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Digital Inclusion in Mediated Peace Processes

HOW TECHNOLOGY CAN ENHANCE PARTICIPATION

By Andreas T. Hirblinger

United States Institute of Peace
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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report explores the concept of digital inclusion and its current and potential uses by mediators in peace processes. It lays out a conceptual framework and identifies key strategic purposes and contextual factors for effective digital inclusion. The discussion is based on surveys and interviews conducted over a year by the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva. This work was supported through a grant from the United States Institute of Peace.

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Cover photo: Members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia look at photos on a mobile phone as they gathered on the eve of a historic armistice in San Vicente del Caguán on September 16, 2016. (Photo by Federico Rios Escobar/New York Times)

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Summary

Conflict parties and stakeholders increasingly use digital technology, especially social media, to further their agendas and interests. This trend toward greater digitization of peace processes among those directly involved in conflicts, however, has only recently begun to be mirrored by those whose job it is to mediate those conflicts. Digital technology can make it easier to include a wide range of stakeholders in peace processes, but mediators have tended to neglect this potential or have focused on the risks of social media and similar technologies. A clearer understanding of the concept of digital inclusion and its practical applications is needed.

Inclusion in peace processes is conventionally understood in "offline" terms, such as being physically present at the negotiation table. However, digital technology can support a mediator's efforts to integrate a broad variety of perspectives, interests, and needs into a peace process. More particularly, digital inclusion can serve such strategic purposes as strengthening the legitimacy of peace processes and their outcomes, empowering women and marginalized groups, transforming community relationships, and reducing threats to vulnerable groups or risks to a peace process.

This report presents a conceptual framework for digital inclusion that helps elucidate an understanding of how digital technology can contribute to any of these strategic purposes of inclusion by delivering specific functions and outputs. The use made of digital technology by mediators until now has been relatively modest, although the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted its value. The potential applications, however, are numerous and varied, as illustrated by a range of "use cases"—scenarios depicting specific situations in which a particular technology could be applied, tailored to the context and the peacemaking challenge the mediator is confronting.

To make the most effective use of digital technology for inclusion, mediators need to consider a variety of contextual factors, not least the sociocultural and political environment, and should attempt to leverage existing technological capacity. Mediators must also carefully balance risks and opportunities. The risks are real, but they should not be exaggerated, lest mediators shy away from innovative applications that can integrate the voice of conflict parties and stakeholders into a peace process in the form of digital data.

A young boy downloads a video from WhatsApp on his smartphone in Chennai, India on June 9, 2018. (Photo by Priyadarshini Ravichandran/ New York Times)

Introduction: The Digitization of Peace Processes

Many members of the mediation community have . . . remained reluctant to take their mediation efforts "online." This changed in 2020 in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Conventional definitions of mediation entail at their core that the conflict parties seek a negotiated settlement with the assistance of a third party.[1] These definitions are vague about the means used to settle the conflict, as long as they involve reaching some form of consensus and employing reason and logic, rather than coercion. However, inclusion in peace processes has predominantly been operationalized in "offline" terms, such as providing seats at the table to civil society representatives or conducting workshops or consultations through which stakeholders can make their views heard.[2] Consequently, the question of how digital technology can contribute to mediated peace processes—and, more specifically, how it can enhance inclusive peacemaking—is yet to be answered. This report sets out to do just that.

The report begins, in this section, by explaining how mediators have gradually come to recognize the opportunities that digital technology offers. This section also outlines the growing literature on the subject and summarizes the methodology of the project on which this report is based. The second section gets to grips with the two key elements

of this report—digital technology and inclusion—by exploring how, broadly speaking, the former functions within the dynamics of a mediated peace process and how it can help overcome the challenges that characterize current approaches to inclusion. The third section gives an overview of the emerging practice of digital inclusion. It describes which technologies are used and how, and how they are linked with offline inclusion efforts and activities across different peacemaking tracks. The fourth section provides a conceptual framework that outlines four principal strategic purposes that digital inclusion can serve, as well as associated functions and outputs. Mediators can use this framework as a guide as they consider how to use digital inclusion and for what purpose. The practical application of digital inclusion comes into sharper focus in the fifth section. Looking in turn at each of the four strategic purposes, this section describes a broad array of potential applications as well as five recent uses in conflicts in Colombia, Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and Myanmar. The concluding section emphasizes the need for mediators to adapt digital inclusion to the technological, sociocultural, and political realities of each peacemaking context and to balance the risks of using—and *not* using—digital technology with the opportunities it presents to respond purposefully and effectively to the increasing digitization of peace processes.

THE INEXORABLE RISE OF TECHNOLOGY IN PEACEMAKING

Currently, mediators tend to perceive digital technology predominantly as an obstacle and threat to a peaceful settlement of conflict—as weapons that conflict parties use to fight for their cause away from the negotiation table and that can all too easily disrupt, derail, or damage mediation efforts. Contemporary peacemaking takes place in a highly technologized political landscape, in which surveillance and spy technologies are pervasive. Conventionally, mediators make considerable efforts to guarantee that negotiation processes can take place in safe spaces in which confidentiality and the protection of participants can be guaranteed. The use of digital technology in peacemaking, therefore, seemingly stands in tension with an essential need of mediators, namely, to control the environment in which the negotiation process occurs.

This wariness of technology is understandable. But, when it amounts to a rejection of digital possibilities, it is also unwise and perhaps even futile, given the seemingly inexorable digitization of peace processes. The increasing role of technology—electronic equipment, applications, and platforms that communicate, process, and store data—has been the subject of academic and practice-oriented contributions on peacebuilding for some time. The United States Institute of Peace (USIP), for instance, published a report on the impact of new media on peacebuilding and conflict management all the way back in 2011. Although written before the repercussions of social media use during the Arab Spring could be fully grasped, the report shed light on the use of social media in "grassroots" protest movements and how it could be harnessed in "communications for peacebuilding." As the authors argued, "The use of these technologies to resist political oppression or promote conflict has garnered much more attention than the use of these same technologies to promote peace and postconflict reconstruction."[3]

Almost one decade later, the discourse around digital technology—and especially social media—is even more strongly centered around its conflict-aggravating potential, especially its utility in efforts to increase political polarization, spread misinformation, and erode trust in political institutions.[4] Many members of the mediation community have therefore remained reluctant to take their mediation efforts "online." This changed in 2020 in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which saw many mediation teams resorting to digital means of communication in order to keep peace processes going in the face of global travel bans that made offline mediation impossible.

Even once conventional forms of inclusion are possible again, peacemakers cannot afford to ignore the potential impact of digital technology on peace processes.

Traditional "shuttle diplomacy"—in which diplomats jet from one location to another as they conducted negotiations—is now partly replaced by a mediator's instant communication with the conflict parties through messaging services such as WhatsApp.

This is because many conflict parties already make proactive use of the increasing availability of digital technology to further their interests and agendas. Consequently, conflicts are inevitably fought out in the digital sphere. What is more, conflict stakeholders, third parties, and the general population increasingly use digital technology to obtain information about the conflict, partake in political activities, or engage in conflict resolution efforts. In an online survey among mediation professionals conducted in 2019 as part of the research for this report, four out of five respondents said they had firsthand experience of conflict parties and stakeholders using digital technology to make their views heard and to promote or reinforce their positions.[5] Social media applications in particular now play a crucial role in forming political opinion and facilitating political mobilization.

Digital technology also opens up new opportunities for communication and engagement in mediation that did not previously exist. Traditional "shuttle diplomacy"—in which diplomats jet from one location to another as they conducted negotiations—is now partly replaced by a mediator's instant communication with the conflict parties through messaging services such as WhatsApp. Such communication methods also make it easier to engage conflict parties that are territorially scattered or based in hard-to-reach areas. In 2017, in Syria, for example, mediators almost exclusively used instant messaging technology to broker local ceasefires; many of the signatories to agreements never met in person (see the snapshot box on page 33).

DIGITAL INCLUSION: AN EMERGING FIELD OF PRACTICE

In the past two years, mediators and mediation support actors have been increasingly inclined to use digital technology in their work. In the 2019 online survey conducted among mediation professionals, three out of five survey respondents stated that they had used digital technologies to support their mediation efforts. This proportion has almost certainly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The growing use of digital technology is mirrored in a growing literature about how best to use it.

The Geneva-based CyberMediation Initiative produced a number of policy publications on the role of digital technology in peace mediation.[6] That initiative transformed in 2020 into the CyberMediation Network, aimed at informing mediation practitioners about the impact of digital technology on peacemaking. As of July 2020, the network is composed of ten members, including USIP.[7] In 2019, the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (UNDPPA) and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue issued a report on the use of digital technologies in mediation and made available a continuously updated online Digital Mediation Toolkit for mediation practitioners.[8] The toolkit identifies "inclusivity" as one of the main thematic areas in which digital technologies can be applied and suggests that digital technologies could be used "to solicit input from large numbers of people on the issues they view as priorities, their aspirations or their views of the process without necessarily broadening the actual negotiating table."[9] In addition, the UNDPPA has published an e-analytics guide on the use of data and technology for peacemaking, preventive diplomacy, and peacebuilding. The guide contends that inclusivity should be one of the main principles shaping how new technologies are employed.[10]

The broader peacebuilding field has seen the emergence of "peacetech," or technologies employed strategically in peacebuilding efforts. Dedicated peacetech organizations and peacetech labs now exist in many countries. Some of the applications and tools that fall under this umbrella have potential utility for inclusive peacemaking. Peacetech

is nothing if not a dynamic field, but constant innovation fuels a perception that peacetech always remains "in the making" and unconsolidated.[11] The fact that technologies are always in flux has led some peacebuilding scholars to argue that technology remains in a "liminal" state—that is, it is characterized by continuous ambiguity about its role.[12] This creates unease among those who aim to use these technologies in a planned and predictable manner. It also means that it is challenging to produce guidance that is still relevant after the next round of software updates has been rolled out. This report responds to this challenge by offering insights that are focused less on specific technologies and more on the strategic purposes that they can serve. It proposes a strategic approach to digital inclusion through which mediators can gradually leverage the potential of digital technology to achieve specific purposes, while carefully taking into account important context factors that vary across different peacemaking scenarios, as well as the associated risks.

This report does not pretend that digital technology, especially social media, cannot have harmful effects on peace processes, but it aims to provide knowledge that can be used despite the associated challenges. This effort is based on the guiding consideration that if digital technology is increasingly employed in an informed and strategic manner, potential risks and challenges can be better controlled. The report seeks neither to spread "tech optimism" nor to indulge in "tech pessimism." Rather, it carves out a reflexive and pragmatic path along which mediators can explore options for digital inclusion, while carefully controlling potential risks.

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

This report reflects the results of the yearlong Designing Digital Inclusion Project, conducted in 2019 at the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding at the Graduate Institute, Geneva. The project, which aimed to support the mediation support community to effectively use digital technology to enhance inclusion in peace processes, had three "workstreams" (or sequenced areas of interrelated activity). In the first workstream, the project assessed how mediators and mediation support actors currently use digital technology to promote inclusion. The project looked at how digital technology is used to facilitate communication between conflict stakeholders within the digital sphere and explored linkages between digital and conventional mediation formats across different tracks of diplomacy, ranging from formal, high-level talks between political and military leaders (track 1), across unofficial dialogue and problem-solving activities involving experts and civil society (track 2), to people-to-people diplomacy at the grassroots level (track 3) that encourages interaction, understanding, and trust building between hostile communities.[13]

To identify not only how mediation practitioners use digital technology but also factors that enable or constrain the effectiveness of digital technology, the project team conducted the online survey referenced earlier. Invitations to participate were distributed widely among the most relevant organizations, including the mediation support units of international and regional organizations such as the United Nations, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development; and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Swisspeace, the Conflict Management Initiative, the Berghof Foundation, and the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes. Mediators and their teams employed in internationally mandated mediation initiatives were also invited to participate. To ensure strong representation by women, invitations were also sent to members of women's mediator networks. A total of seventy-three responses were received. In addition, twenty interviews were conducted with mediation professionals and experts, who provided information and perspective on individual cases. The assessment was global and included experiences from Afghanistan, Northern Ireland, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Ukraine, Myanmar, Colombia, Mali, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, and South Sudan.[14]

In the next workstream, a review was conducted of the large body of literature on the use of digital technologies for development (or "ICT4dev") and humanitarian relief and disaster response. Relevant learning examples were also distilled from the literature on e-participation in policymaking and the role of social media in social movements. Finally, the literature on countering online hate speech was mined for relevant insights.

These fields bear similarities to peacemaking in terms of the context in which these technologies are applied, which is often characterized by limited socioeconomic development and communication infrastructures. Moreover, as with peacemaking, these fields have objectives related to the overarching goal of increasing participation. The application of digital technology in these fields has also unveiled a range of intervening factors, challenges, and risks that should also be considered when applying digital technology in the field of peace mediation. Therefore, this report draws on the knowledge resources produced in these adjacent fields—including academic studies and policy- and practice-oriented literature—to inform the adaption of digital technology by the mediation community.

In the third and final workstream, the project sought to translate insights gained from the adjacent professional fields to peacemaking generally and mediation specifically. To better understand how to tailor digital technology to the needs of the mediation community, the project team invited mediators and mediation support actors to participate in an online course; here, the goal was to help the project develop practical learning and guidance resources. This activity was implemented jointly with Helena Puig Larrauri and Maude Morrison from the NGO Build Up.[15] The course presented the preliminary findings of the other two workstreams (the survey and the literature review) and discussed how digital technology could be used to facilitate inclusive peacemaking in four distinct peacemaking scenarios: negotiations after a full-fledged civil war, negotiations to end a localized armed insurgency, negotiations in the context of electoral violence, and national dialogues after a popular uprising. These scenarios were chosen to discuss a wide variety of use cases in which a technology could be tailored to a specific situation. Fifteen of the use cases developed during the online course are presented later in this report. More detailed descriptions can be found on the project's online resource, www.digitalpeacemaking.com. This website also presents additional information on the various peacemaking scenarios and phases in which the use cases may be applied.

Understanding Digital Inclusion

Before examining the question of how best to make use of digital technology for inclusion, some clarity is required about what is meant by these terms. It is also necessary to understand how digital technology functions within the dynamics of a mediated peace process and how it can help overcome some of the challenges and dilemmas that characterize current approaches to inclusion, such as the competition for seats at the negotiation table.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY: BEYOND TOOLS AND GADGETS

In this report, digital technologies are understood as devices, platforms, or techniques that communicate, process, and store data—in other words, both hardware and software. They thus include computer and mobile phone–based applications, as well as social media. The peacebuilding and peacemaking communities increasingly utilize the term "digital technologies" in place of the more unwieldy term "information and communication technologies," the latter also encompassing some nondigital technologies.

However they are defined, these technologies are more than just tools or gadgets. Technologies contain specific knowledge, through which they complete a task.[16] It is thus essential to ask about not only the material aspects of technology (the tools or gadget), but also the knowledge and skills required to utilize them. Like any technology, digital technologies are always situated in a context and are "socially embedded." They have been shaped by the environment in which they were developed, and they serve specific preferences.[17] Knowledge is necessary not only to create a specific technology, but also to apply it purposefully and effectively.

In recent years, discussions about the use of digital technology have been dominated by concerns about the detrimental role that it can play in political processes, and particularly in increasing political polarization, populism, xenophobia, and racism.[18] In addition, feminist critiques of technology have flagged that current patterns of technology design, access, and usage mirror the broader social patterns and institutions that continue to marginalize women and other groups. Technologies are thus colored by the intentions, interests, and inclinations of those who build and use them. But if this is true, then technology can of course be used as a tool to advance emancipatory agendas, just as well as repressive and divisive ones.[19]

Once put in place, these technologies have an impact on the dynamics of peace processes—and their inclusivity. For instance, they may facilitate specific political agendas and not others, enhance the voice of specific stakeholders over others, or provide access to specific segments of the population while making participation more difficult for others.

INCLUSION: CHALLENGES AND DILEMMAS

In the past years, inclusion has emerged as a central concern for mediators and mediation support actors. It now forms an essential element in international efforts to support the peaceful settlement of armed conflict and to build long-term peace. Inclusion is also increasingly enshrined in international policy provisions and international law, particularly since the publication in 2012 of the UN secretary-general's report "Peacebuilding in the Aftermath of Conflict."[20] There is, however, no precise definition of "inclusion" and the term risks being used as a buzzword to correspond with expected normative commitments, while its utility remains unclear.[21]

The United Nations' "Guidance on Effective Mediation," which was also issued in 2012, defines "inclusivity" as "the extent and manner in which the views and needs of conflict parties and other stakeholders are represented and integrated into the process and outcome of a mediation effort."[22] The term "inclusion" focuses on the efforts in the process through which inclusivity is achieved. These definitions, while somewhat fuzzy, mirror some of the early reasoning behind inclusion, namely, to widen participation beyond the principal conflict parties so that the views and needs of all stakeholders can be brought into the process.

In practice, implementing inclusive peace processes has been challenging. Inclusion can lead to a change of power relations at the negotiation table and beyond. Domestic political elites (whether within the country or part of a diaspora) may therefore view inclusive arrangements as a threat to their power and oppose it. Foreign interests also matter. In Syria, more inclusive arrangements have been hindered by powerful foreign states that reject more inclusive peace negotiations. Moreover, widespread insecurity, ongoing military operations, or the destruction of infrastructure through armed conflict make the participation of large parts of civilian society in peace processes very difficult. Although digital technology cannot change the political context in which peace processes take place, it allows mediation professionals to respond to these challenges differently, by enabling more flexible forms of inclusion that are less dependent on infrastructure and physical location.

But who should mediators include? The age-old fight to have a seat at the negotiation table has recently been widened, but there are no clear answers to the question of who should have a say alongside the track 1 parties—at the table or beyond. There is a risk of a competition for seats between participants that claim to represent various population and stakeholder groups, matching specific identity traits (for example, gender, age, ethnicity). Inclusion has to a great extent become associated with women's participation, but other identity markers, such as youth, are also drawing attention.[23] What is more, peace processes often necessitate resolving animosities along ethnic or religious identity categories. Given the focus on specific identity traits, participants in peace processes become associated with the seemingly homogenous constituencies they represent, while actually possessing multiple identity traits simultaneously. In addition, a reliance on a single identity marker, such as gender or geographic origin, as the criterion for selection poses the risk that the representatives of their constituents may brush over, or misrepresent, what is in fact a heterogeneous group of stakeholders.[24]

This complexity is compounded by increasing fragmentation in contemporary peace processes. In contexts such as Syria, Yemen, and South Sudan, the proliferation of armed groups, political parties, and civil society groups has made broad-based inclusion difficult to achieve.[25] Conventional inclusion formats usually must go through a delicate selection process to guarantee that participation is balanced. This also pertains to the participation of what are often portrayed as "neutral" civil society actors, which may worsen detrimental power dynamics at the negotiation table if, for instance, civil society groups or women representatives side with elements of the political elite or armed opposition.[26]

HOW CAN DIGITAL INCLUSION HELP?

Many problems about participation stem from a misguided understanding of what should be included in a peace process. Inclusivity is achieved primarily through the inclusion, not of persons, but of the views and needs of conflict parties and stakeholders. These are related to the various identity traits that matter in a given conflict.[27] In this respect, digital technology may provide practical solutions, because it allows access to the negotiation table and helps broaden the process in ways that conventional inclusion modalities cannot—by focusing primarily on the integration of views and needs that are expressed by a diverse set of stakeholders, rather than on their physical presence at a conference or workshop, for instance. Digital technology promises to enable more

fluid and adaptive forms of participation. Digital inclusion allows for more direct forms of participation and thus circumvents the challenge to distribute seats at the table in a way that reflects the overall composition of those affected by the conflict. It also enables participation on a larger scale, which means in effect that a more heterogeneous group can be involved in the processes. For instance, the United Nations Innovation Cell currently experiments with large mass online focus groups that could enable the participation of up to a thousand stakeholders—for instance, in Yemen or Ukraine.[28] Stakeholders can also participate more flexibly, engaging with others depending on the specific issues and purposes.

By way of definition, it is suggested here that digital inclusion in a mediated peace process means that the voice of conflict stakeholders is integrated into that process in the form of digital data. "Voice" encompasses various kinds of information that are intentionally expressed by the conflict party or stakeholder, including factual information, preferences, experiences, opinions, and beliefs. Peace processes are typically characterized by new and often inchoate political demands and ideas, which aim at the renegotiation of the political status quo and need to be given expression—hence the importance of voice.[29] Voice also helps to gather information about the needs and experiences of population groups that are affected by war and violence, which can inform the short-term activities of mediators and their teams.

Conventional forms of inclusion ultimately require the physical presence of representatives who can ensure that their constituents' preferences are communicated in a direct manner to the mediator and other conflict parties and stakeholders, thereby informing the ongoing peace process. The representatives will also be able to verify if their message has been accurately received and taken into account. When using digital technology, messages are translated into digital data and transmitted by digital means. This means that the "data" is split from the "sender." This is another reason why the emphasis on voice is important in the data collected through digital inclusion—it requires that the data integrated into the process corresponds with the message that the sender wanted to deliver in the first place.

A real danger exists that senders lose control of the information and ideas they express, especially if they do not express them with the intention of influencing the peace process. Large amounts of data are available that can inform a peace process that have not originally been produced with this intent. For instance, posts and comments on social media may contain political messages that can help mediation professionals understand the preferences of conflict parties, conflict stakeholders, and their respective constituents. Indeed, sentiment analysis tools are specifically designed to reveal such preferences. But although these tools may gather relevant information, there is no way to guarantee that the senders of information actually wanted the information to inform the peace process in this particular way.

This problem has been raised through warnings about the "extractive" potential of digital technology and its possibly disempowering effects that do not encourage engagement in peace processes.[30] Research in other domains has shown that while social media users have to agree to the collection and use of personal data that is difficult to keep track of, they nonetheless have a sense of the range of uses of that information and the inferences that might be made from it.[31] That said, using social media data to inform political processes without the explicit consent of social media users is likely to backfire for several reasons, not least because of the danger of taking comments out of context and thus misinterpreting them. An emphasis on the need to capture voice in order to be truly inclusive can avert such risks because it requires that the data collected is intended by its senders to inform the peace process.

From left to right, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Qatari Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohamad Bin Abdel Rahman Al-Thani and Mutlaq bin Majid al-Qahtani, the special envoy of the Qatari Foreign Minister for Terrorism and Mediation in the Settlement of Disputes, listen to Abdullah Abdullah, chairman of Afghanistan's High Council for National Reconciliation, on the screen, at the opening session of the peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, on September 12, 2020. (Photo by Hussein Sayed/AP)

The Emerging Practice of Digital Inclusion

Which digital technologies do mediators use to facilitate inclusion and how do they use them? Drawing on the results of the online survey and expert interviews conducted as part of this study, this chapter offers a rough sketch of current practice. Those results are not representative of all mediation practices, but they are likely to be indicative of broader trends.

The aim here is not to describe the vast array of technologies that can be used in peace processes (to do so would require a small encyclopedia in need of constant updating), but first to offer a brief overview and then to describe the communication patterns that result from the use of digital technology, how digital technology is used in combination with offline conventional forms of inclusion, and how digital technology is used to link peacemaking efforts between different tracks.

Since the survey was conducted, the global COVID-19 pandemic has changed these use patterns. Faced with a global lockdown and widespread travel restrictions, many mediation teams have increasingly used digital technology in their work. This is documented in a starkly increased interest in the topic of digital inclusion. In a survey of individuals with an interest in the CyberMediation Network conducted in June 2020, more than nine out of

ten respondents stated that their teams had spent more time than usual considering or planning options for digital inclusion, and more than eight out of ten stated that their teams had increasingly applied digital technology to enhance inclusion during the pandemic.[32]

WHICH TECHNOLOGIES ARE CURRENTLY USED, AND WHY?

Many mediators make use of digital technologies, but not all the time and for all purposes. As noted earlier, three out of five participants in the 2019 survey stated they have used digital technologies to support their mediation efforts, and more than four out of five have firsthand experience of conflict parties or stakeholders using digital technologies to make their views heard. For instance, conflict parties use digital technologies to shape the "information battleground" and influence the participants' perceptions, stances, and willingness to negotiate. At times, conflict parties may also use digital technologies to share grievances, put forward proposals, and promote or reinforce their positions. In many contexts, conflict party representatives that are involved in a negotiation may use their social media profiles to post updates about the process and share details and even documents. However, only two out of five respondents have known conflict parties to request that digital technologies be used as a tool for inclusion in a mediated peace process. This indicates a discrepancy between the use of technologies by the conflict parties and their interest in having technology used in mediation efforts. Of course, this should not be interpreted to mean that other stakeholders—and especially those with limited voice—would not appreciate stronger inclusion through digital means.

The survey also yielded insights into which technologies are used and why. The top technologies used were email, followed by websites, interactive data visualization and analysis tools, online discussion forums, short messaging services, and smartphone messaging applications. These results reflect the fact that the majority of the mediation support community employs off-the-shelf communication technologies that can be utilized for a variety of purposes. In contrast, specialized, dedicated, and more technically demanding technologies seem to be less widely used. The survey also indicates that mediation professionals choose their technologies mainly based on the criteria of "what works." Important considerations are the appropriateness for a particular context, the availability and reliability of technology, and the stakeholders' preferences for and acceptance of technology, visible in local use patterns. Other influential factors are ease of deployment, use, and maintenance; the overall performance and usefulness of technology for a given purpose; and cost. Security is also a crucial consideration, particularly concerns about data security, data manipulation, and surveillance risks, as well as protection concerns for those who use the technology.

COMMUNICATION PATTERNS: TWO-WAY VERSUS NETWORKED COMMUNICATION

The survey produced interesting insights into the communication patterns between mediation professionals, conflict parties, stakeholders, and the broader population. Three out of five respondents use digital technologies to communicate with the conflict parties; the same proportion use them to communicate with the general public; and an even larger proportion—four out of five—use digital technologies to facilitate their communication with conflict stakeholders. Some mediation teams, for example, set up several decentralized reporting centers to which the population could send news of ceasefire violations and other significant developments. Other teams used SMS-polling technologies to get a sense of the perceptions and preferences of the broader population. The lower levels of use in communication with conflict parties may be due to the mediators' concerns about surveillance. For instance, mediators were conscious of the risk that the content of their conversations could be intercepted or the identity and geographical position of those using the technologies could be disclosed. Many mediators invest considerable resources to guarantee the safety of the conflict parties they interact with, and thus they aim to keep digital traces to a minimum. Where surveillance is less of a concern, and its consequences are less likely to

imperil the parties' safety, digital technologies are more likely to be used as a vehicle for inclusion.

Mediation professionals also use digital technologies to facilitate communication that does not primarily involve them. Almost three out of five respondents have used digital technologies to facilitate communication between the conflict parties and the general public. This again indicates that these technologies are already used in ways that foster inclusion. For example, such communication may be facilitated to foster a basic level of buy-in among the conflict parties' constituents through information sharing and consultations. One in two respondents have used digital technologies to facilitate communication between different conflict stakeholders. This suggests that digital technologies can help strengthen interaction between parties that usually do not have direct access to the negotiation table. Almost two out of five respondents have used digital technologies to facilitate communication between conflict stakeholders and the general public, which also broadens engagement in peace processes.

In contrast, digital technologies are used less to facilitate the communication between conflict parties and between conflict parties and conflict stakeholders. Here, again, data security concerns are likely to play an important role. It seems plausible that exchanges between conflict parties, and between conflict parties and other stakeholders, are perceived as highly sensitive and challenging to manage, which is why most mediation professionals continue to rely on face-to-face communication. There are some interesting outliers, however, such as the use of text-messaging services to establish contact between representatives of quarreling groups that have not been in direct contact for years or even decades. Digital technologies have also been used to increase empathy between communities associated with different conflict parties. In Ukraine, for instance, the Donbass Dialogue uses a virtual dialogue platform that connects communities that live in government-controlled areas with communities that live in areas not controlled by the government (see the snapshot box on page 30).

Many digital technologies enable forms of communication that are not strictly between two parties, but instead unfold in relational networks. For instance, messaging services, which have conventionally been used to connect two parties, now often involve groups of participants. A WhatsApp group may be moderated by an administrator, who regulates the membership of the group, but all members have an equal ability to contribute to the chat. Other communication platforms may allow a stronger level of moderation and control, for instance, through the curation of specific dialogue themes and through moderation functions such as calling on or muting participants or even censoring specific content and comments. In addition, some technologies—such as online surveys, polling, and crowdsourcing applications—are more suited to enable vertical communication between a central agent and a larger group, whereas other technologies—such as online fora and wikis—enable horizontal and decentralized communication. The design of such technologies shapes the dynamics of inclusion and ultimately influences what objectives can be achieved through them. As the use cases presented later in this report make clear, the design of the technology will affect how specific functions and outputs associated with a specific strategic purpose are delivered.

INTEGRATING OFFLINE AND ONLINE INCLUSION EFFORTS

The survey responses indicate that mediation professionals use digital technologies primarily in combination with conventional, offline forms of inclusion; digital technologies are also used, albeit to a smaller degree, to facilitate standalone, online forms of inclusion. In 2019, almost nine out of ten respondents reported that they used digital technologies in combination with offline inclusion formats, such as consultations or workshops. Mediators often alternate between online formats and offline formats, or use them in parallel. For example, online platforms provide opportunities to organize and coordinate offline activities and to set agendas. In advance of offline activities, digital technologies are also used to conduct informal consultations and preliminary discussions with individual actors,

which are then continued, extended, and finalized through offline activities. For instance, during the negotiations in Myanmar that led to a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in October 2015, mediators used, with the agreement of all major parties, an NGO's Facebook page as an ad hoc consultation platform. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many mediators have used online-only inclusion formats.

Digital technologies may be used to create and share content that then features in offline meetings. Digital technologies can also enable broader participation during offline activities—for instance, through video streaming or videoconferencing services. Many mediation professionals believe that digital technologies cannot easily replace face-to-face meetings and that these conventional forms of interaction continue to be understood as the "real" effort. In particular, offline forms continue to be perceived as more meaningful and more suited to building a basis for collaboration. They are also understood as a prerequisite for online activities. In short, digital inclusion is currently seen as being able to complement conventional forms of inclusion, but not to replace them. During the pandemic, although many mediation teams have relied on digital technology to maintain communication with important stakeholder groups and have taken already planned offline inclusion efforts online, most mediators still seem to regard building new relationships or realizing other strategic objectives solely through digital means as challenging.

CREATING LINKAGES BETWEEN TRACKS

Digital inclusion can be a vehicle for connecting peacemaking efforts. Three out of four respondents have used digital technologies to create linkages between different peacemaking tracks. For example, digital technology can enable civil society actors in track 2 dialogues to provide their perspectives to participants in track 1 through electronic messages, "digital feeds," or videoconferencing links. Messaging services can provide a platform for informal discussions among influential civil society leaders that then inform the official negotiating positions of the conflict parties. Information gathered through online consultations can be fed back into formal national dialogue processes. Mediation professionals also use information gathered through social media sources to analyze and monitor conflict dynamics and trends and to inform mediation strategies. This information may also be presented to stakeholders and conflict parties taking part in various tracks. However, as explained in the preceding section, this does not contribute to digital inclusion unless the information is provided intentionally by the users.

Digital technologies can also be used for multilevel peace advocacy and to capture the sentiments and interests expressed in one track and present them to stakeholders participating in another track. It is important to note, however, that in digital inclusion, differentiating between tracks becomes increasingly difficult. This is because digital inclusion stakeholders connect in spaces that are much more fluid and dynamic than a static model of separate peacemaking tracks assumes. When conflict parties and stakeholders interact on social media platforms, they are operating in a trackless space, one in which conventional roles and political boundaries are challenged. In some cases, conflict party representatives have shared information from the negotiating process with their followers or constituencies and have engaged in discussions with these audiences through social media channels. In other cases, civil society activists have brought political elites into a social media debate with the wider population by using Twitter hashtags and tagging these influential stakeholders in comments on Facebook.

These examples point to an emerging practice of digital inclusion that is already changing how the broader public participates in peace processes. But if this desire for participation is to be harnessed by mediators and their teams, it is important to get clarity about the specific purposes that these various expressions of voice can serve. Mediators need an informed and strategic approach to digital inclusion, as the next section explains.

Men sell mobile phones and SIM cards at a market in Kabul, Afghanistan, on March 31, 2016. (Photo by Adam Ferguson/New York Times)

A Conceptual Framework for Digital Inclusion

Inclusion is not an end in itself but a means to an end: the peaceful settlement of conflict. But how can inclusion, and in particular digital inclusion, contribute to that broad goal? This section of the report introduces a conceptual framework that elucidates how digital inclusion can support specific *strategic purposes* in mediated peace processes by delivering specific *functions* and *outputs*.

As inclusion has grown more popular, approaches to it have considerably diversified. Many of these approaches implicitly or explicitly correspond with deeper reflections about the causes and dynamics of conflict, and how inclusion can help to address, mitigate, and overcome them. To matter for peace processes, inclusion should therefore be understood as purposeful.

The conceptual framework is built around four strategic purposes, drawing on an article published in January 2020 by Andreas Hirblinger and Dana Landau, who spotlighted major strategies of inclusion in peacemaking practice and their underlying rationales:

- To build the legitimacy of processes and outcomes by involving a broad range of stakeholders beyond the principal conflict parties.
- To empower women and marginalized groups by providing opportunities for participation in peace processes and political institutions.

Table 1. A Conceptual Framework for Digital Inclusion

Strategic purposes of digital technology	Description
Build the legitimacy of processes and outcomes	Increase public support for peace processes and their outcomes by involving conflict stakeholders beyond the principal conflict parties
Empower women and marginalized groups	Give marginalized or vulnerable groups the power to inform peace processes by providing opportunities and resources for participation
Transform relationships	Transform the social, political, and cultural relationships underlying conflict by focusing on the relations between conflict parties and stakeholders
Protect vulnerable groups and reduce the risk of continued violence	Enable early warning and early action by fostering horizontal networks of information exchange

Functions of digital technology	Description
Gather data	Collect data relevant for the peacemaking context, actors, or specific events
Analyze data	Process, prepare, compare, or triangulate data relevant for the peacemaking context, actors, or specific events
Disseminate data	Share or publish data relevant for the peacemaking context, actors, or specific events
Amplify messages	Increase the visibility of information and make it more marked
Diversify messages	Increase the diversity of information or the diversity of senders
Connect actors	Enable exchange and communication between actors
Enable coordination	Enable alignment between usually unconnected or disjointed actors
Enable collaboration	Enable joint action between actors toward a common objective

Outputs of digital technology	Description
Better information	Providing data that is not otherwise available
Faster information	Reducing the time required for data transmission
Wider information	Widening the reach of data among the population
Political expression	Making the thoughts and feelings of stakeholders known
Assert influence	Enabling stakeholders to affect the course of the peace process
Empathy	Increasing the ability of stakeholders to understand and share the feelings of others
Mobilization	Organizing and encouraging a particular group to take collective action
Representation	Providing information that depicts someone's interests, needs, or concerns
Deliberation	Enabling discussion through which an issue is carefully considered

- To transform relationships underlying conflict and build community by focusing on the relational dynamics between conflict parties and stakeholders.
- To protect vulnerable groups and reduce the risk of continued violence by enabling early warning and early action.[33]

Digital technologies can be used—either individually or collectively—to pursue any of these strategic purposes. Mediators can use digital technologies to achieve a single strategic purpose or a combination of them.

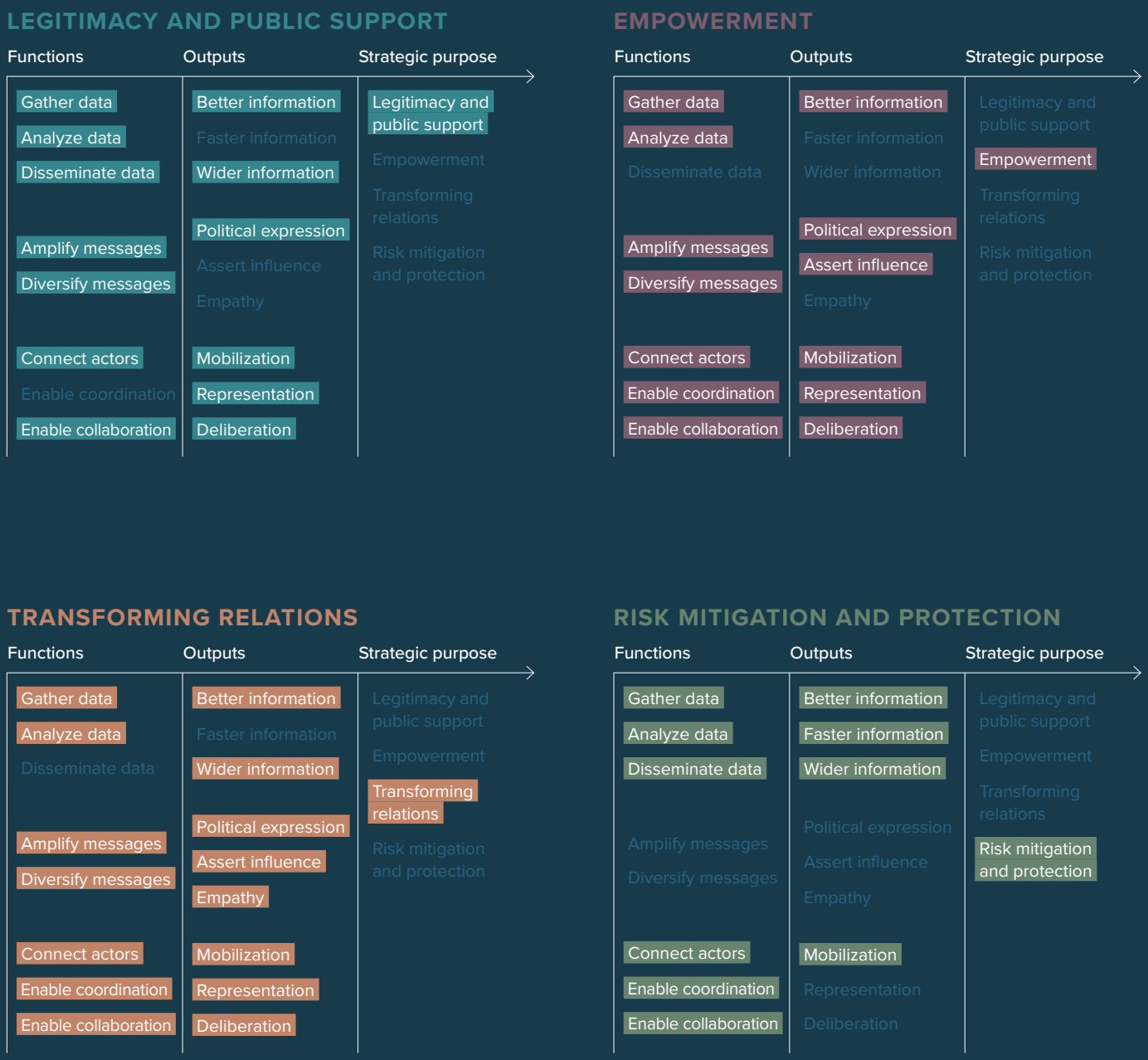
To chart out an actionable pathway to achieve each of these strategic purposes, it is helpful to think in greater detail about the individual functions that digital technology has to fulfill and the outputs it needs to generate. The NGO Build Up differentiates between three general functions of technology, namely, data management, strategic communication, and dialogue and networking. These general functions can in turn be broken down to yield a detailed understanding of what digital technology must deliver to facilitate inclusion in mediated peace processes. Data management can be broken out into data gathering, data analysis, and data dissemination. Strategic communication can be disaggregated into the amplification of messages and the diversification of messages. Finally, dialogue and networking can be broken down to differentiate between connecting users, coordinating their activities, and enabling collaboration between them.

The functions create various outputs that help to achieve each of the four objectives. The data management functions help to produce new or better information, increase the speed of information transmission, and increase the spread of information among the population. The strategic communication functions can enable or enhance political expression, assert influence in the peace process, and increase empathy. Finally, the dialogue and networking functions enable or enhance mobilization, representation, and deliberation. Importantly, the technologies will always have to enable a combination of functions in order to generate the outputs, and a combination of outputs is needed to achieve a single strategic purpose.

This conceptual framework—the strategic purposes, functions, and outputs of digital technology—is elaborated in table 1. It should be noted that it does not provide a one-size-fits-all solution; to the contrary, it is meant as an inspiration that can guide the designing of digital inclusion efforts in a context-sensitive manner. The functions and outputs of technology presented in the table were first derived from a review of academic and policy-oriented literature that documents the use of digital technologies in adjacent fields, such as peacebuilding, development aid, and humanitarian response. The idea was to distill lessons learned about how technologies can contribute to any of the four strategic purposes. The framework was then discussed and further refined during a participatory online course, held as part of the Designing Digital Inclusion project. The relevance of the individual functions and outputs for each of the strategic purposes was tested during the design of the digital inclusion use cases, which are presented in the next section. As such, the framework is meant to support the practical design of digital inclusion activities.

The four sections of figure 1 show which functions and outputs are involved with each of the four strategic purposes. As can be seen, not all functions are needed to achieve a specific output or strategic purpose.

Figure 1. Strategic Purposes of Mediated Peace Processes: Functions and Outputs



The Strategic Purposes of Digital Inclusion

The conceptual framework presented in the preceding section identifies the strategic purposes that digital inclusion can serve, as well as the functions and outputs that digital technologies have to deliver to contribute to these purposes. The framework is not prescriptive, but provides a heuristic resource through which mediation professionals can consider how to use digital technology and for what purpose. The framework thus encourages mediators to ask certain questions, but—as this section explains and illustrates—how they answer those questions must be shaped by the specific peacemaking context in which they are working.

Prominent among the contextual factors mediators and their support teams should consider is the kind of conflict and its underlying causes. Inclusion through digital technology can support a variety of peacemaking efforts in several different kinds of conflict, ranging from mediating in civil wars or armed insurgencies, to facilitating national dialogues in the context of political transitions, or preventing electoral violence. The needs of the process shape the mediator's mandate, objectives, and approach and influence the purpose of the digital inclusion intervention.

The stage of the process also matters. Although generating public support is crucial throughout most of the process, the early stages may demand that mediators pay more attention to other strategic purposes, such as empowering civil society to increase the political pressure for a negotiated settlement or building trust between the conflict parties. The later stages of a mediation usually require that the outcomes of the negotiation are viewed as legitimate by all relevant stakeholders and call for activities that support the longer-term transformation of the relationships that underpinned conflict. This is not to suggest that peace processes unfold in a linear fashion. However, timing matters in the design and implementation of digital inclusion activities.

This section discusses how the four strategic purposes can concretely be achieved. To this end, it summarizes core insights from the use of digital technologies in adjacent fields, such as development aid and humanitarian relief, and offers two types of examples for each of the strategic purposes. One type is a *snapshot* of how digital inclusion has been or currently is being used in peacemaking. The other type consists of *use cases* that sketch scenarios of how digital technology *could* be used for purposeful digital inclusion. As noted earlier, these use cases were developed in a participatory process during the Designing Digital Inclusion Online Course, which was held from August to October 2019. To make it easier to see how the use cases correspond with the conceptual framework, the functions and outputs are set in bold type.

BUILDING THE LEGITIMACY OF PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES

Peace negotiations require public support at various stages in a process if they are to produce results that are legitimate. Inclusive arrangements, which make it more likely that the views and needs of all relevant stakeholders are taken into account, will also increase the likelihood that the underlying causes of conflict are addressed, thereby making it less likely that any conflict stakeholder will return to violence.

Snapshot

COLOMBIA—DIGITAL AGENDA SETTING

In 2012, in the course of the peace process between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the government of Colombia, digital technology was used to consult with the public to shape the agenda of the peace negotiations and to inform the public about the peace process. The means used included a dedicated web page and a smartphone application, Mesa de Conversaciones, which was used to share documents and videos and to collect submissions from the general population. The platform was managed as a joint effort by the mediation parties in collaboration with the government.

The information collected through the process, however, was too vast to be systematically analyzed. As a result, it remains unclear how it actually informed the negotiations. The initiative also struggled with a high percentage of SPAM and fabricated submissions, which had to be differentiated from authentic submissions. Reports on the consultative process were published in 2013. The final peace agreement text acknowledges the impact of the digital consultations, in conjunction with responses obtained in workshops with civil society across the country, and mentions that the public made more than seventeen thousand submissions.

Following the 2014 elections, the use of digital technology became much more politicized. Social media in particular turned into a battleground for supporters and opponents of the peace process. This contest became especially pronounced after the government and FARC negotiators agreed on the terms of a peace agreement in August 2016. During preparations for a public referendum on the agreement, various political stakeholders used social media to campaign for or against it. After a thin majority rejected the peace agreement in the referendum, peace activists used social media to campaign for a renegotiation of the agreement. The amended agreement was ratified in the Colombian Congress and no attempt for a second referendum was made.

Inclusion has been widely used as a vehicle to strengthen the public support and acceptance of political processes and their outcomes, and digital technology plays an increasing role in such efforts. Even though increased use of digital technology, including social media, does not necessarily lead to increased political participation, this has not discouraged efforts to extend democratic processes into the digital realm through variants of "eParticipation."[34] These initiatives can take many forms, including data gathering, information sharing, electronic voting, online debates, consultations, and decision making.[35] In addition, social media has been broadly used in support of political activism—both online and offline—which can strengthen the support for political and social movements. When decision makers hear such claims, political processes become more legitimate.[36]

In conflict-affected countries, many stakeholders have little opportunity to voice their needs and interests because of the high costs of participation. By providing simple and cost-effective means to engage, digital technology can also amplify the messages of a larger number of stakeholders and thus increase the public support for processes.[37] For instance, providing input through a simple messaging platform is very inexpensive. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Build Up partnered with the UN Peacebuilding Fund to run a public consultation in Somalia to identify peacebuilding priorities for the next three years. The process was conducted exclusively on WhatsApp and almost four hundred people participated. The results of this public consultation were fed into a closed-door virtual consultation that brought together high-level UN and government officials to agree on a final list of peacebuilding priorities.

Digital inclusion in peace processes can strengthen public support and approval at several stages. In the early phases, mediators and their teams may make use of the political momentum created by peace activists and civil society. Although mediators usually do not work directly with such groups, the potential of peace movements can be leveraged to bring the conflict parties to the negotiation table. Digital technologies provide many opportunities to coordinate peace campaigns, help gather information about political demands, and increase public support for a peaceful settlement of the conflict.

USE CASE 1: In the early phases of a process, *participatory peace campaigns* can be supplemented through a social media component. These campaigns could involve civil society groups that demonstrate the public's willingness for a peaceful settlement and pressure conflict parties to join the formal negotiation process. For instance, mediation support actors could share multimedia content that documents progress in the peace process. Once a formal negotiation process is established, the campaign would disseminate data that informs the public about tangible achievements. The campaign would also ask members of the public to express their political demands and lobby their political representatives to commit to a peaceful settlement. The campaign would amplify the messages of peace activists, increase mobilization, and support them to assert influence on the conflict parties. The participants could also sign up for more confidence-building measures. These activities could be continuously documented and disseminated on social media.

Digital inclusion can contribute to the mapping of important peace processes actors, as well as their interests and positions and the power relations between them. Such mapping exercises are a prerequisite for crafting inclusion formulas that can help build public support. They are particularly relevant in contexts in which democratic representation is weak or long periods of violence have resulted in fragmented and dispersed forms of political organization, including in the online space. For instance, peace efforts that are intended to end long-running, large-scale armed conflicts—such as the conflicts ongoing in Syria, Yemen, and Libya—will have to deal with high levels of

Many stakeholders have little opportunity to voice their needs and interests because of the high costs of participation. By providing simple and cost-effective means to engage, digital technology can also amplify the messages of a larger number of stakeholders and thus increase the public support for processes.

fractionalization. In addition, large parts of the population may be living in refugee communities outside the country and therefore may be limited to remote, online-only forms of engagement. Limited public infrastructures, especially in development settings, may also make it difficult to find information about those who hold influence and power in the society affected by conflict. Mapping methodologies that document conflict stakeholders and the relations between them can fill such information gaps. The peacetech start-up Dialeqtic has piloted such mapping tools in the context of armed conflicts—as, for instance, in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.[38]

USE CASE 2: A tool that enables the collection, analysis, and visualization of data to conduct a *dynamic mapping of power relations* can enable mediators to acquire better information about the conflict context. The tool gathers and analyzes data from offline or online focus group discussions with the support of a network of insider or local-level facilitators. The data could be displayed on an online dashboard to illustrate and visualize key stakeholders, their interests, and attitudes, as well as the relationships between them. The information will help in the development of mediation strategies and processes that produce more legitimate outcomes.

In preparations for peace negotiations, digital inclusion has proven helpful as a vehicle to enable joint agenda setting. Digital inclusion can increase the chances that the negotiation agenda reflects not only the interests of those with direct access to the negotiation table, but also the needs and concerns of the broader population. During the peace process between rebels and the government in Colombia, for instance, the conflict parties used digital tools to consult with the public on the agenda of the peace negotiations (see the snapshot box on page 20).

USE CASE 3: A variety of *rapid polling* applications can be used to collect data before and during peace negotiations—for instance, to support agenda setting processes. The polls could capture attitudes and opinions on a wide range of subjects that should be covered in the negotiation, such as specific power- or wealth-sharing provisions, reintegration and resettlement, disarmament, and political reform processes. The information would be collected, classified, and analyzed, and conclusions shared with the mediation team. The polls would thus amplify the messages of stakeholders without direct access to the negotiation table. At a later state in the process, the results of the polls could be used to incentivize compromise among negotiating parties, shared back to polling participants, and distributed among a wider set of organizations involved in the peace process. Rapid polls would lead to better information and help stakeholders express their political demands and assert influence at the negotiation table. The data collection, analysis, and dissemination could be done through WhatsApp messages, dedicated polling apps, online forms, or SMS systems.

Once negotiations are under way, digital technology can be employed to foster and maintain transparency. Although much of the peace process will be conducted behind closed doors, a controlled dissemination of information can help to build public approval of the eventual negotiation outcomes and guard against them being deals that satisfy only elites. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, Swisspeace and NOREF facilitated a series of virtual meetings between the UN Special Envoy for Syria and representatives of civil society.[39]

Civil society–led initiatives can play a strong role in enforcing transparency and a democratization of information.[40] By promoting a culture of openness that enhances government accountability, digital technology can inject trust and reciprocity into state-society relations.[41] Such qualities are usually absent in societies wracked by armed conflict. A first step in building trust can be the creation of online platforms that bring together representatives of the mediation team, conflict stakeholders, and civil society peacebuilding organizations to facilitate the exchange of information about the ongoing negotiation, its major activities and events, and options for participation. This could even involve collecting feedback on possible agreement texts or aspects of it.

USE CASE 4: Toward the end of negotiations, digital inclusion could be used to strengthen the public's acceptance of and support for an agreement. Key stakeholders could be invited to participate in *a digital review of the draft agreement text* or key provisions of a possible agreement. This could involve a selected number of qualified participants, who would be able to view an entire text and comment directly on the document. The review process would amplify and diversify the messages that inform a final agreement text. The mediation team would then analyze these comments and incorporate workable ideas that promise to be consensual into the next version of the agreement.

USE CASE 5: Additionally, digital technology could be used to solicit *public feedback on an agreement* through a large-scale campaign to gather inputs on a draft text and raise awareness of and support for it. The agreement would be disseminated through videos, infographics, and other forms that enable a lay public to understand the content of legalistic provisions. Feedback is then gathered from participants through a range of mechanisms, including surveys administered by trained enumerators on smartphones.

In an increasing number of cases, digital tools have been used to inform ongoing dialogue efforts. (See the snapshot box on page 24 for an example of dialogue in Libya.)

Digital technologies strengthen the legitimacy of policy-making processes particularly if they enable deliberation. In group discussions, for instance, participants can carefully weigh the arguments for and against a specific policy proposition presented by others.[42] Importantly, deliberation does not always require a direct conversation between those participating in a process. It can be enabled through gathering, exchanging, and weighing views and positions through online collaboration or crowdsourcing—for instance, in the context of constitutional reform processes or national dialogues.[43] Although achieving consensus may be difficult, such activities can help to ensure that a broader range of views and options inform an ongoing peace negotiation.

USE CASE 6: During negotiations, *public digital consultations* could involve a broad cross section of the population interacting with the mediator on a dedicated online discussion forum. The consultations could focus on specific elements of the negotiations. The online forum would gather relevant data, as well as amplify and diversify the messages of stakeholders in the peace process. The results of these consultations would contain better information about the population's needs and interests and could be used by the mediator to inform the negotiation process. The consultations would enable a broad range of stakeholders to express their political opinions and assert influence on the process. The collected data could also be analyzed and synthesized using analytical tools that leverage artificial intelligence. Furthermore, a social media campaign could be run to disseminate the results of the consultations and invite people to the online discussion forum that enables deliberation between them.

Snapshot

OFFLINE AND ONLINE CONSULTATIONS IN PREPARATION OF THE LIBYA NATIONAL DIALOGUE

In 2018, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue conducted a series of local consultations in Libya to support the ongoing high-level political process. These consultations constituted the first phase of the National Conference Process (NCP), which was followed by the National Conference itself. The consultations were an integral part of the UN Action Plan for Libya and designed in close collaboration with the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General and all major Libyan stakeholders. The objective of the initiative was to consult citizens from all sectors of Libyan society, especially those who had been left out of the elite political dialogue. The initiative aimed to identify elements of consensus in Libya's fragmented political landscape in regard to key issues of the conflict and the future of the Libyan state.

The main element of the process was offline consultations. From April through July, seventy-seven town-hall–style meetings were held in forty-three locations, including thirty-nine locations in Libya. This process was supported through online campaigning involving a dedicated website and social media channels, which provided an alternative means of participating in the process. The campaign sought to engage politically and geographically marginalized groups—such as women, youth, and minorities—who were unable to participate in public events. The website provided information on the nature of the process and the different options for engagement. It also gave details about upcoming events and published reports and visual content from earlier events. Libyans who were unable to attend events in the physical world could contribute to the consultative process by filling out an online questionnaire. In order to reduce barriers, the website was in Arabic and used simple language and a straightforward design.

A Facebook page and a Twitter account were set up to promote the consultations, enable direct communication with participants, and encourage participation when options for offline consultation were limited. For instance, during the month of Ramadan, the "And you? Participate!" campaign was launched on Facebook and Twitter. The campaign featured anonymous quotations from participants on themes such as government priorities, national reconciliation, security and defense, and the distribution of resources to encourage other Libyans to share their perspectives via the NCP's digital platforms.

All digital data collected that provided substantive information was analyzed qualitatively and informed the final report, which was shared with the UN Security Council and the top echelons of the Libyan political sphere. The online contributions constituted more than 30 percent of the total contributions to the process.

EMPOWERING WOMEN AND MARGINALIZED GROUPS

Digital technology can enable users to make informed decisions, enlarge their opportunities, and strengthen their capacities.[44] As such, it can be an invaluable tool in empowering women and marginalized groups. In the wake of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which was adopted in 2000 and recognizes women's key role in preventing and resolving armed conflict, many empowerment efforts have focused on women and girls. These have been able to draw on the experiences and expertise of feminist organizations that have used digital technologies to fight against structural disadvantages, unequal gender relations, sexual harassment, and gender-based violence.[45] A need for empowerment exists for many parts of the population affected by conflict, including youth, the poor, and ethnic or religious minorities. These needs are often closely linked to both the causes of conflict and the dynamics of violence; for instance, a politically or economically marginalized group may have taken up arms in a bid to defend and assert itself.

When mediators enter a peace process, one of their first tasks is to map the relevant actors, including groups that have limited or no political influence on the negotiation, despite the fact that they hold a stake in the conflict. Conventional mapping techniques focus on, among other sources, literature and media reviews, as well as on information gathered through informal channels. However, the increased use of digital technology by conflict parties and stakeholders means that some voices—including those of marginalized groups with scant access to traditional media—may be found chiefly or even exclusively online. To begin with, empowerment efforts should therefore be based on an assessment of who has a voice in online as well as offline worlds.

USE CASE 7: A social media analysis tool could be used for *mapping voice on social media.* The tool would identify voices on social media platforms that belong to constituencies that are outside of the political parties and armed factions that dominate the peace process's offline activities. The analysis tool would help mediators identify weakly represented subgroups within those constituencies and develop a formula for their inclusion that recognizes the increasing role of social media in peace processes. The data collection and analysis would be conducted by political analysts manually identifying relevant seed social media pages, Twitter handles, hashtags, and keywords. The search would then be expanded to look at both individuals who are connected to the seed pages or handles and individuals who use similar keywords or hashtags. The results from the social media analysis could be cross-referenced with data collected from focus group discussions in order to identify differences between online and offline representation.

Large parts of the populations in conflict-affected societies often have limited access to—and limited ability to exchange—information. The civil wars in Syria or Yemen, for instance, destroyed much public infrastructure while displacing huge numbers of people, forcing them to rely on digital technology to get and share information. Populations in geographically remote parts of a country are likewise reliant on technology—if it exists.[46] Where it does not, mediation support actors should partner with development and humanitarian agencies, as well as the private sector, to develop communication infrastructures, such as telecenters, which increase the populations' access to information. With the infrastructure in place, mediation teams can use digital technology to enable civil society as a whole, and vulnerable and marginalized groups in particular, to participate actively in the peace process. Many mediation teams maintain informal contact with relevant stakeholders through text-messaging applications, for instance.

A woman takes a photo with her mobile phone during the announcement of the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, in Havana, Cuba, on August 24, 2016. (Photo by Desmond Boylan/AP)

Digital platforms can enable marginalized groups to coordinate among themselves and collaborate on joint activities.[47] Studies in the humanitarian field suggest that the spread of digital technologies changes the role of crisis-affected populations from passive "beneficiaries" of assistance to active participants in relief efforts, and that this ultimately leads to a change in power relations.[48] Mediation efforts can similarly seek to enable victims of conflict to become active participants in peace processes.

USE CASE 8: Mediation support actors could bolster *online collaboration in support of the peace process* around specific initiatives relating to the peace talks. For example, a dedicated website could connect participants from different stakeholder groups and enable them to identify common concerns and build coalitions around key issues. The website could further facilitate collaboration through the planning and coordination of joint actions that support the mediation. Results of the online collaborations could be fed into the negotiation as collective contributions to agenda setting or advocacy for specific outcomes, which would also allow the public to exercise influence on the negotiations by demonstrating their support for peace.

Once peace negotiations are ongoing, digital technologies can strengthen representation of otherwise marginalized groups in decision-making processes. In settings with limited connections between political elites and the broader population, WhatsApp groups have been used to connect urban-based elected representatives and their rural constituencies. These messaging groups not only provide a medium through which data about ongoing political debates and policymaking processes can be shared, but also give constituents a channel through which to amplify their views and opinions, thus holding elected officers to account.[49]

USE CASE 9: The *rapid polling* methodology described in use case 3 could be used to reach out to specific population groups that do not have a strong voice in the public sphere. Groups could be targeted using identity markers such as gender, age, ethnic affiliation, or geographic location. For example, during the early stages of a negotiation, data could be collected from members of the target groups and analyzed to understand their interests, needs, and concerns. The results of the poll could be used for agenda setting and to inform the design of the negotiation process.

Women are disproportionally affected by conflict and violence. Their empowerment should be a key objective throughout the peace process. Despite the fact that in many parts of the world women continue to have less access to digital technology than men, digital technologies can contribute to challenging social norms and gender roles by creating new spaces where women (and men) can express themselves, amplifying a more diverse set of messages.[50] The proactive use of digital technologies can contribute to women's empowerment in various additional ways, from helping to coordinate women-led human rights campaigns (for example, through using common hashtags on Twitter) to facilitating efforts to lobby for respect for women's rights.[51]

USE CASE 10: Digital technology could be used to conduct *online focus groups* that bring together subject experts and representatives from specific vulnerable or marginalized demographic groups. The virtual exchange platform could create a safe space in which policy options debated at the negotiation table and relevant to the group could be deliberated. The groups could comment on and advise on more complex questions, such as administrative reforms, decentralization, or resource governance and thus assert influence on the negotiation process. The group could also discuss data collected through other forms of digital inclusion, such as from rapid polling. The results of these discussions could be used by the mediator to inform track 1 negotiations.

TRANSFORMING RELATIONS

Digital technology can help transform the relationships that underpin armed conflict and violence within and between communities. Such efforts are often associated with peacebuilding rather than mediation. However, addressing how the conflict parties and their constituents view each other and how they relate—with the aim of building nonviolent relationships—can be beneficial throughout a peace process, from early trust-building and humanizing measures to long-term reconciliation programs.

Digital technology has been used widely to strengthen cohesion and trust within communities. For instance, social media has been used to enhance a sense of belonging among members of religious and cultural groups and to increase the commitment of members to work together and solve problems.[52] However, digital technology, particularly social media, has also been widely associated with increased polarization between different groups through the spreading of stereotypes, scapegoating, and the use of hate speech. These intra- and intergroup dynamics often lie at the heart of the conflict—and transforming them should thus be an integral part of any peace mediation effort.

Digital technology has been used widely to strengthen cohesion and trust within communities. . . . However, digital technology, particularly social media, has also been widely associated with increased polarization between different groups through the spreading of stereotypes, scapegoating, and the use of hate speech.

Before using digital technology to support conflict transformation, it is important to get a clear sense of the narratives and representations of "the other" that are produced and perpetuated on digital platforms, especially social media. Understanding such narratives is particularly relevant for the mediation team's conflict analysis at the early stages of a peacemaking effort. An analysis that draws on data collected through social media promises a fine-grained picture of the narratives that underpin violence by allowing a disaggregation of data down to the level of the individual user. Moreover, such analysis can map changes in the relationships between conflict parties and their constituents throughout the peace process and can be used to understand how the narratives constructed online affect offline dynamics.

USE CASE 11: An analysis tool could be designed for *understanding narratives in digital qualitative media.* This tool would identify key narratives about the Other that shape the relationship between the conflict parties. To this end, the tool could collect and analyze data from a broad selection of digital media, including social media. A mediation support actor could curate sources that feed into the analysis tool and a network of volunteers could support the data collection and analysis. If large enough amounts of data need to be analyzed, artificial intelligence–driven tools could be utilized to automate this task. The tool would provide better information to mediators and their teams, not least about relevant stereotypes, and thereby help the mediators design a strategy for fostering more positive community relations at the negotiation table and beyond. Note that this use case will only contribute to digital inclusion if paired up with other activities through which stakeholders actively participate in the peace process, such as use case 12.

In addition to analyzing narratives, digital technology can be used to proactively construct and disseminate counternarratives to fight extremist viewpoints and ideologies.[53] In Kenya, for instance, digital technology is used to reduce stereotyping and scapegoating across ethnic groups, thereby helping to prevent violence. As part of larger conflict prevention efforts, the Uwiano Platform uses digital technology to disseminate "peace messages" to persons located in "hot spot" areas affected by armed conflict. This helps to influence popular discourse and prevent conflict boiling over into violence.[54] Such countermessaging seems particularly effective if it involves informal actors, or "amateurs," that can create more credible and authentic content and disseminate it in collaboration with formal campaigns and actors.[55]

On social media, information flows in multiple directions, which enables more parties to initiate and maintain communication.[56] Humanitarian actors have leveraged this ability to alter communication patterns by enabling horizontal and decentralized communication between local volunteers. Mediation teams could similarly encourage an expansion in the numbers of people participating online in peace activism, allowing new ideas to be aired, discussed, and shared, with the aim of changing the mutual perceptions of conflict parties and their constituents and fostering empathy between different communities. Social media, in particular, can serve as a channel through which users can express their emotions about an event or process and share information not available in the conventional mass media that can help the population understand and cope emotionally and cognitively with the crisis.[57] Furthermore, social media has been used in many ways to create sympathy with victims and encourage collaboration between social media users around support and relief activities.[58]

USE CASE 12: In the early phases of a mediated process, a *digital campaign to build empathy between conflict parties* could encourage citizens to share positive experiences of interacting with other conflict stakeholders, thereby encouraging a change in community relations that can build momentum for the peace process. The campaign could start with short video clips that demonstrate empathy with people who have different and opposing views and experiences. These videos could be created during offline mediation activities and then disseminated on social media. The campaign could also launch an open call for submissions by citizens to create and disseminate their videos as part of a nationwide competition. Videos would then be shared regularly, demonstrating the value of human stories across the divide. Targeted workshops and outreach activities could accompany such a campaign.

Digital technology also has the potential to play a supporting role in fostering empathy and understanding across different communities and restoring relationships between them. For instance, social media can play a role in "post-disaster community deliberation" by connecting those who have caused suffering with those affected by it.[59] Among the more notable cases, oil companies have used social media platforms to try to restore their public reputations by disseminating factual information about their response efforts and promising "corrective action" after causing environmental crises that prompted public outcry on social media, which amplified the voices of those affected by the disaster. In peace processes, digital technology can likewise help develop a shared understanding of the causes of conflict and possible options for its resolution.[60] This may be particularly relevant in cases of armed conflict where the population is geographically divided and the opportunities for conventional communication between communities are sparse, as is the case in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine (see the snapshot box on page 30).

USE CASE 13: Digital technology can be used to facilitate *virtual exchange between conflict parties*. The virtual exchange could be conducted before or in parallel with the formal negotiation. Through the process, participants would begin to build empathy toward each other, thus contributing to an enabling environment for peace negotiations. A mediation support actor could invite groups of eight to twelve people drawn from constituencies to participate in a series of online exchanges where they share views and perceptions of the conflict, of the peace process, and of one another and perhaps engage in deliberation. The results of these exchanges would be shared with principal negotiation parties to help to diversify and amplify the voices around the negotiation table.

Reconciliation processes and efforts to deal with the past can be facilitated by digital technology's ability to transcend physical distance. For instance, Facebook profiles now routinely turn into a place for mourning for victims of violence. By connecting affected populations in locations that are geographically distant from where the violence occurred, social media enables a dispersed group to come together and express their emotions. This experience can contribute significantly to societal healing, which is one reason why social media has featured in truth and reconciliation processes and in community reconciliation efforts that seek to develop a mutual understanding of conflict causes.[61] In Cyprus, for instance, digital technology was used to devise new approaches to environmental peace education that helped to acknowledge narratives of conflict across communities and develop compassionate responses to the challenges of the other community.[62]

PROTECTING VULNERABLE GROUPS AND REDUCING THE RISK OF CONTINUED CONFLICT

Although protecting the population from the consequences of armed conflict should be an abiding concern throughout a peace process, efforts to reduce risks to

Snapshot

UKRAINE—DONBASS DIALOGUE

The Donbass Dialogue is a virtual dialogue platform created in April 2015 in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine. The initiative seeks to reconnect citizens from the government-controlled area with citizens from the non-government-controlled area. To this end, the project has adopted a combination of online dialogues and offline elements. Through a closed Facebook group with more than four hundred members, the team crowdsources dialogue topics by posting questions or statements of mutual concern. Then, the team gathers and analyzes responses to identify relevant topics.

These topics are then addressed in detail during weeklong dialogues, which take place twice per year. The dialogue participants are recruited from both sides of the conflict and include community and civil society representatives and internally displaced persons, as well as members of the Facebook group. International experts are invited to present on specific topics. Participation is possible in a physical location, as well as through a dedicated videoconferencing platform that uses peer-to-peer technology, which allows anonymous connection. This creates a safe space for all dialogue participants, independent of their physical location. The Donbass Dialogue publishes results of the online and offline meetings on its website.

Despite—or because of—the absence of strong links to high-level political processes, the Donbas Dialogue has enabled significant engagement across the conflict's major fault lines and promoted more cooperative community relations.

the process should intensify as it progresses, so as to safeguard mediation achievements, such as a cessation of hostilities or a ceasefire agreement. Digital inclusion efforts can help protect both the population and the process. This strategic purpose of inclusion is often unacknowledged among mediators, but it is one in which digital technology can play a significant role.

Even before violence erupts, digital technology can play a valuable role by helping to collect and analyze timely data that makes it easier to predict crises and develop indicators of increased risks of violence. This data can also support the coordination of preventive measures. Conventional conflict early-warning systems often operate vertically, by feeding information into a central unit, such as a government entity or international organization. However, citizen-reporting systems can establish horizontal networks through which early warning and response can be driven and coordinated from the bottom up.[63] For instance, crowdsourcing applications have been discussed as a method to gather and disseminate relevant data promptly and to coordinate responses.[64] The information collected can encompass a broad range of indicators, such as commodity prices, citizen perceptions, and migration patterns.[65] In addition, monitoring efforts that are particularly relevant for an ongoing peace mediation could involve the documentation of misinformation that may endanger the process.

Women take part in a demonstration against Muammar Gadhafi at the Green Square in Tripoli, Libya, on August 29, 2011. (Photo by Alexandre Meneghini/AP)

USE CASE 14: Digital technology can be used to reduce the risks stemming from fabricated information by *countering misinformation about the negotiations.* With the help of trained volunteers, a reporting and analysis system could collect data regarding the spread of rumors and misinformation about security incidents, the negotiating process, and other sensitive subjects. This system could involve the machine-supported monitoring of specific keywords on popular social media platforms, as well as regular or ad hoc reports from key informants, such as civil society organizations and journalists. Once a rumor relevant to the negotiations has been reported, the volunteers would analyze its factual validity, source, spread, and impact on public opinion. This information could be used by mediation support actors to counter the rumor with targeted messaging.

Digital technology is increasingly used to warn populations about imminent dangers. For instance, to reduce the risks of violence in the run-up to elections, NGOs such as Impart Change use messaging platforms to coordinate a network of volunteers who exchange information about ongoing events and coordinate responses to increased tensions between different ethnic communities (see the snapshot box on page 32).

Drawing on experiences in humanitarian disaster prevention and relief, other potential applications of digital technology include disseminating information about rapidly evolving security situations and relaying warning messages to the population about impending dangers and how to behave to minimize the risks they present.[66] Better information shared quickly through social media can help increase the preparedness of a population and reduce casualties and damage.[67] Some peacekeeping

Snapshot

KENYA—VIOLENCE PREVENTION THROUGH DIGITAL YOUTH NETWORKS

Impart Change, a local not-for-profit organization, uses digital technology to connect and coordinate youth leaders based in Nairobi's informal settlements. The organization leverages social media (e.g., WhatsApp) to enable dialogue between youth to prevent violent conflict in the context of Kenya's recurrent electoral crises. The core membership of these social media groups consists of leaders of local youth groups, selected in partnership with local authorities, who have undergone training as "community ambassadors" or "community peace champions." These youth leaders then recruit additional youth into the social media groups. This method has proven effective in securing membership from specific locations that identify with different ethnic groups and political parties. The organization also invites women to join these groups to foster their empowerment and achieve a gender balance. Groups also form as a follow-up to offline dialogue activities and consultations. Impart Change then facilitates online exchanges among the group members.

Through the groups, Impart Change monitors levels of youth mobilization, spreads messages to counter online hate speech and misinformation, and enables group members to vent their grievances. On occasion, the organization also facilitates an exchange between youth representatives and high-level political leaders who are involved in formal dialogue efforts. In addition, Impart Change engages in public social media groups, posting on the Facebook pages of political leaders and monitoring and commenting on specific Twitter hashtags. The organization is a member of various social media networks that share information about ongoing developments and coordinate joint initiatives with peacebuilding and human rights organizations. These various social media activities are driven by local dynamics and demands rather than being part of a carefully orchestrated strategy.

missions establish alert systems that rely on mobile phones to provide information about imminent attacks.[68] Social media–based applications can also create participatory environments in which potential security threats can be discussed and evaluated and community responses planned and implemented.[69]

Once violence begins, the reporting and documenting of security incidents or compliance with agreed-upon security arrangements, through dedicated online platforms or mobile applications, can help to build trust between the conflict parties and prevent a relapse into conflict. Conventional approaches to monitoring and safeguarding security arrangements or ceasefire often depend on securing the buy-in of all conflict parties, incur high costs, and more often than not require a UN Security Council mandate. Online approaches that rely on citizen monitors may offer viable alternatives, especially given the widespread availability of devices able to collect evidence, such as smartphones.

Similar applications have been tested for human rights monitoring. For instance, the eyeWitness project, an initiative by the London-based International Bar

Snapshot

SYRIA—MONITORING OF SECURITY INCIDENTS

After the Cessation of Hostilities agreement had been negotiated by the International Syria Support Group in 2015, mediators and mediation support actors facilitated efforts to track potential violations of the agreement. In the absence of a formal observer mission mandated by the UN Security Council, mediators decided to employ digital technology to increase international ceasefire monitoring capacities. In addition to obtaining information on violations from social media, the mediation team collected reports through a decentralized platform. Informants were invited to message mediators individually or send data such as pictures to contact centers based in various countries allied to the conflict parties. The information obtained not only helped verify compliance with the agreement but also was used to analyze ongoing events and was shared with the Security Council.

Association, developed a dedicated mobile application in 2015 through which citizens were able to collaborate in documenting and sharing footage about human rights violations.[70] In efforts to prevent electoral violence, digital technology plays a growing role in the detection and reporting of rumors and incitements of violence.[71] In the context of an ongoing peace process, documenting individual security incidents can reduce the likelihood of an escalation of conflict if mediators are ready to respond with de-escalation efforts and the conflict parties are willing and able to discipline individual violators.

USE CASE 15: To reduce the risks to a mediated peace process and protect vulnerable groups, digital inclusion can enable both early-warning and early-response activities. Technology can, for example, be used to enable *digital monitoring of security incidents by civilians.* This can take place through a reporting system that allows trained civilian volunteers to collect data about security incidents on the ground, such as ceasefire violations. These monitors would provide input through SMS, a mobile application, or a dedicated website. All reports would be triangulated and verified by a team of validators before being published. The data would then be disseminated to mediators and peacebuilding organizations, which would combine it with other information to create a panorama of the security situation across the country and plan and implement timely and appropriate responses.

Conclusion: Toward Effective Digital Inclusion

The extent to which mediators currently use digital technology to broaden participation in peace processes beyond the main conflict parties is hard to gauge with any precision, but it seems clear that the enormous potential of digital inclusion is beginning to be exploited. If this trend is to continue, and if it is to yield good results, mediators and their support teams need to do two things: one is to always adapt digital inclusion to the peacemaking context; the other is to balance risks and opportunities. This final section of this report looks in turn at these imperatives, in the process offering recommendations for using digital technology wisely and effectively.

ADAPT TO CONTEXT

Digital technology can foster inclusion in mediated peace processes only if it is used in a way that acknowledges and responds to the challenges of the peacemaking context. Those challenges inevitably vary from case to case, but three types of factors should always be considered: technological, sociocultural, and political. These dimensions are often closely interrelated, reinforcing or counterbalancing one another in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Each set of factors has its risks and unintended consequences, but there are strategies that mediation teams can adopt to mitigate those risks.

Technological Factors

Not surprisingly, the local infrastructure of information and communication technologies (ICT) is a basic determinant of what technologies can be used in that context, as well as when and how. At the most fundamental level, digital technology depends on the *availability of electricity*. In many conflict-affected societies, the electricity grid is patchy (especially in rural areas) and the supply is unreliable or subject to regular and lengthy power cuts. These problems can be mitigated by using local sources of electricity, including generators, solar panels, and power banks. These options, however, are often restricted to wealthier neighborhoods and to professional organizations.

Similarly, the *availability of ICTs* differs not only from country to country, but also within countries. Most relevant is the penetration of internet services, including cable and mobile phone networks, as well as the widely varying cost of data and the speed of data transmission. Electricity and communication infrastructure are often damaged or destroyed during armed violence. In such situations, **mediators dare not rely exclusively on digital technology and must always complement digital inclusion with offline participation.** Mediators may also work with other actors, including peacekeeping operations and development or humanitarian organizations, to maintain or improve ICT infrastructure.

Another locally variable factor is *platform popularity and usage*, which varies from one peacemaking context to another. While Facebook tends to be used by large parts of the population in Libya and Myanmar, other social media platforms may be more prevalent in other countries. For example, political elites in Burundi widely use Twitter. Platform usage also differs between urban and rural areas, correlating with the general availability of ICTs. There is also a variation in each platform's demographic. For instance, Twitter is

Men from a group of People's Peace marchers check their phones in Ghazni, Afghanistan, on June 11, 2018. WhatsApp has become second only to Facebook as a way for Afghans to communicate, including in the highest echelons of the country's government and military, as well as among the Taliban. (Photo by Jim Huylebroek/New York Times)

more heavily used by social and political elites than is Facebook. Other social media platforms, such as Snapchat, target younger user groups. **When relying on off-the-shelf social media platforms, mediators thus always run the risk that inclusion is limited. Investing in better knowledge about context-specific usage patterns, and using multiple platforms, can reduce this risk.**

Technology design should follow the intended purpose of the inclusion effort. Some off-the-shelf technologies fulfill certain functions better than others. For example, none of the conventional social media platforms are currently well suited to facilitate deliberation, as filtering and ranking effects influence the communicative interaction between users. Many platforms also only limitedly allow for a moderated discussion. Word limits, the embedding of multimedia content, and options to encrypt data and enable anonymous participation are a few among many additional factors that influence the functions that the technologies can enable. **Creating or customizing technologies specifically for inclusion can overcome some of these problems if designers consider the needs of both the mediators and those who they aim to include.**[72]

Sociocultural Factors

Digital inclusion is also conditioned by the social and cultural environment in which technologies are designed and utilized. One crucial factor is the level of *digital literacy* of those whom mediators hope to reach through technology. Digital literacy refers to having not only the skills needed to use the various features of digital technology but also the ability to do so safely

Prevailing gender roles limit women's access to digital technologies in most contexts or shape how women can use them. . . . Women may engage less than men in visible political behavior online. This suggests that particular strategies are necessary if digital technologies are to be used effectively for women's empowerment.

and to critically evaluate the data obtained.[73] For instance, specific approaches to digital inclusion may not match a population's level of digital literacy, and more demanding forms of digital inclusion, such as online consultations or monitoring activities, are likely to lead to a selection bias.

Digital literacy, and indeed basic access to digital technology, is also impeded by various sociocultural *barriers to ICT use*. The cost of hardware, software, and data usage may exclude not only poorer socioeconomic groups but large sections of an entire society. Prevailing gender roles limit women's access to digital technologies in most contexts or shape how women can use them. For instance, women may engage less than men in visible political behavior online.[74] This suggests that particular strategies are necessary if digital technologies are to be used effectively for women's empowerment. Linguistic barriers continue to be a challenge in many multilingual settings, despite improvements in machine-enabled translation. In many contexts, older people tend to have less digital literacy and access to technology and more resistance to using it.[75] **If these barriers are not to lead to new forms of exclusion, mediators and their support teams need to put together packages of different technologies that cater to the abilities, habits, and preferences of various demographic groups and to ensure that offline inclusion efforts reach populations that cannot participate online**.

Digital inclusion may also be affected by *hierarchies* that exist in social media networks, where specific types of users enjoy a higher profile and more authority than others. These hierarchies can mirror social and political hierarchies that exist offline; for instance, experts from think tanks may automatically be accorded high levels of respect.[76] However, digital technology, and especially social media, can also erode trust in conventional authorities, including government actors. Conventional hierarchies may also be challenged and reshaped by the rise of new influencers.[77] It should be remembered that hierarchies exist in most forms of social organizations and do not necessarily constitute a problem for digital inclusion—but they can make objectives such as empowerment more difficult to achieve. **Recognizing such hierarchies and gaining more information about them is the first step to reducing risks and unintended consequences that may jeopardize the intended purpose of digital inclusion**.

Variants in the *culture of digital technology use* are likely to influence how and why digital inclusion is used. For instance, the size and composition of individual social media networks may differ from context to context and may influence the degree to which social media can be used for political mobilization and for democratic engagement, both online and offline.[78] How a society uses digital technology in its political life is usually a good indicator of how and to what degree technology can be used to foster digital inclusion in peacemaking. **In many contexts, however, such information is limited, and mediators will have to explore context-specific technology use patterns to better judge what digital technologies to use for what purpose**.

Political Factors

The third category of contextual factors—the properties of the political system and the behavior of governing institutions—is probably the one most discussed by mediation professionals. At the top of the list of factors that inform the behavior of technology users and produce specific risks is *political surveillance*. Domestic and foreign government agencies, as well as agents operating on behalf of nonstate conflict parties, may

try to intercept information about the negotiations; about negotiation parties' interests, preferences, and strategies; and about specific participants. Surveillance poses multiple risks to a mediation: Mediators' control over the negotiation process may weaken, because, for instance, information can no longer be shared selectively. The negotiation process may be driven less by conflict parties' efforts to find a mutually acceptable common position than by efforts to manipulate each other's interests and bargaining power. The negotiation parties, conflict stakeholders, and mediators may also become susceptible to blackmail or their physical security may be at risk if information about their location is disclosed. Even perceived threats of political surveillance can erode the mediators', conflict parties', and stakeholders' willingness to use digital technologies. Many professional mediators operate under the assumption that all information shared online is potentially public information. This attitude, however, may hinder a mediator's ability to facilitate meaningful dialogue through digital means.

Moreover, *state control of ICT infrastructure* can have a significant negative impact on digital inclusion. Some governments have a record of blacking out the internet in specific locations or even the whole country, and government agencies may be able to block specific applications and social media platforms, such as Skype or Twitter, as well as particular websites.[79] "Backdoors" in distributed hardware can also allow governments to conduct mass surveillance or spy on individual users.[80] In fragile states, a fragmented ICT infrastructure may allow various actors to control the infrastructure in parts of the country. Given the risk of national or foreign agencies blocking specific populations from participating in the peace process through digital media, mediators who want to employ digital technology require the consent of those actors who control the communication infrastructure. Conventional efforts to foster inclusion—for example, through workshops or consultations—can avoid this danger by flying participants to a foreign country. However, digital inclusion that aims to involve large parts of the population usually requires reaching the users where they live.

Fortunately, technology users are not defenseless against political surveillance and control. In contrast to *cybersecurity*—the failproof protection of ICT infrastructure, which cannot be achieved in many conflict contexts—*cyber resilience* refers to the ability to maintain the functional use of digital technologies in the face of adverse political events or conditions.[81] **Achieving cyber resilience requires conflict stakeholders to develop the necessary skills and technical capacity to protect themselves from cyber threats so that they can continue their work**—for instance, by identifying vulnerabilities and security breaches, and by creating and maintaining ICT infrastructure that enables autonomous communication networks. **Efforts to foster digital inclusion should thus go together with efforts to strengthen the cyber resilience of those who are to be included.**

When users are not afraid about possible negative repercussions of their online behavior or are willing to take risks, they are likely to generate content that can be relevant for the mediation effort—for instance, by exchanging views on social media regarding specific topics that are discussed at the mediation table. However, it is important that this information is not extracted without the users' knowledge. Where users provide information intentionally, they will actively contribute to the negotiation of a political settlement by sharing their objections to the current status quo. Civil society groups may also use digital platforms to coordinate campaigns in support of a peaceful settlement or to lobby for political change. This information flows in all sorts of directions and is not necessarily intended for the mediator. **When facilitating digital inclusion, mediators should develop linkages or synergies with existing online movements or civil society initiatives to provide opportunities to integrate the voice of their constituencies into the peace process.**

Female delegates during the opening ceremony of Afghanistan's Grand Assembly in Kabul, Afghanistan, on April 29, 2019. (Photo by Jim Huylebroek/ New York Times)

If mediators are to anticipate and address not only these political challenges but also the technological and sociocultural factors described above, they need to invest in the mediation team's analytical capacities. Several databases can help with assessing country contexts, including databases on internet freedom and internet inclusivity, as well as databases of household use of digital technology provided by UN agencies and the World Bank.[82] There also exist individual indicators that capture, for individual countries, the diversity of online media, social media censorship and monitoring, and internet shutdowns.[83] However, for many of the factors mentioned above, comprehensive and comparable data is still lacking. Therefore, mediation teams should proactively invest in their in-house capacities and technology partnerships to collect and analyze data relevant to the context in which they operate.

BALANCE RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Although the notion of a technology-free, and thus controllable, peacemaking environment persists in some quarters, many mediation professionals could not effectively carry out their work without the use of technology. Contemporary mediation efforts are already highly dependent on various types of digital technologies, such as messaging applications, social media, and websites. This dependence has been underscored by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has reduced mediators' ability to travel and conduct face-to-face meetings.

Even so, digital inclusion in peacemaking, as a concept and as practice, is still in its infancy. There is a need for a more nuanced discussion about the added value and the strategic purposes of digital inclusion—to which this report aimed to contribute. It is likely that a combination of online and offline activities will be the new normal,

because digital technologies do provide benefits to inclusion efforts. This is most obvious in situations where their use is unavoidable, as during the 2020 global lockdown. However, digital inclusion can also enable, supplement, and strengthen conventional inclusion efforts—for instance, by reaching stakeholders in geographically isolated areas, enabling forms of participation suited to tech-savvy and younger groups, reducing the pressure around the negotiation table, and providing more flexible forms of participation that can accommodate a greater diversity of interests and needs.

But while many mediators and mediation professionals contemplate the use of digital technology, initiatives that go beyond ad hoc uses by mediation team members have often proven difficult to implement. This is due not least to the perceived risks, which often lead to a selective and cautious approach to technology. Caution is understandable, and the mediation community needs better tools to assess the risks and possible unintended consequences of digital inclusion. However, such knowledge can emerge only through experience. **We need to build a knowledge base that is grounded in practice and lessons learned, including through the aggregation of existing data and the development of new analytical tools that help to assess the most important context factors.**

Many mediators fail to factor in the risks of *not* using technology. When weighing risks and benefits, it is important that the peace mediation field as a whole moves beyond individual short-term calculations and focuses on the longer-term picture. Conflict parties and stakeholders are less risk averse and will continue to increase their digital capabilities. If mediators do not follow suit, they will fall ever further behind in their understanding of the digital dimensions of conflict and in their ability to use digital technology to make peace. Technological innovation cannot be restricted to the laboratory; it requires an iterative process that is nurtured through practical experience. **Over the long run, successful digital inclusion requires that any negative effects are kept at an acceptable level. In the short term, however, innovation may require taking significant risks so as to enable learning.** This process of innovation will require close collaboration between mediators, technology experts, and researchers. This will also provide the basis for further research on this topic—including on how meaningful inclusion can best be achieved and under which conditions digital inclusion will most likely contribute to a mediator's strategic objectives.

An additional challenge is to enable effective learning in a professional community that continues to cherish secrecy. Most mediation initiatives adhere to high standards of confidentiality, which reduces the mediation community's ability to exchange information, develop synergies, and advance common knowledge. In practice, this means that experiences in using digital technology are not widely shared or are shared only after considerable delay. At best, some cases of success are referenced more widely. However, innovation also requires learning from past failures. **The mediation support community should thus consider how to build innovation processes that can immediately benefit individual mediation initiatives while contributing to a steadily accumulating global body of knowledge on digital inclusion.**

Digital inclusion is not a panacea for peace processes. However, as conflict parties and conflict stakeholders increasingly rely on digital technologies, so should mediators. The increasing digitization of peace processes demands a response, and digital inclusion allows the mediation community to turn digitization to the advantage of themselves and the people they seek to assist. When designing digital inclusion, mediators must give up the illusion that they can control the environment in which peace negotiations take place—at least its digital dimensions. In return, they will increasingly understand that they can shape it.

Notes

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4. Joshua Tucker et al., "Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature," *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2018).
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12. Pamina Firchow et al., "PeaceTech: The Liminal Spaces of Digital Technology in Peacebuilding," *International Studies Perspectives* 18, no. 1 (2017): 4–42.
13. Compare with Dan Snodderly, ed., *Peace Terms. Glossary of Terms for Conflict Management and Peacebuilding*, 2nd ed. (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2018), 88.
14. This list is not complete to safeguard the anonymity of respondents.
15. Build Up is a nonprofit organization that works to transform conflict in the digital age. More information can be found at www.howtobuildup.com.
16. Richard Heeks, *Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D)*, Routledge Perspectives on Development (London: Routledge, 2018), 9.
17. Chrisanthi Avgerou, "Information Systems in Developing Countries: A Critical Research Review," *Journal of Information Technology* 23, no. 3 (2008): 135.

18. This is related to a further important question, namely if technologies are "neutral." Some argue that technologies can be applied to serve various agendas and objectives and do not themselves define them. The opposing view is that technologies and societies are shaped mutually, and that technologies cannot be employed to perform a task but evolve jointly with specific political (and peacebuilding) initiatives. See, for instance, J. R. Welch, S. Halford, and M. Weal, "Conceptualising the Web for Post-Conflict Governance Building," *Peacebuilding* 3, no. 1 (2015): 58–74.
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Conflict parties and stakeholders increasingly use digital technology, especially social media, to further their agendas and interests. This trend toward greater digitization of peace processes among those directly involved in conflicts, however, has only recently begun to be mirrored by those whose job it is to mediate those conflicts. Digital technology can make it easier to include a wide range of stakeholders in peace processes, but mediators have tended to neglect this potential or have focused on the risks. This report attempts to provide a clearer understanding of the concept of digital inclusion and its practical applications in mediation while illustrating how a greater diversity of voices can be integrated into a peace process in the form of digital data.

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