to pull in the same direction during the actual mediation sessions. Co-mediators who fight in front of the parties lose their credibility. A co-mediator who surprises his or her co-mediators during the mediation session, twisting the process in a totally different direction than agreed on, is likely to jeopardize the process. It is therefore important to divide up the tasks in advance of the mediation process so that different members of the team know exactly what is expected from them. This allows each mediator to focus on certain areas and make the most out of the effective partnership. Once a co-mediation team has gained experience and is in sync, less planning is needed, and a more natural role division develops.

- **How does the constellation of the mediation team relate to key factors in the conflict?** Structuring a balanced mediation team requires in-depth knowledge of the conflict, so that the key divide is either mirrored fairly in the mediation team (e.g., mediators from both cultural contexts), or, if one does not choose to use the culturally balanced co-mediation approach, so that the team does not mirror the divide at all (e.g., mediators from a completely different cultural context). The balance has to reflect the most appropriate dimension. To do this, it is crucial to evaluate each and every conflict extensively to determine the underlying factors at the heart of the dispute. For example, while gender balance may be crucial in some conflicts (e.g., conflict related to gender-based discrimination), the cultural balance of the co-mediation team may be more important in other conflicts (e.g., conflicts related to cultural discrimination). In longer processes, the limited balance of a co-mediation team can also be partly complimented by having experts or other mediators come in for certain issues (e.g. a working group on women’s rights).

- **Is the questioning of the co-mediation team’s impartiality a strategic or tactical move from the parties?** Especially at the early stages of a process, the parties tend to test the mediators’ impartiality, commitment, and authority. Thus, the lack of

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Aroua 2009, 34-36.
\textsuperscript{26} Wehr and Lederach 1991, 87.
\textsuperscript{27} Questions 1-3 are inspired and adapted from Love and Stulberg 1996.
balance in the mediation team may be a genuine strategic concern of the parties; however, it may also be the case that the parties are testing the mediators and creating an issue for purely tactical reasons. In one mediation case in Kenya, the parties challenged the ethnic constellation of the mediation team. The mediation team overcame this issue by stressing their common Muslim identity, rather than by adapting the ethnic balance of the co-mediation team (which would have lost time). By refusing to let the parties divide and rule the co-mediation team on ethnic grounds, the mediators showed their authority and commitment to serious mediation.

These four questions should be considered when deciding on the use of co-mediation, the constellation of the co-mediation team, and the operational questions involved.

Case Studies

Danish ‘Faces of Mohammed’ Cartoons: A Cross Cultural Mediator-Party Relationship

An example of the concept of ‘bridging worlds’ within the mediation team was the use of mediation by the Cordoba Center for Peace Studies related to the ‘Faces of Mohammed’ cartoon crisis. This was a dispute between some Danish media representatives, the Danish government, and some Muslim groups, first in Denmark and then, later, further afield. The conflict was sparked by depictions of the face of Mohammed by some Danish cartoonists. The mediation process that took place in Geneva in February 2006 involved a Muslim advisor for the Danish delegation (Abbas Aroua) and a Scandinavian advisor for the Muslim delegation (Johan Galtung), working together in a culturally balanced co-mediation team. The co-mediation constellation was shaped by the wishes of the delegations themselves and demonstrates a slightly different use of co-mediation than the typical strategy of achieving a direct connection between the party and their respective mediator. In this circumstance, the understanding and ability to connect with the different cultures that is fostered within the mediation team lends itself well to identifying the underlying feelings on both sides of the dispute, and thus nurturing a successful mediation environment. Strategically, the cross representation creates a space in which each party is able to develop a sense of understanding from someone who can express the views of the opposing party, but is also a trusted figure. The two mediators also knew each other and trusted each other. This built confidence and a favorable environment for mediation, allowing for an effective subsequent dialog process.\(^{28}\)

Christian and Muslim Militias in Northeastern Nigeria: Common Ground between the Mediator and the Party

Another example of culturally balanced co-mediation related to a conflict with religious dimensions involved Christian and Muslim militias in northeastern Nigeria. With the approval of Jos State authorities, Imam Mohammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye worked as co-mediators between the Christian and Muslim sides of the dispute. Two factors stand out in this process: Firstly, as preparation for direct dialog and negotiations, when the groups were separate, having a Christian mediator on the Christian side and a Muslim mediator on the Muslim side allowed the issues that lay at the heart of the conflict to be identified from both angles. Secondly, once the team had come together, the equality and balance in the team fostered a very advantageous mirroring dynamic. Both mediators allowed each other to speak, and religious connection was made from quoting both from the Bible and the Qur’an. This success carries even more weight when considering that previous mediation efforts had been very unsuccessful, also due to the fact that the mediators had been Christian and were therefore seen as biased and not accepted by the Muslim delegation.

These cases illustrate how relational partiality between the mediator and the party, based on common cultural aspects, facilitates a deeper insight into the root of the dispute, while impartiality can still be maintained through the co-mediation team. Another use of the co-mediation idea is the use of a cross-cultural relationship between the mediator and the parties, where the mediator, working closely with each party as a kind of ‘coach’, is culturally close to the opposing party. If the

---

28 This example was mentioned by the late Dekha Ibrahim Abdi in March 2011 in an interview with the author. Dekha Ibrahim Abdi mediated many conflicts, and coached several mediators, in the Kenya-Somalia cross-boarder region.

29 Mason et al 2010.
mediators are trusted, this creates a favorable environment for conducting dialog and unpacking the opposing parties’ viewpoints, as part of the preparations of negotiations.³⁰

**Conclusion**

Culturally balanced co-mediation allows for greater acceptability and impartiality of mediators, while at the same time enabling greater cultural proximity and understanding of the different ‘worlds’ at play. It will not overcome all of the challenges faced by mediators in conflicts that involve religiously inspired political actors. Nevertheless, it is an effective tool that can be flexibly combined with other methods, some of them outlined in this publication.

**References:**


