



Beyond Universalism: Rethinking the Limitations of Western Mediation Models in Non-Western Conflict Settings

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Abstract

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Mediation has become an important instrument of contemporary conflict management and peacebuilding, but its increasing standardisation raises questions about the assumptions embedded within dominant models. This article examines how assumptions concerning neutrality, rational negotiation, formal institutional authority, and negotiated settlement can become problematic when mediation encounters societies where authority, legitimacy, justice, and reconciliation are organised through different social and cultural relationships. It argues that the problem is not that Western mediation is inherently ineffective, nor that local approaches are inherently superior. Rather, mediation can become less legitimate when historically situated assumptions are treated as universally transferable. Drawing on critical peacebuilding, postcolonial scholarship, and recent work on localisation, the article proposes mediation pluralism: an approach that recognises multiple sources of mediation knowledge and authority while retaining commitments to consent, inclusion, accountability, and human dignity. The article concludes that a more plural and context-sensitive approach can strengthen mediation theory without requiring the rejection of established international practice.

Keywords: mediation; conflict resolution; Western mediation; peacebuilding; localisation; indigenous knowledge; cultural context; mediation pluralism.

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Introduction

Mediation occupies an important position within contemporary conflict management and peacebuilding. Over the past several decades, it has developed from a relatively flexible practice of third-party intervention into an increasingly professionalised field supported by international organisations, states, regional institutions, civil society organisations, and specialised mediation actors. Scholarly research has similarly sought to identify the conditions under which mediation succeeds, examining questions concerning mediator strategies, leverage, timing,

relationships between conflict parties, bargaining processes, and the characteristics of different mediation environments (Bercovitch & Jackson, 2009; Bercovitch & Gartner, 2009). The institutionalisation of mediation reflects a broader effort to make conflict resolution more systematic, predictable, and transferable across different conflict settings.

The United Nations represents one of the clearest institutional expressions of this development. Its Guidance for Effective Mediation identifies preparedness, consent, impartiality, inclusivity, national ownership, international law,



coherence, coordination, and the quality of peace agreements as fundamental considerations in effective mediation. Significantly, the UN framework also recognises that national ownership requires mediation processes to be adapted to local cultures and norms. Thus, contemporary mediation practice does not formally present itself as entirely detached from culture or context. Nevertheless, an important analytical question remains: how far do the assumptions embedded in dominant mediation frameworks actually accommodate different understandings of authority, legitimacy, justice, and reconciliation?

This problem has become increasingly visible within scholarship on peacebuilding and the so-called local turn. Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013) challenged approaches to peacebuilding that concentrated excessively on external institutions and actors, drawing attention to local agency and the epistemological consequences of treating externally designed models as the principal reference point for understanding peace. Mac Ginty's (2014) work on everyday peace similarly highlighted forms of bottom-up agency that can be overlooked when peacebuilding is analysed primarily through formal institutions and professional conflict-resolution actors. These contributions helped establish a broader debate concerning whether peace can be effectively constructed through externally designed institutional arrangements without sufficient attention to the social practices through which communities themselves negotiate coexistence.

Recent scholarship has pushed this critique further. Paffenholz, Poppelreuter and Ross (2023) argue that localisation should involve more than rhetorical recognition of local actors; it requires confronting persistent power imbalances between international and local actors and considering the more radical implications of transferring authority within peacebuilding practice. Richmond (2024), however, cautions against treating the "local turn" as an uncomplicated solution, arguing that some subsequent applications have lost the original critical and postcolonial impetus of the concept. These developments are important

because they suggest that the problem is not simply a choice between "Western" and "local" approaches. Both categories contain internal differences, power relations, exclusions, and competing interests.

Recent research on the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon illustrates why mediation should be analysed within the domestic political environment into which it is introduced. Cho (2025) examines the Swiss facilitation process between 2019 and 2022 and shows how foreign mediation interacted with domestic political fragmentation, competing state interests, and rival understandings of the peace process. The case demonstrates that external mediation can become part of domestic political contestation rather than operating as a neutral mechanism outside it (Cho, 2025).

A related argument is developed by Seidel (2025), who examines standardised peace mediation governance through a postcolonial lens and calls attention to the ways in which mediation can operate as a travelling model when institutional practices developed in particular contexts are transported into African settings. Such scholarship suggests that the problem of mediation is not simply whether a particular technique is technically appropriate, but also how knowledge, authority, and legitimacy are distributed between those who design mediation processes and those who experience them.

Nevertheless, the critique of externally designed mediation should not lead to an uncritical celebration of everything labelled "local," "traditional," or "indigenous." Recent scholarship provides an important corrective to romanticised accounts of local peacebuilding. Magara (2025), for example, demonstrates how the professionalisation of peacebuilding in Africa can produce simplified understandings of "the local" and reproduce power inequalities even when interventions are explicitly designed around local participation. Similarly, Fosu and Gordon (2025), examining Acholi traditional justice in Uganda, show that localisation can reproduce gendered inequalities and harmful power relations when traditional practices are treated uncritically. The implication is

important: the limitations of Western mediation cannot be addressed simply by replacing Western models with an idealised conception of local tradition.

The purpose is therefore not to establish a simple opposition between Western and non-Western mediation. Rather, it is to ask a more fundamental question: what would mediation theory look like if no single cultural tradition were assumed to possess the universal template for resolving conflict?

The Making of Modern Mediation: From Conflict Management to a Global Practice

The contemporary practice of mediation did not emerge from a single intellectual tradition or institutional setting. Rather, it developed through the convergence of diplomatic practice, negotiation theory, international law, conflict resolution scholarship, and the professionalisation of peacebuilding. Over time, mediation moved from being primarily an informal diplomatic activity towards a more systematic field in which mediators, international organisations, governments, regional organisations, and civil society actors increasingly employ identifiable principles, procedures, and analytical tools. This institutionalisation has contributed substantially to the development of mediation as a recognised instrument of conflict management, but it has also encouraged the development of standardised understandings of what mediation should look like.

Early conflict-resolution scholarship placed considerable emphasis on the role of third parties in helping adversaries overcome bargaining problems, communicate their preferences, identify areas of agreement, and reach mutually acceptable settlements. Bercovitch and Jackson (2009), for example, conceptualise mediation within the broader field of conflict resolution as a structured form of third-party intervention that can assist adversaries in addressing disputes that they cannot resolve independently. Similarly, Bercovitch and Gartner (2009) demonstrate the increasing sophistication of mediation research by examining variables such as mediator

characteristics, strategies, conflict intensity, and the relationship between mediation and settlement outcomes. These contributions helped transform mediation from a largely practical diplomatic activity into a field capable of systematic theoretical and empirical investigation.

Importantly, the UN framework does not simply present mediation as a mechanical process. It explicitly recognises that mediators need cultural sensitivity and that the mediator should possess knowledge appropriate to the particular conflict context. The Guidance also emphasises that mediators must be acceptable to the parties and that mediation strategies should be adjusted according to the circumstances of individual conflicts. This recognition of contextual variation complicates any simplistic argument that contemporary international mediation completely ignores culture. The more important question is therefore whether the institutionalisation of mediation has nevertheless produced a relatively standardised conception of conflict resolution beneath the language of contextual adaptation.

Yet standardisation creates a tension between transferability and contextuality. The more mediation is presented as a professional technique that can be transferred between conflicts, the greater the possibility that assumptions developed in particular historical and institutional environments will be treated as generally applicable. Seidel's (2025) recent analysis is particularly relevant here. Examining peace mediation frameworks in African contexts, she argues that internationalised mediation approaches are deeply influenced by Anglo-Eurocentric political-philosophical traditions and liberal mediation theory. Her analysis of Sudan and South Sudan highlights the potential effects of standardised mediation governance, including what she describes as processes of de-contextualisation, de-politicisation, and de-pluralisation.

In many societies, particularly those shaped by colonial histories and plural systems of authority, formal state institutions coexist with religious, customary, communal, and traditional structures. Authority may therefore be simultaneously legal,

social, moral, religious, and relational. A mediator may derive credibility not from occupying a formally recognised institutional position but from having longstanding relationships with the parties or possessing culturally recognised authority. Such forms of authority can be difficult to incorporate into standardised mediation frameworks precisely because they do not necessarily conform to the institutional categories through which international mediation is organised.

This does not mean that traditional or community-based authorities are automatically legitimate, inclusive, or peaceful. Indeed, locally embedded institutions can reproduce inequalities and exclude particular groups. Recent research on localisation demonstrates why such practices require critical scrutiny rather than romanticisation. Paffenholz, Poppelreuter and Ross (2023), for example, argue that the localisation agenda must address the power imbalances that continue to structure relationships between international and local peacebuilding actors. Similarly, scholarship on traditional justice has demonstrated that locally embedded systems may contain gendered or hierarchical practices that complicate assumptions about their emancipatory potential.

This is one reason why recent scholarship has increasingly questioned the universalisation of liberal peacebuilding concepts. Richmond (2024), revisiting the “local turn,” argues that the concept originally sought to expose hidden local agency and global power hierarchies but warns against its subsequent misuse or simplification. The point is particularly relevant to mediation. Simply adding “local actors” to an established international process does not necessarily decentralise the knowledge structure underpinning that process.

Recent postcolonial scholarship on mediation makes precisely this concern visible. Seidel (2025) argues that international peace mediation in African contexts can reproduce epistemic hierarchies when standardised frameworks are transferred without adequately engaging plural forms of conflict-resolution knowledge. Her analysis is particularly significant because it shifts the debate from the familiar question of

whether mediation is culturally sensitive towards a more fundamental question of how mediation knowledge itself is produced and legitimised.

Recognising this tension provides the foundation for the next stage of the argument. If contemporary mediation is built around principles such as neutrality, consent, rational dialogue, inclusion, and negotiated agreement, the critical question becomes how these principles operate when they encounter different cultural understandings of authority and conflict.

The Problem of Neutrality: Is the Mediator Ever Truly Neutral?

Neutrality occupies a central position within contemporary mediation. It is commonly presented as one of the conditions that distinguishes mediation from more coercive forms of intervention. The logic appears straightforward: if a mediator is perceived as favouring one party, the other may distrust the process, refuse to participate, or reject its outcomes. The United Nations therefore identifies impartiality as a fundamental principle of effective mediation, arguing that a mediator should conduct a balanced process, treat actors fairly, and avoid having a material interest in the outcome.

The importance of impartiality is difficult to dispute, but it should not be treated as synonymous with neutrality. Neutrality ordinarily refers to a mediator’s relationship to the substance or sides of a conflict, whereas impartiality concerns whether the process is conducted fairly and without unjustified preference. A mediator may therefore be situated within a particular political, institutional, or cultural environment while still seeking to treat participants impartially. The relevant question is not whether mediation can be completely detached from context, but how claims of impartiality are interpreted and maintained within that context.

The UN itself implicitly recognises this tension. Its Guidance describes impartiality as essential while simultaneously emphasising consent, inclusivity, national ownership, international

law, cultural sensitivity, and the involvement of local peacemakers. It specifically advises mediators to understand culturally specific approaches to negotiation and communication and, where appropriate, to draw upon indigenous forms of conflict management and dispute resolution. This creates an important conceptual tension: mediation requires impartiality, but effective mediation may also require forms of social and cultural embeddedness that do not always appear neutral according to conventional institutional standards.

A useful distinction follows. Neutrality can imply a position of non-alignment or distance from the conflict, whereas impartiality concerns fair and even-handed treatment of the participants and the process. The two may overlap, but they are not identical: a mediator can be contextually embedded without abandoning impartiality, just as an apparently detached mediator can still exercise influence through the framing of issues, selection of participants, or interpretation of acceptable outcomes.

The Cameroonian case is analytically important because it demonstrates that the legitimacy of an external mediator cannot be assumed from the mediator's international status. A process may possess international credibility while simultaneously being interpreted differently by domestic actors. The question of neutrality therefore becomes inseparable from questions of political legitimacy and local ownership.

Conventional mediation theory tends to associate impartiality with the absence of substantive alignment with either conflict party. Yet in many communal settings, an individual who belongs to the social environment in which the conflict occurs may possess forms of knowledge and legitimacy unavailable to an external mediator. Such a mediator may understand local histories, kinship structures, symbolic practices, customary expectations, and the reputational consequences of different settlement options.

Such an approach challenges a strict separation between mediator and community. It suggests that in some contexts, the legitimacy of the mediator may derive partly from the very relationships that a conventional conception of

neutrality seeks to minimise.

Recent African scholarship provides evidence that traditional institutions can perform precisely these relational functions. Okoye's recent study of traditional rulership and alternative dispute resolution in Africa argues that traditional institutions can contribute to negotiation, mediation, reconciliation, and community cohesion because of their proximity to local communities and their embeddedness within social relationships. At the same time, the study explicitly identifies politicisation and corruption as important limitations, demonstrating why embeddedness cannot automatically be equated with legitimacy.

This qualification is essential. The purpose of questioning external neutrality is not to romanticise traditional authorities. Traditional institutions can themselves be hierarchical, exclusionary, politicised, or vulnerable to elite capture. The analytical point is that mediation legitimacy may be generated through different institutional and relational pathways, and these pathways should be examined empirically rather than assumed in advance.

A traditional leader, for example, may represent a community through customary legitimacy rather than electoral mandate. A religious authority may possess moral influence without holding formal political office. A community elder may have considerable authority over local disputes without any constitutional status. Whether such actors are treated as legitimate participants therefore depends partly upon the conceptual categories through which the mediation process understands representation.

This is compatible, to some extent, with the UN's own approach. The Guidance does not define effective mediation simply in terms of detached neutrality. It also stresses cultural knowledge, national ownership, local peacemakers, and indigenous forms of conflict management.

This distinction has important implications for the study of dominant mediation models. If claims of neutrality are interpreted through political and cultural contexts, then neutrality cannot function as a universally self-explanatory condition of legitimacy. What must remain

constant is the commitment to fair treatment; how that commitment is enacted and recognised may vary across mediation settings.

The broader implication is that mediation legitimacy is relational rather than purely institutional. It is produced through interactions between mediators, conflict parties, communities, institutions, and normative frameworks. This suggests that mediation theory should pay greater attention not only to what mediators do, but also to how their authority is interpreted by the societies in which they operate.

The problem of neutrality therefore leads to a second limitation of dominant mediation models: the tendency to approach conflict through rational bargaining, even where identity, memory, morality, obligation, and collective belonging shape what parties regard as negotiable.

Beyond Rational Bargaining: Culture, Identity and the Social Construction of Conflict

A second important limitation of dominant mediation models concerns the way in which conflict is conceptualised. Much of the established mediation literature has understood conflict through the language of interests, preferences, bargaining, negotiation, and mutually acceptable settlement. This approach has generated valuable insights into how parties communicate, make concessions, respond to incentives, and calculate the costs and benefits of alternative outcomes (Bercovitch & Jackson, 2009; Bercovitch & Gartner, 2009). However, conflicts are not always reducible to disagreements between autonomous actors pursuing identifiable interests. In many societies, conflict is embedded within identities, historical memories, moral obligations, social relationships, and collective understandings of justice.

This does not mean that interests and bargaining are irrelevant. Rather, the problem arises when they become the primary conceptual lens through which conflict is understood. A conflict

over land, for example, may appear to concern competing material claims to territory. Yet the same land may also represent ancestry, spiritual significance, communal identity, historical belonging, or the memory of displacement. A mediation process that treats the dispute exclusively as a problem of competing interests may therefore identify only one dimension of the conflict while overlooking the meanings that make compromise difficult.

The distinction between material interests and socially constructed meanings is particularly important in conflicts involving identity. Social identity can influence how actors understand themselves, how they perceive other groups, and what kinds of outcomes they regard as legitimate. Recent scholarship on international mediation demonstrates that mediation can itself become an arena in which identities are reconstructed. Clowry (2023), examining mediation in Syria and Yemen, argues that mediation does not simply operate between already established identities; the norms introduced through mediation can also contribute to the reconstruction of conflict-party identities. This suggests that mediation should be understood not only as a mechanism for resolving conflicts but also as a social process capable of influencing how conflicts and their participants are understood.

The bargaining approach to mediation often assumes that conflict parties possess preferences that can be identified and negotiated. Parties may be expected to compare alternative outcomes, calculate costs, make concessions, and eventually identify a zone of possible agreement. This logic is particularly influential in international negotiation and mediation scholarship because it provides a framework for analysing why parties enter negotiations and under what conditions agreements become possible.

There is considerable value in this perspective. Armed groups, governments, political organisations, and other actors undoubtedly make strategic calculations. Mediators frequently need to understand the interests and incentives that influence the behaviour of conflict parties. Indeed, recent scholarship

continues to demonstrate the importance of bargaining within international mediation. Nathan (2025), for example, revisits the mediation-bargaining model and argues, on the basis of African mediation cases involving coups, that mediating organisations themselves may engage in bargaining with conflict parties rather than merely facilitating bargaining between them. His study found bargaining by mediating organisations in more than 70 per cent of the cases examined, demonstrating that mediation is often more politically active than a purely facilitative conception would suggest (Nathan, 2025).

Culture is sometimes treated within mediation practice as contextual background: something that mediators should understand so that they can communicate more effectively with the parties. This is undoubtedly important, and the UN's mediation guidance explicitly instructs mediators to understand culturally specific approaches to negotiation and communication and, where appropriate, to work with local peacemakers and indigenous conflict-resolution practices (United Nations, 2012).

Recent research in Africa illustrates this point. Benson and Asaah-Junior (2024) study of mediation users in Ghanaian courts found that understandings of procedural fairness were shaped by Ghanaian and African social contexts. Participants' experiences of fairness included considerations such as who should speak first, the involvement of important personalities, the selection of mediators, and the manner in which settlement agreements were generated. These findings suggest that procedural fairness is not experienced exclusively through abstract principles of formal equality; it can also be interpreted through culturally situated expectations concerning authority, participation, relationships, and procedure.

Clowry's (2023) analysis is particularly relevant here because it demonstrates that mediation itself can participate in identity construction. The mediator does not simply enter an existing conflict between fixed actors. By determining which actors are recognised, which norms are introduced, which forms of political representation are encouraged, and which

narratives receive attention, mediation can influence the identities and political relationships through which conflict is subsequently understood.

The concept of everyday peace is particularly relevant because it shifts attention from elite-level agreements towards the ways in which ordinary people navigate difference, insecurity, and social relations in their daily lives. Mac Ginty (2014) argues that local actors can exercise agency through everyday practices that reduce tensions and create spaces of coexistence, even where formal peacebuilding institutions remain limited.

Recent African scholarship provides further evidence that cultural meaning can influence mediation processes. Ramahuma and Mkhize (2024), examining African approaches to the African peace mission to Russia and Ukraine, argue that African cultural values and traditions influenced the delegation's emphasis on quiet diplomacy, relationship-building, and persuasion. Their study illustrates how mediation practices can reflect culturally grounded understandings of diplomacy rather than simply reproducing established Western models.

Similarly, Waluke and Obondi Nyandoro (2024), studying inter-ethnic conflict in Kenya's Mount Elgon region, highlight the relevance of culture to conflict mitigation, mediation, and reconciliation. Their findings reinforce the argument that cultural practices are not simply external variables surrounding mediation but can form part of the mechanisms through which communities understand and manage conflict.

A mediation process that asks only what parties want may miss why particular demands have become non-negotiable. A process that focuses primarily on agreement may overlook whether the agreement has social legitimacy. A process that treats parties as autonomous negotiators may fail to recognise the communities and relationships within which those parties operate.

The argument also strengthens the case for greater epistemic pluralism. If different societies understand conflict and reconciliation through different social and cultural frameworks, then

mediation theory should not treat those frameworks merely as contextual variables. They can also provide theoretical insights into how mediation works.

If mediation is shaped by social relationships and culturally constructed understandings of legitimacy, then the question becomes unavoidable: why should states, political parties, diplomats, and internationally recognised organisations automatically occupy the centre of mediation processes?

Formal Institutional Authority and the Politics of Recognition

The question of who is recognised as a legitimate mediator cannot be separated from the question of who is recognised as a legitimate political actor. Dominant mediation practices generally operate through identifiable institutional categories: governments, political parties, armed organisations, civil-society representatives, diplomats, international organisations, and other formally recognised stakeholders. Such institutional ordering is understandable. Mediation requires identifiable interlocutors, and formal recognition can provide a basis for accountability, representation, and implementation. Yet the privileging of formal institutions can also obscure forms of authority that operate outside the state.

This problem is particularly pronounced in societies where political authority is institutionally plural. In many African settings, state institutions coexist with customary authorities, religious institutions, community organisations, kinship networks, and other locally recognised structures. Traditional authorities may possess no equivalent of formal electoral legitimacy while nevertheless exercising substantial influence over land, dispute resolution, social order, and community mobilisation. Recent comparative research across 31 African countries, for example, demonstrates that traditional authorities continue to play significant roles in local governance, including land allocation and dispute resolution, alongside formal state institutions (Baldwin, 2025).

This institutional plurality presents a challenge to mediation models that implicitly equate political legitimacy with formal institutional status. If a mediator's legitimacy depends upon recognition by the state or an international organisation, actors whose authority is socially rather than legally constituted may be treated as secondary participants. Yet the absence of formal institutional recognition does not necessarily mean the absence of political or social authority.

In many conflict-affected societies, particularly rural or peripheral areas, citizens may interact more frequently with customary or community authorities than with formal state institutions. A recent study of Malawi, Zambia, and Kenya found that customary and state dispute-resolution forums frequently coexist rather than simply replacing one another. Funjika and Honig (2025) found that greater diversity of dispute-resolution forums was associated with increased use of conflict-resolution services, although access was uneven and some groups—including women and people with lower status in customary systems—were less likely to access any forum.

Baldwin's (2025) review of traditional authorities is particularly useful here because it distinguishes *de facto* power, downward accountability, and state recognition rather than treating traditional authority as a single institutional category. This distinction demonstrates that state recognition does not automatically determine whether traditional authorities possess meaningful authority within their communities.

Okoye (2026), for example, argues that traditional rulership institutions in Africa can perform mediation, negotiation, reconciliation, and community-unification functions because of their proximity to local populations. At the same time, the study identifies politicisation and corruption as important limitations, illustrating why traditional authority cannot simply be romanticised as an alternative to the state.

Similarly, Kifle and Mekonnen (2025) find that traditional mechanisms remain relevant to resolving localised communal conflicts in

Africa, while emphasising that the effectiveness of conflict-resolution mechanisms varies according to conflict intensity and the type of mechanism employed.

Indeed, recent research on forum pluralism demonstrates precisely this possibility. Funjika and Honig (2025) find that customary and state dispute-resolution forums can complement rather than simply substitute for each other. Different users select different forums depending on factors including geography, kinship, status, and economic insecurity.

This distinction is central to the broader localisation debate. Paffenholz, Poppelreuter and Ross (2023) argue that localisation cannot be reduced to increasing local participation while leaving underlying power structures unchanged. They emphasise the importance of addressing the obstacles that prevent meaningful transfers of power between international and local actors.

Recent work on peace mediation governance reinforces this concern. Seidel (2025) argues that standardised international mediation can operate as a travelling model whose assumptions become detached from the political and historical contexts into which it is introduced. Her analysis calls for greater attention to plural forms of knowledge and the political consequences of standardised mediation frameworks.

Recent research provides empirical support for such coexistence. Funjika and Honig (2025) show that customary and state forums can operate alongside one another and that their coexistence can increase the overall use of dispute-resolution services. However, their findings also reveal important inequalities in access, particularly among women and people with lower status in customary institutions.

Pluralism should not mean that every institution is equally legitimate or that every customary practice should be preserved. Some local institutions may reproduce gender inequality, exclude minorities, or reinforce elite power. Fosu and Gordon (2025), examining Acholi traditional justice in Uganda, demonstrate precisely this danger. Their study shows that an uncritical return to customary approaches can reproduce patriarchal power relations and

unequal access to security and justice.

Hybrid mediation does not necessarily mean combining two institutions mechanically. It can involve the interaction of different sources of authority, procedural norms, and knowledge. A formal state institution may provide legal recognition and implementation capacity, while a traditional authority provides community legitimacy and social access. Civil society organisations may contribute specialised expertise, while religious or community leaders facilitate communication and trust.

Recent research on the interaction between traditional dispute-resolution institutions and formal justice systems in Ethiopia demonstrates this possibility. Roba (2024), examining the Jaarsa Biyyaa institution, analyses how traditional dispute resolution interacts with the formal justice system rather than treating the two systems as completely separate domains.

Similarly, research on African traditional mechanisms indicates that the effectiveness of conflict-resolution approaches varies by context, suggesting that hybrid or plural arrangements may need to be adapted to the particular characteristics of the conflict rather than imposed through a universal institutional formula (Kifle & Mekonnen, 2025).

Traditional institutions are historically dynamic. They change in response to colonialism, state-building, democratisation, economic transformation, migration, religious change, and contemporary political competition. Lamphear's recent study of Jie peacemaking in Karamoja, Uganda, is particularly instructive. Rather than presenting indigenous conflict resolution as a static tradition, the study demonstrates how local communities have continuously adapted and innovated their peacemaking practices over time (Lamphear, 2026).

The future of mediation may lie less in replacing international models with local alternatives than in constructing institutional arrangements in which different forms of mediation authority can interact without one being automatically treated as the universal standard.

These institutional questions also expose a

deeper issue: whose knowledge determines what counts as mediation in the first place. If formal recognition shapes which actors are treated as legitimate, epistemic authority shapes which practices are treated as legitimate knowledge.

The Epistemic Problem: Who Produces Mediation Knowledge?

One of the deepest limitations of dominant mediation models concerns not only how mediation is practised, but how knowledge about mediation is produced. The institutionalisation of mediation has generated an extensive body of scholarship concerning negotiation, bargaining, mediator strategies, conflict ripeness, leverage, settlement design, and peace agreement implementation. This scholarship has provided valuable conceptual and practical tools for understanding conflict intervention. Yet the geographical and intellectual origins of much of this knowledge raise an important question: whose experiences have been transformed into general theories of mediation, and whose experiences have been treated primarily as local variations of those theories?

This question moves the critique beyond the familiar argument that international mediators sometimes fail to understand local cultures. It instead concerns the production of knowledge itself. If mediation theory is largely developed through particular historical and institutional experiences and subsequently presented as broadly applicable, then the problem is not simply that practitioners may occasionally misapply theory. The deeper problem is that the categories through which mediation is understood may already privilege particular conceptions of authority, rationality, legitimacy, negotiation, and peace.

This hierarchy has been challenged more broadly by postcolonial and decolonial scholarship. In the field of peacebuilding, the “local turn” emerged partly as a response to approaches that privileged external expertise and institutional templates over local agency and knowledge (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). Mac Ginty (2014) subsequently demonstrated how everyday practices of peace can emerge through

local agency even when they remain largely invisible within formal peacebuilding frameworks. These contributions are important because they shift the analytical focus from asking how local actors can be incorporated into externally designed peace processes towards asking whether local practices can themselves transform the way peace and conflict are theorised.

There is an important difference between recognising local knowledge and recognising local theory. Local knowledge is often valued for its ability to help external practitioners understand the context in which an intervention takes place. Local actors may be consulted about community relationships, historical grievances, customary practices, language, religious norms, or political dynamics. Such knowledge can be extremely useful to an external mediator.

However, treating local actors primarily as sources of contextual information can leave the underlying hierarchy of knowledge unchanged. The international mediator remains the producer of the mediation framework, while local actors become providers of information about the environment in which that framework is applied.

This distinction is increasingly relevant to the localisation debate. Paffenholz, Poppelreuter and Ross (2023) argue that the “third local turn” requires attention to structural obstacles that prevent genuine transfers of power between international and local actors. Their argument is significant because it suggests that localisation cannot be reduced to greater participation within existing institutional structures. Meaningful localisation requires reconsidering who has authority over the design and direction of peacebuilding processes.

Richmond (2024) similarly warns that the local turn can lose its critical character when “local” becomes a managerial category rather than a challenge to established structures of knowledge and power. The implication for mediation is considerable. A process can include local actors while still reproducing an epistemic hierarchy if the fundamental concepts through which mediation is understood remain externally defined.

Seidel (2025) describes this problem through the idea of a travelling mediation model. Her analysis argues that standardised peace mediation governance can become detached from the political and historical contexts in which it is deployed, particularly in African settings. The significance of her argument lies in its movement from a critique of individual interventions towards a critique of the structures through which mediation knowledge travels.

Recent African research provides evidence of precisely this complexity. Kifle and Mekonnen (2025), examining traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution across African contexts, find that such mechanisms remain relevant to localised communal conflicts, while also emphasising that their effectiveness varies according to the nature and intensity of conflict. Their findings challenge the assumption that traditional mechanisms are merely remnants of pre-modern institutions awaiting replacement by formal systems.

Similarly, Lamphear's (2026) study of peacemaking among the Jie of Karamoja demonstrates that indigenous peace practices should not be understood as static traditions. Instead, local actors have adapted and innovated their practices in response to changing political, economic, and security environments. This is theoretically significant because it demonstrates that indigenous mediation is not necessarily a fixed body of inherited customs; it can constitute a dynamic form of political and social problem-solving.

A customary mediator may lack a professional mediation certificate but possess decades of practical knowledge concerning local conflict dynamics. A community elder may not use the terminology of negotiation theory but may understand precisely which forms of apology, compensation, public acknowledgement, or relational repair are necessary for a dispute to end. A religious leader may not conceptualise legitimacy in terms of institutional neutrality but may possess substantial moral authority within the community.

Magara (2025), for example, argues that professional peacebuilding organisations can

romanticise the local turn by constructing simplified images of local communities and local actors. This can produce a new form of paternalism in which “the local” becomes an idealised category rather than a complex social and political space.

Fosu and Gordon (2025) provide another important corrective through their analysis of Acholi traditional justice in post-conflict Uganda. Their research demonstrates that traditional institutions can contain gendered inequalities and forms of power that require critical examination. Recognising local knowledge therefore cannot mean accepting every local practice as legitimate simply because it is locally embedded.

Applied to mediation, epistemic pluralism would require scholars to ask not only whether a local practice can be incorporated into an existing mediation model, but also whether that practice reveals something about mediation that existing theory has failed to conceptualise.

Including local actors in mediation processes is important, but inclusion does not necessarily produce theoretical transformation. A mediation process can include traditional leaders while continuing to define legitimacy according to externally established categories. It can incorporate customary practices while evaluating them exclusively according to Western assumptions about neutrality and individual rights. It can consult communities while retaining external control over the design of the process.

Baldwin (2025) demonstrates the continuing political relevance of traditional authorities across Africa, while Funjika and Honig (2025) show that institutional pluralism can shape people's choices concerning dispute resolution. These findings suggest that plural institutional environments are not anomalies to be overcome but important sites for understanding how authority and dispute resolution actually function.

Such an approach is consistent with the broader literature on everyday peace, which demonstrates that peace can be produced through ordinary social practices that are not necessarily

captured by formal peace agreements or international indicators (Mac Ginty, 2014).

The concept emerges from three interconnected observations. First, mediation legitimacy is socially and culturally situated rather than determined exclusively by formal institutional status. Second, conflict cannot always be reduced to rational bargaining between autonomous actors because identity, memory, morality, relationships, and collective meanings shape what parties consider negotiable. Third, mediation knowledge itself is produced within particular historical and institutional contexts and should therefore not automatically be treated as universally applicable.

Importantly, mediation pluralism is not relativism. It does not suggest that any practice should be accepted simply because it is culturally embedded. Principles concerning consent, inclusion, human dignity, accountability, and protection from discrimination remain important. The argument is instead that these principles should interact with diverse institutional and cultural forms rather than being assumed to require a single model of mediation.

From Universalism to Mediation Pluralism

The preceding discussion demonstrates that the limitations of dominant Western mediation models are not necessarily located in individual techniques but in the assumptions that can accompany their universal application. Principles such as impartiality, consent, negotiation, inclusion, and formal agreement remain important to contemporary mediation. The problem arises when these principles are treated as though their meaning and practical application are independent of cultural, historical, and institutional contexts. Mediation is not conducted in an abstract social space. Its legitimacy depends upon relationships, institutions, political histories, and culturally situated understandings of authority and justice.

The comparative relevance of this argument extends beyond African settings. In Ecuador, for example, indigenous communities exercise forms of justice grounded in their own laws and

traditions within a constitutional framework that also places human-rights limits on that jurisdiction (Bourgeat-Flores & Morales-Navarrete, 2023). In Southeast Asia, recent work on Indonesia and Malaysia likewise shows how religious values, legal pluralism, and cultural norms shape the institutional practice of family mediation (Umah, Fadhilah & Mu'allifin, 2025). These cases do not establish a single alternative model; rather, they reinforce the broader point that mediation acquires meaning through interactions among formal law, social authority, and culturally grounded norms.

The concept of mediation pluralism proposed in this article responds to this problem by treating mediation as a field in which different sources of authority, knowledge, and practice can coexist. Rather than searching for a single model that can be transferred across conflicts, mediation pluralism begins from the proposition that legitimate mediation may take different forms depending on the social and political environment in which it operates. This does not imply that every culturally embedded practice is automatically legitimate or effective. Instead, it requires mediation theory to distinguish between universal normative commitments and the culturally variable institutional forms through which those commitments are pursued.

Such an approach is consistent with the more recent evolution of the localisation debate. Paffenholz, Poppelreuter and Ross (2023) argue that meaningful localisation requires confronting structural inequalities between international and local actors rather than simply increasing local participation. Richmond (2024) similarly cautions that the local turn can lose its critical purpose when “the local” becomes a managerial category within externally controlled peacebuilding. These observations suggest that mediation pluralism must involve more than inviting local representatives into internationally designed processes. It requires greater participation by local actors in defining what mediation should involve in the first place.

This reciprocal relationship is particularly important in societies characterised by institutional pluralism. Formal state institutions, traditional authorities, religious organisations,

civil-society groups, and community networks may all possess different forms of legitimacy. Baldwin (2025) demonstrates that traditional authorities continue to exercise meaningful political functions across many African societies, while Funjika and Honig (2025) show that citizens may navigate between customary and state dispute-resolution forums. Such findings indicate that mediation theory should not automatically assume that authority operates through a single institutional hierarchy.

At the same time, mediation pluralism must remain attentive to power. Local institutions are not necessarily democratic or inclusive. Traditional authorities can exclude women, minorities, youth, or lower-status groups, while community-based institutions can reproduce existing inequalities. Fosu and Gordon (2025) demonstrate this problem in their examination of Acholi traditional justice, while Magara (2025) warns against romanticising the local turn. Consequently, mediation pluralism cannot mean accepting every local practice simply because it is locally rooted.

The framework also has implications for the meaning of peace agreements. A negotiated settlement remains important, particularly in armed and political conflicts, but agreement should not automatically be treated as equivalent to reconciliation. A settlement may require additional processes of recognition, relationship repair, reintegration, and community-level engagement. Everyday peace scholarship demonstrates that peaceful coexistence can depend upon practices occurring outside formal peace processes (Mac Ginty, 2014). Mediation pluralism therefore encourages a broader conception of outcomes in which formal settlement and social reconciliation are considered related but distinct dimensions of peace.

This approach does not diminish the contribution of established mediation scholarship. Rather, it places that scholarship within a broader and more diverse intellectual conversation. Western mediation becomes one important tradition of mediation rather than the implicit universal standard against which other practices are evaluated. Such decentring can strengthen rather

than weaken the field by making its theoretical assumptions more visible and opening mediation research to insights that may otherwise remain marginal.

Implications for the Future of Mediation Practice and Scholarship

The argument developed in this article has implications for both practitioners and scholars. For practitioners, the central implication is that mediation design should begin with greater attention to the political and social structures through which legitimacy is produced. A mediation process that is formally inclusive may still lack legitimacy if the institutions and individuals recognised as representatives do not correspond to locally meaningful structures of authority.

This suggests that conflict assessment should examine not only the interests and positions of formal conflict parties but also the wider networks through which communities understand authority and justice. Traditional authorities, religious leaders, women's organisations, youth groups, community organisations, and other locally embedded actors may possess forms of influence that are not captured by formal institutional categories. Their relevance should therefore be assessed rather than assumed.

For scholarship, the implication is even broader. Researchers should be cautious about treating non-Western mediation practices solely as empirical cases to which established theories are applied. They should also ask whether these practices reveal concepts that can modify existing theories. Such an approach would contribute to a more genuinely comparative mediation scholarship.

The broader implication is that effective mediation should be understood as context-sensitive without becoming normatively indifferent. Mediation needs sufficient flexibility to recognise different cultural and institutional realities while retaining commitments to consent, meaningful participation, accountability, and human dignity. The

challenge is not to choose between universal principles and cultural difference but to determine how legitimate principles can be pursued through diverse institutional forms.

Conclusion

This article has examined the limitations of Western mediation models by questioning the assumption that mediation principles developed within particular historical and institutional contexts can be universally transferred without substantial conceptual adjustment. The argument has not been that Western mediation is inherently ineffective or that locally embedded approaches are inherently superior. Rather, it has demonstrated that mediation is socially situated and that its legitimacy depends upon relationships among institutions, communities, mediators, and conflict parties.

Five interconnected limitations have been particularly important. Dominant mediation approaches can place considerable emphasis on neutrality without fully recognising the culturally variable meaning of impartiality; they can conceptualise conflict through rational bargaining while underestimating identity, memory, morality, and social relationships; they can privilege formal institutional authority over socially embedded forms of legitimacy; they can treat local knowledge as contextual information rather than a source of theory; and they can place considerable emphasis on negotiated settlement without adequately distinguishing agreement from reconciliation.

These limitations do not invalidate contemporary mediation. Indeed, the UN's own mediation framework recognises the importance of consent, inclusivity, national ownership, cultural sensitivity, and local participation (United Nations, 2012). The challenge is to move from the formal recognition of these principles towards a deeper pluralisation of mediation theory and practice.

The future of mediation may therefore depend less upon developing a single universally applicable model than upon developing the capacity to recognise, evaluate, and connect

different mediation traditions. Such an approach would not eliminate disagreement over what constitutes legitimate mediation. Rather, it would make those disagreements visible and intellectually productive. In a world characterised by increasingly complex conflicts, institutional pluralism, and diverse understandings of authority and justice, mediation theory may become more effective not by becoming more universal, but by becoming more plural, reflexive, and contextually grounded.

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