

# A Reflection on Promoting Inclusive Mediation

**Mariam Babu**

## Editorial information

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In 2018, I was asked to be part of the mediation team for a conflict between communities living along the Songwe River basin between the Republic of Tanzania and Malawi. The conflict arose from changes to the riverbed and water flow that affected international boundary demarcations. The shifting of international boundaries and the river changing directions created tensions between people living on either side of the border, which was escalating to interstate conflict. Following a presentation I gave for FEMWISE-Africa at the African Union, I was asked to be part of the peace mediation team whose goal was to find a lasting solution to that conflict.

As a woman leader, a mother, a grandmother, and a borderer<sup>1</sup>, but also an experienced peacebuilder and mediator, I guided the negotiators to consider and include the most affected people. I particularly advocated for including youth who are often engaged in causing unrest in these situations. Above all, I advocated for women who are consistently left out of peacebuilding processes. Women's efforts are hardly recognised, yet they are the ones who bear the burden of taking care of their injured spouses, children, and weak families. Additionally, women often send messages of peace to their fighting husbands, which helps soften their hearts and increases support for the cessation of fighting.

In our dialogue and mediation peace processes, we developed an inclusive approach, approved and appreciated by the parties, to work towards a shared natural resource and management of the source of conflict, the Songwe River. In any peace process,

negotiations and mediations are major tools for peacebuilding. A clear understanding of the root cause of the conflict is critical to give the mediators and negotiators a foundation for the dialogue. Most conflicts emanating from border communities result from the poor management and sharing of natural resources that straddle borders. This is particularly true when the delimitation and demarcation of boundaries need to be clarified.

The inclusive approach to the negotiation brought the conflicting parties and actors together and created opportunities to examine the conflict dynamics and appreciate each other's contributions towards permanent peace. In addition, the approach can be an eye-opening experience for local communities in those conflicts that are the major impediments to sustainable economic growth and development because conflict delays and slows development and weakens the cohesion of society.

The inclusive approach used in this peace negotiation gives the people most affected by the conflict an opportunity to be appreciated in the process. It also allows them to willingly surrender to peace dialogue because they will feel consulted, involved, and own whatever decision is taken. They will appreciate that they are part of the issue being discussed and that it is important for them to contribute to the end of the conflict to allow progress and development of their communities. When peace negotiations have been held without the involvement of the local people and only high-profile people sitting in hotels, negotiations take a long time and fail to reach lasting solutions. In my experience, the people

close to the conflict always have the best solutions.

A peace treaty was signed by both parties in October 2018. I am pleased that the parties have adhered to and respected the treaty. It continues to be implemented and supports the better management of resources and restoration of peace and development. The deep-rooted historical relationship has been restored, with both sides regularly organising cultural events attended by all, economic activities such as farming, fishing and animal grazing are going on uninterrupted, and the cross-border committee put in place by the treaty is functional. It sits for quarterly meetings to track the progress.

Throughout my active participation in the peace processes, I gained valuable insights. Here are the key lessons I learned:

- The inclusivity of women and youth is crucial. They have a significant role in softening the hearts of their spouses and peers. The inclusivity of youth is just as important. Since youth are often used in fighting, their closeness to the conflict can support thoughtful solutions.
- Recognising and supporting women and youths' significant role in peace negotiation and mediation is vital for creating inclusive, sustainable and responsive peace processes. Their involvement addresses immediate conflict and shapes the future by nurturing a new generation of leaders and peacebuilders.
- The involvement of the affected communities at all stages of the mediation process is essential. Like

youth involved in the conflict, those most affected often possess the best solutions to their problems.

- Creating linkages between the grassroots local and high-level actors is essential. Collaboration allows for complementary efforts and a more effective outcome.
- Mapping out influencers in the conflict is vital. Identifying who benefits from the status quo, who are the strong allies, and those 'on the fence' (undecided) is crucial. These influencers become key targets during the dialogue.

I continue to apply these lessons and the skills that I gained from this process throughout my ongoing advocacy work. My experiences have proven the importance of the inclusivity of all key stakeholders in peace processes and ensuring that women and youth are empowered with information about their rights and how they can contribute to peace.

### **Author Information & Contact**

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### **Endnotes**

1 According to Collins dictionary, “a Borderer is a person who dwells on or near a border of a country, region.”