

Report on the Launch and Training Course of the Platform for Tradition and Faith- Oriented Insider Mediators (TFIMs) in the Horn of Africa

16th –19th June 2026

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia



Introduction

From 16–19 June 2026, the [Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers](#), in partnership with the [Finn Church Aid \(FCA\)](#), convened the inaugural Platform for Tradition and Faith-Oriented Insider Mediators (TFIMs) from Africa in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The four-day training and peer learning event brought together 20 TFIMs from Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan.

The Horn of Africa TFIM Platform is a regional community of practice that seeks to promote continuous learning, peer support, and cooperation among mediators from Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan. The platform, which is supported through a grant from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, aims to provide a space for members to share experiences, strengthen mediation practice, and advance locally led, context-sensitive approaches to peacebuilding across the region.

The launch of the platform and training course provided an opportunity for learning, reflection, and peer exchange among mediators working in some of the Horn of Africa's most complex conflict settings. Through interactive discussions, case studies, group work, and peer-to-peer learning, participants explored the role of religion, tradition, and intersecting identities in shaping conflicts and influencing peace processes.

Course Objectives

The training and peer learning course was designed to equip Tradition and Faith-Oriented Insider Mediators with the knowledge, analytical tools, and practical skills needed to understand and engage with violent conflicts that have religious dimensions. It aimed to strengthen participants' ability to apply appropriate peace mediation approaches within their communities while deepening their understanding of how religion, tradition, identity, and worldviews influence conflict dynamics and peace processes.

Training Approach

The training combined conceptual learning with practical application through expert presentations, facilitated discussions, group exercises, case studies, reflections, and peer-to-peer exchanges. The participatory approach enabled participants to draw on their own experiences while learning from one another and exploring practical approaches to mediation in their respective contexts.

Day One

Introduction to the Platform and Foundations of Faith-Oriented Mediation

The first day of the programme introduced participants to the Platform for Tradition and Faith-Oriented Insider Mediators (TFIMs) from the Horn of Africa, laying the foundation for learning, reflection, and peer exchange among mediators from Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan.

Discussions focused on the origins and vision of the platform, the role of religion and tradition in mediation, and the contribution of faith-oriented insider mediators in addressing complex conflicts. Participants were also introduced to the principles of mediation, including neutrality, mediation process design, and the distinction between dialogue and mediation.

Origin of the TFIM Platform

Facilitators explained that the training course and format originated from efforts to strengthen United Nations mediators' understanding of how religion, faith, and intersecting identities influence peace processes.

As the initiative evolved, it became evident that similar learning opportunities were needed for civil society actors, religious leaders, and traditional mediators, while also creating structured opportunities for exchange between formal and community-based peace actors. In response, N RTP developed two trainings for youth and women of faith mediators.

Consultations with practitioners further revealed the need for sustained engagement beyond training programmes. In response, the TFIM Platform was established as a long-term, participant-driven mechanism for peer learning, networking, collaboration, and knowledge sharing.

Supported by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, the platform brings together mediators from Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan. Rather than prescribing activities, it enables members to collectively identify priorities, shape future engagement, and strengthen regional collaboration.

Religion and Tradition in Mediation

In the first session, participants explored the role of religion and tradition in mediation and conflict transformation. Religion was described as a system of beliefs, values, and practices that shapes behaviour and influences how individuals and communities understand the world, while tradition was defined as inherited customs and practices rooted in cultural and historical identity.

Peace mediation was presented as a voluntary process in which an impartial third party assists conflicting parties to prevent, manage, or resolve disputes.

Discussions emphasized that effective mediation requires a thorough understanding of the conflict context, the interests of the parties involved, and the social, cultural, and political environment in which the conflict exists. The principle of "do no harm" was highlighted as a fundamental ethical consideration throughout the mediation process.

Dialogue and mediation

Participants also discussed the distinction between dialogue and mediation. Dialogue was described as a process that promotes understanding, trust, and relationships, while mediation was presented as a structured process that supports parties in negotiating mutually acceptable agreements. Facilitators emphasized that mediation should never rely on pressure or coercion but should instead create an environment in which parties are able to reach their own decisions voluntarily.



Principles of Effective Mediation

The discussions highlighted the principles that guide effective mediation practice. Participants noted that mediators must remain impartial, avoid taking sides, and ensure that ownership of decisions remains with the parties involved. The role of the mediator is to facilitate communication and support the process rather than impose solutions.

Mediation was described as a process that extends beyond negotiations to include preparation, facilitation, and follow-up to support implementation. Participants agreed that understanding local dynamics, maintaining confidentiality, building trust, and exercising patience are essential qualities for mediators working in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

Religion, Identity and Contemporary Conflict

Next, the workshop examined how religion and identity influence contemporary conflicts. Participants noted that although religion often features in conflicts, it is rarely the primary cause. Instead, it frequently intersects with political exclusion, economic inequality, historical grievances, competition over resources, and identity-based tensions. In some instances, religion may also be instrumentalized by political actors to deepen divisions.

The discussions also explored how worldviews shape conflict dynamics. Participants described worldviews as the beliefs and values through which individuals and communities interpret justice, governance, morality, and social order. Differences in worldviews, particularly around identity, sacred values, and historical narratives, were identified as factors that can complicate mediation efforts.

Participants agreed that sustainable peace requires approaches rooted in local realities, cultural practices, and lived experiences. They also emphasized that lasting peace depends not only on negotiated agreements but also on justice, accountability, reconciliation, and long-term social transformation.

Women's Participation in Peace Processes

Participants reflected on the continued underrepresentation of women in formal peace negotiations despite their significant contributions to community peacebuilding.

Experiences shared during the workshop demonstrated that women play an important role in building trust, facilitating dialogue, and resolving disputes at family and community levels.

The discussions underscored the need to strengthen institutional support for the meaningful participation of women in mediation and peace processes.

Participant Reflections



Participants shared experiences from their respective countries, illustrating how religious and traditional leaders have contributed to conflict prevention and community reconciliation. Several participants highlighted examples where traditional mediation mechanisms had successfully resolved disputes that formal systems had struggled to address.

Participants from conflict-affected communities also reflected on the challenges of maintaining neutrality while mediating conflicts that directly affect their own lives. Women participants shared experiences of exclusion from formal peace processes while highlighting their contributions to dialogue and reconciliation.

The discussions reinforced the importance of trust-building, cultural sensitivity, patience, and continuous learning in addressing conflicts shaped by religion, identity, and competing worldviews.

Country Case Study: Ethiopia

The session examined Ethiopia as a case study to better understand the complexity of contemporary conflicts and the role of religious and traditional actors in mediation.

Participants explored Ethiopia's historical trajectory, noting that recurring cycles of conflict have been shaped by nation-building processes, identity politics, unresolved grievances, competition over resources, and environmental pressures.

The discussions highlighted the country's current conflict landscape, including the fragile post-conflict situation in Tigray following the Pretoria Agreement, ongoing armed confrontations in the Amhara and Oromia regions, and localized conflicts in Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz, Afar, Somali, and southern Ethiopia.

Participants noted that conflict in Ethiopia cannot be attributed solely to religion. Rather, religion intersects with ethnicity, political interests, and historical narratives, with religious identity at times becoming closely linked to political identity and perceptions of exclusion.

The discussions also examined the contribution of religious and traditional leaders to peacebuilding. While these actors have played an important role in mediation, participants acknowledged that political and ethnic divisions have at times affected their perceived neutrality and legitimacy. This highlighted the importance of rebuilding trust and strengthening the independence of religious institutions.

Participants further observed that formal peace processes often exclude traditional leaders, religious actors, women, and youth, weakening the link between national agreements and local realities.

They emphasized that women and young people should be recognized as active peacebuilders rather than passive victims and highlighted unemployment, limited education opportunities, and exposure to hate speech as factors that increase young people's vulnerability to conflict.

The role of digital technologies also featured prominently in the discussions. Participants identified misinformation, hate speech, and divisive narratives on social media as significant drivers of polarization that can rapidly escalate tensions.

Drawing on the Ethiopian experience, participants concluded that mediation is most effective when it is inclusive, context-specific, and grounded in local cultural realities. They also recognized that community-based and insider mediation efforts often achieve meaningful outcomes even when they are not formally documented.

Country Case Study: Sudan

The second case study focused on Sudan's ongoing conflict, examining its historical roots, the current humanitarian crisis, and the challenges facing peacebuilding efforts.

Participants traced the conflict to long-standing political exclusion, uneven development, militarization, and identity-based grievances. They noted that successive peace agreements have often concentrated on power-sharing arrangements without addressing the structural causes of conflict, contributing to repeated cycles of violence.



The current conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) was discussed as a struggle over political power, security sector reform, and control of state institutions. Participants observed that while religion has at times influenced political narratives, the conflict is primarily political and economic in nature.

Discussions highlighted the contribution of religious and traditional leaders to mediation and humanitarian response while emphasizing that their effectiveness depends on maintaining neutrality and public trust.

Participants also reflected on the important role played by women and youth during Sudan's political transition and peace efforts. Despite their contributions, both groups continue to face limited representation in formal peace negotiations while remaining active in grassroots peacebuilding, humanitarian response, and advocacy.

The discussions identified several challenges facing Tradition and Faith-Oriented Insider Mediators, including insecurity, shrinking civic space, limited recognition, and exclusion from formal peace processes.

Nevertheless, participants acknowledged Sudan's strong community mediation traditions, active civil society, and resilient women and youth movements as important assets for future peacebuilding.

A discussion on transitional justice highlighted that meaningful accountability depends on political will, institutional capacity, and carefully sequenced peace processes. Participants noted that transitional justice cannot succeed in isolation but should form part of broader political settlements that address the root causes of conflict.

Day Two

Reflections and Consolidation of Key Themes

The day opened with reflections on the previous discussions, allowing participants to consolidate key learning points and identify emerging themes shaping the workshop. A strong emphasis was placed on inclusive peace processes, regional collaboration, historical drivers of conflict, and the wellbeing of insider mediators.

Participants consistently highlighted the importance of meaningful inclusion of women and youth in peacebuilding and mediation. While there was broad agreement on the need for a whole-of-society approach, it was also noted that women and young people continue to face structural barriers that limit their participation. Participants observed that despite being disproportionately affected by conflict, these groups remain underrepresented in formal peace processes.

There was a shared recognition that inclusion must go beyond general commitments and be intentionally designed into mediation and transitional justice processes. Participants noted that peace processes involving women in meaningful roles tend to be more sustainable and emphasized the importance of creating deliberate space for their engagement at all levels of decision-making, going beyond merely symbolic and tokenistic inclusion.

Similarities between Ethiopia and Sudan

Participants also reflected on the similarities between conflict contexts in Ethiopia and Sudan.

Common challenges included the management of diversity, historical marginalization of peripheral regions, and restricted civic and political spaces that limit dialogue and mediation efforts. These parallels were seen as indicators of broader regional governance and inclusion challenges.

Another key theme was the interconnected nature of conflicts in the Horn of Africa. Participants noted that instability in one country often affects neighbouring states through refugee movements, arms flows, economic disruption, and cross-border tensions. This reinforced the importance of the TFIM platform as a space for regional collaboration, peer learning, and coordinated responses among insider mediators.

Participants further reflected on the absence of a shared sense of the common good within societies affected by conflict. Divisions along ethnic, tribal, religious, and political lines were seen as often overriding national interests. Participants emphasized the need to rebuild a collective sense of identity and purpose that supports nation-building and reduces fragmentation.

The discussion also explored the historical roots of conflict in Africa, with participants highlighting how exclusionary governance systems, unequal development, unhealed social wounds, narratives of victimhood, and historical power imbalances continue to shape present-day grievances. It was also noted that contemporary conflicts are influenced not only by internal dynamics but also by regional and international actors, some of whom may contribute to sustaining instability through political or strategic interests.

Finally, participants underscored the importance of supporting the wellbeing of insider mediators. Given their proximity to conflict and the emotional burden of their work, the need for psychosocial

support and self-care mechanisms was emphasized. Strengthening mediators' understanding of transitional justice was also identified as critical for supporting healing, accountability, and long-term peacebuilding.

Key Lessons from the Triangle Exercise

Participants reflected on the triangle exercise as a practical illustration of the dynamic and fluid nature of mediation processes. One of the key lessons was the relationship between movement and power. It became clear that when one actor shifts position, it influences the decisions and strategies of others within the conflict system. This highlighted the importance of understanding the broader environment before taking action in mediation processes.

The exercise also demonstrated how alliances and relationships can shift over time. Participants observed that actors who initially hold opposing positions may eventually align around shared interests.

Drawing from experiences in South Sudan, examples were shared of armed groups that began negotiations separately but later formed alliances, significantly altering mediation dynamics and requiring mediators to adapt their strategies.

Another important lesson was the need for continuous problem identification. Participants noted that the definition of the problem may change as relationships and political dynamics evolve. This requires mediators to constantly reassess the situation and remain attentive to shifting perceptions among stakeholders.

Flexibility and adaptability were also identified as essential skills in mediation. Participants recognized that mediation processes are rarely linear and often involve uncertainty, setbacks, and changing conditions. Effective mediators must therefore adjust their approaches while maintaining focus on the overall objectives of the process.

The exercise further emphasized perseverance and resilience. Despite the complexity of mediation environments, participants agreed that maintaining focus on long-term outcomes and sustaining engagement through difficult moments are critical qualities for insider mediators.

Case Study: South Sudan

The South Sudan presentation provided an in-depth analysis of the country's conflict history, current peace processes, and the role of faith and traditional actors in peacebuilding.

Participants traced the roots of the conflict to the colonial administration period (1899–1955), which established structural inequalities between the centre and periphery. This legacy of exclusion, uneven development, and marginalization contributed to long-standing grievances that later fuelled conflict.

South Sudan experienced two major civil wars while still part of Sudan, and although the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005 ended the second war and led to independence in 2011, several key issues remained unresolved. These included governance arrangements, security

sector reform, transitional justice, and the status of disputed areas such as Abyei. These gaps continued to affect the country's stability after independence.

Participants noted that the conflict in South Sudan is primarily political and ethnic in nature rather than religious. While earlier conflicts in Sudan were often framed in religious terms, the current dynamics are driven by political competition, identity, and access to resources. Religion itself was described as a unifying factor, with churches maintaining largely peaceful relations across communities.

Weak governance, corruption, and the misuse of oil revenues were identified as major drivers of instability. Instead of supporting development, oil resources have often been used to sustain political patronage networks and armed groups. Participants also highlighted restrictions on civic space, including intimidation of civil society, media censorship, and limited accountability for human rights violations.

The security situation remains fragile, with fragmented armed groups, incomplete integration of forces, and weak institutional control over the security sector. Failed disarmament and reintegration processes have left weapons widely circulated among civilians, further increasing vulnerability to violence.

Despite multiple peace agreements, including the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan and the 2018 Revitalized Agreement, implementation challenges remain significant. Key transitional justice mechanisms like the Truth, Reconciliation and Healing Commission and the Hybrid Court, are yet to be fully operationalized.

Participants also examined the role of regional and international actors, noting the involvement of IGAD, neighbouring states, and international partners in mediation and stabilization efforts. However, concerns were raised about the slow progress of implementation and the gap between agreements and lived realities.

Faith and traditional actors were recognized as central to peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan. Churches have consistently played roles in mediation, humanitarian support, protection of civilians, and advocacy for peace and human rights. Their moral authority and grassroots presence were identified as key strengths in conflict resolution processes. However, some religious groups and CSOs are politically aligned and therefore viewed as biased.

Challenges remain, including limited inclusion in formal negotiations, internal divisions within religious institutions, and insufficient funding for sustained peace initiatives. Participants emphasized the need to strengthen collaboration between churches, traditional leaders, women's groups, and youth networks. The South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) is planning to form a Council of Traditional Leaders (COTAL), to strengthen engagement with associations of tribes.

The presentation concluded by reaffirming that while political actors remain central to the conflict, faith-based and community actors continue to play a critical role in maintaining social cohesion, facilitating dialogue, and supporting recovery at the community level.

Case Study: Somalia

The Somalia case study examined the country's political evolution, cycles of state collapse, and ongoing efforts in state-building and peacebuilding.

Participants traced Somalia's early post-independence period, noting initial democratic progress, including elections in 1960 and a peaceful transfer of power in 1964. This trajectory was disrupted by the military coup of 1969, which introduced authoritarian rule for over two decades.



Although the military regime introduced development initiatives, it also suppressed political freedoms and weakened governance institutions. Over time, shifting international alliances and growing internal clan divisions contributed to state fragility, culminating in the collapse of central government in 1991.

The collapse triggered a prolonged civil war and humanitarian crisis. However, participants emphasized that Somali society did not collapse entirely. Instead, local governance systems, traditional elders, religious leaders, civil society, and the private sector continued to provide essential services and maintain social order.

Somaliland was highlighted as an example of locally driven reconciliation processes that contributed to relative stability and institutional development, despite its contested political status.

Subsequent peace processes were often externally driven, including transitional arrangements established in 2000 and 2004, as well as later federal state formation processes. While these efforts contributed to institutional frameworks, participants noted challenges related to ownership, legitimacy, and implementation.

Security remains a major challenge, with the presence of armed groups such as Al-Shabaab, clan-based militias, and fragmented security forces. Climate shocks, poverty, and unemployment further contribute to instability and vulnerability among young people.

Participants emphasized that Somalia's resilience lies in its communities, traditional systems, civil society, diaspora engagement, and private sector, particularly in telecommunications and mobile money systems.

The session concluded that sustainable peace requires stronger local ownership, clearer governance arrangements, inclusion of marginalized groups, and integration of climate and economic factors into peacebuilding strategies.

Scriptural Reasoning in Peace Mediation

The session introduced scriptural reasoning as a tool for fostering dialogue and trust in mediation processes. Participants were organized into interfaith groups to encourage engagement between Christian and Muslim perspectives.

The exercise explored sacred texts that emphasize reconciliation, forgiveness, and coexistence. Participants reflected on Islamic teachings that highlight justice, reconciliation, and peaceful coexistence, as well as Christian teachings that emphasize structured approaches to conflict resolution, including direct engagement, mediation with witnesses, and community involvement where necessary.

Through discussion, participants identified shared ethical values across both traditions, particularly around reconciliation, accountability, and the importance of maintaining relationships even in the presence of disagreement. It was observed that both traditions discourage violence and exclusion while promoting structured approaches to resolving conflict.

Participants concluded that scriptural reasoning can serve as a practical tool for building trust between faith communities and strengthening mediation processes by identifying shared moral foundations.

The AACP Conflict Analysis Tool

Following the scriptural reasoning exercise, facilitators introduced the AACP conflict analysis tool, which focuses on four key elements: **Actors, Content, Context, and Process**.

Participants were guided through its application in structured conflict analysis and then assigned group work to identify real conflicts from their respective country contexts. Each group selected either a community or district-level conflict to ensure practical relevance.

They were tasked with defining the conflict, identifying the role of religion within it, and outlining the objectives of their proposed mediation engagement. This included clarifying the intended change and the specific aspects of the conflict they sought to address.

Day Three

Conflict Analysis and Intervention Design

The session opened with a debrief of the previous day's conflict analysis exercise. Participants reflected on lessons learned from mapping actors, identifying drivers of conflict, and distinguishing between structural and immediate causes.

Following the debrief, participants were divided into country groups and tasked with selecting real conflicts from their contexts at community or district level. Each group was required to conduct a structured analysis focusing on:

- Key actors and stakeholders
- Conflict environment and context
- Root causes and contributing factors

- Interests versus positions
- Possible entry points for mediation
- Potential pathways for intervention

Facilitators emphasised that effective mediation begins with structured and in-depth conflict analysis. Participants were encouraged to move beyond surface-level descriptions of conflict and instead examine the deeper systems that sustain violence and tension.

A key conceptual reflection was that mediators must first fully understand the conflict system before designing interventions. This includes mapping formal and informal institutions, analysing relationships of power and influence, and identifying actors who may support or resist peace processes.

Participants were further encouraged to distinguish between visible positions expressed by conflict parties and underlying interests that often remain hidden but are central to sustainable resolution. This analytical shift was presented as essential for designing interventions that are not only responsive but also transformative.

Country Group Presentations

South Sudan: Intercommunal Violence and Cattle Raiding

The South Sudan group presented an analysis of intercommunal violence in Unity State, with a specific focus on cattle raiding as a long-standing and deeply embedded driver of conflict.

Participants explained that cattle in many South Sudanese communities represent far more than economic assets. They are closely linked to cultural identity, social status, marriage systems, and community prestige. As such, cattle raiding is not only an economic activity but also a socially and culturally embedded practice that reinforces cycles of retaliation and violence.

The group identified multiple conflict drivers, including:

- Cycles of revenge and retaliatory attacks
- Poverty and economic vulnerability
- High bride price systems that increase pressure to acquire cattle
- Proliferation of small arms and light weapons
- Weak law enforcement and limited state presence
- Ethnic mobilisation and intercommunal mistrust

The proposed intervention focused on intercommunal dialogue processes that combine informal community engagement with structured mediation mechanisms. These would involve elders, youth representatives, women, religious leaders, and other influential community actors.

Participants emphasised that formal state structures are often not trusted at community level, making traditional and locally grounded systems more effective entry points for mediation. The group also highlighted the dual role of actors such as youth leaders and elders, who can either mobilise violence or serve as key agents of peace depending on context and incentives.

A key insight was the importance of identifying spoilers and understanding how certain actors may perceive peace processes as a threat to their social, economic, or political interests.

Somalia: Understanding Interests Versus Positions

The Somalia group focused on strengthening analytical clarity in mediation processes by distinguishing between stated positions and underlying interests.

Participants observed that conflict parties often publicly articulate positions—such as ownership claims over land, resources, or political representation—while the real drivers of conflict are often deeper and more complex. These underlying drivers may include:

- Historical grievances
- Political marginalisation
- Economic exclusion
- Competition over scarce resources
- Clan and identity dynamics

The group emphasised that mediation processes that focus only on positions risk addressing symptoms rather than root causes. Effective mediation therefore requires deep analysis of interests, incentives, and structural conditions.

Participants also highlighted the importance of assessing the broader humanitarian and socio-economic impacts of conflict. Understanding how communities are affected helps mediators identify meaningful entry points for engagement and prioritise interventions that address real needs.

Facilitators further reminded participants that mediators are not neutral outsiders but are part of the conflict ecosystem. As such, they must continuously reflect on their legitimacy, relationships, positionality, and potential biases when engaging in mediation processes.

Sudan: Strengthening Traditional and Religious Leadership



The Sudan group adopted a preventive conflict approach, focusing on strengthening traditional and religious leadership structures in Eastern Sudan as a strategy for addressing rising tensions.

Participants identified a wide range of actors relevant to the conflict environment, including:

- Traditional leaders
- Religious leaders
- Youth and women groups
- Civil society organisations

- Media professionals and social media influencers
- Security actors
- Political actors and armed groups (identified as potential spoilers)

Key conflict drivers identified included:

- Increasing displacement and population movement
- Tribal tensions and identity-based divisions
- Militarisation and presence of armed actors
- Drug and arms proliferation
- Land disputes and competition over resources
- Rising hate speech and political polarisation

The proposed intervention included mapping trusted traditional and religious leaders, facilitating structured dialogue consultations, and providing targeted mediation training. The group also proposed engaging media actors to reduce the spread of hate speech and misinformation.

Facilitators encouraged the group to ensure meaningful participation of women and youth, and to critically assess internal power dynamics within traditional leadership systems. This reflection highlighted the importance of inclusion not only as representation but as meaningful participation in decision-making processes.

Ethiopia: Inclusive Networks of Insider Mediators



The Ethiopian group focused on building inclusive and interconnected networks of Tradition and Faith-Oriented Insider Mediators.

Their proposed intervention aimed to strengthen collaboration among:

- Women mediators
- Youth representatives
- Traditional leaders
- Faith-based actors

The group identified key challenges affecting mediation effectiveness, including:

- Exclusion of women and youth from decision-making spaces
- Fragmented and uncoordinated mediation structures
- Limited institutional linkages among actors
- Weak coordination across regions and communities

To address these challenges, the group proposed a combination of actor mapping, capacity building, and institutional strengthening. The aim was to develop a more connected and sustainable mediation ecosystem.

Facilitators encouraged the group to narrow their focus to specific geographic areas or conflict contexts to ensure feasibility and measurable impact. Participants reflected on the complexity of the Ethiopian context and acknowledged the importance of prioritisation in programme design.

The discussion also emphasised the need to intentionally create space for women and youth in mediation processes, recognising that traditional systems are often male-dominated and may require deliberate transformation to become more inclusive.

Key Reflections from Group Work

Across all groups, several shared reflections emerged.

Participants emphasised that mediation interventions must be grounded in specific, realistic, and well-defined conflict contexts. Overly broad interventions were seen as difficult to implement and less likely to produce measurable outcomes.

Facilitators reinforced the importance of a cascading capacity-building model. In this approach, national-level religious and traditional leaders are trained first and then supported to cascade skills and knowledge to local levels. This model was viewed as both practical and sustainable in fragile and resource-constrained environments.

Security constraints, limited access, and political sensitivities were also highlighted as key factors shaping program design. Participants agreed that in many conflict-affected settings, working through trusted local structures is more feasible than direct external engagement.

Overview of the TFIM Platform Project and Small Grants Mechanism

Participants were provided with a detailed overview of the TFIM platform under the Project-Based Support mechanism funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland (2026–2029).

The project operates across Africa, Ukraine, and Syria, with Africa receiving an annual allocation of approximately €90,000, including a dedicated small grants component.

The overall objective of the project is to strengthen Tradition and Faith-Oriented Insider Mediators, with a particular focus on:

- Enhancing the participation of women and youth
- Strengthening dialogue and reconciliation processes
- Supporting locally led peacebuilding initiatives
- Increasing recognition of TFIM actors at national and regional levels

The project includes three main outputs:

1. Establishment of the Horn of Africa Regional TFIM Platform
2. Provision of small grants for locally led initiatives
3. Advocacy and engagement to strengthen recognition of insider mediators

Participants were informed that monthly online meetings and peer-to-peer learning sessions will support continuous engagement beyond the workshop.

Small Grants Programme

The small grants component is designed to support locally led mediation and peacebuilding initiatives.

Eligible initiatives may include:

- Community and national-level mediation processes
- Interfaith and intra-faith dialogue
- Capacity strengthening for traditional and religious leaders
- Youth and women-led mediation initiatives
- Conflict prevention and early warning systems
- Documentation of mediation practices
- Digital peacebuilding initiatives

Projects will run for a period of six to nine months. Applications will require concept notes outlining:

- Conflict context
- Proposed intervention
- Role of traditional and faith actors
- Expected outcomes
- Budget overview

Facilitators emphasised that proposals should prioritise feasibility, inclusivity, cost efficiency, and contextual relevance.

Coordination and Implementation Arrangements

Participants discussed coordination mechanisms to support proposal development and future implementation.

Country groups were encouraged to form collaborative platforms, including digital communication tools such as WhatsApp groups, to facilitate ongoing coordination. Monthly virtual meetings and annual in-person convenings were proposed to sustain engagement.

Clarifications were provided on financial compliance, accountability requirements, and implementation procedures. Participants acknowledged the importance of balancing flexibility with strong financial governance systems, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

Intersectionality and Positionality in Mediation

The session explored how identity shapes mediation practice, focusing on intersectionality and positionality.

Participants reflected on how gender, age, religion, ethnicity, and social status influence:

- Access to mediation spaces
- Perceptions of legitimacy
- Authority and credibility
- Effectiveness of peacebuilding engagement

Women and young mediators shared lived experiences of resistance and bias, particularly in conservative and conflict-affected environments. Despite initial rejection, many demonstrated how trust can be built through persistence, knowledge, and respectful engagement.

Participants emphasised the importance of:

- Building diverse mediation teams
- Engaging trusted local partners
- Creating safe and inclusive dialogue spaces
- Practising self-awareness and managing unconscious bias

Closing Reflections

The day concluded with broader reflections on inclusion, masculinity, and changing social dynamics.

Participants agreed that inclusion should not be reduced to numerical representation but should focus on meaningful participation based on skills, capacities, and readiness. Peacebuilding processes should strengthen social cohesion rather than create division.

A key takeaway was that effective mediation requires a balance between analytical depth and practical implementation. Insider mediators were recognised as central actors due to their legitimacy and proximity to communities, while external actors should play a facilitative and supportive role.

Meeting at the Embassy of Finland in Ethiopia



The TFIM participants met with the Ambassador of Finland to Ethiopia, Djibouti and South Sudan and the Permanent Representative to the African Union, IGAD and UNECA as well as the Deputy Head of Mission. The Ambassador welcomed the team and expressed appreciation for their participation in the training in Addis Ababa. She inquired about their experiences over the past days and invited reflections on what they had learned during the workshop.

In her opening remarks, the Ambassador reflected on the ongoing conflicts and wars across the Horn of Africa and beyond, including Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, and the wider Middle East. She noted that these conflicts are deeply interconnected and complex, with regional and global dimensions that reinforce instability.

She emphasised that the Horn of Africa holds significant potential for cooperation, particularly due to its complementary resources, including access to ports, human capital, and land. However, this potential remains unrealised due to persistent conflict. She underscored that peace mediation is essential for unlocking regional cooperation, economic development, and stability.

The Ambassador further highlighted the important role of civil society, communities, and insider mediators in peacebuilding. She encouraged participants to share practical ideas on how sustainable peace can be achieved in the region and what role external partners, including embassies, can play in supporting these efforts.

She also invited reflections from participants, particularly from South Sudan and Sudan, on the nature of conflict dynamics in their contexts.

Reflections from Sudan

The Sudan delegation expressed appreciation for the ceasefire efforts and highlighted the complex dynamics driving conflict in the region. They noted that the conflict is deeply linked to economic and geopolitical interests, with external influences contributing to internal instability.

They appealed for stronger international engagement to address the root causes of the conflict and to support mediation efforts. A particular emphasis was placed on the need to strengthen and support women mediators, who are actively engaged in advocacy but require greater institutional and financial support.

Participants noted that the war continues to expand and that without stronger mediation and political commitment, instability may persist. They stressed the importance of trauma-informed dialogue processes and community-based reconciliation efforts that rebuild trust between groups.

The Sudan group further highlighted the growing challenge of hate speech, particularly on social media, and emphasised the need to strengthen social cohesion through structured dialogue and peace education at community level.

Reflections from South Sudan

The South Sudan delegation shared updates on ongoing peacebuilding initiatives and highlighted efforts to strengthen mediation structures across the country. They noted that plans are underway to enhance high-level mediation processes and build the capacity of peace actors across the ten states.

They also shared that awareness-raising efforts are being undertaken in preparation for peaceful elections, with a focus on civic education and conflict prevention. The delegation appealed for continued support from international partners, particularly in strengthening mediation structures and supporting dialogue initiatives.

A key reflection from South Sudan was that while the country has a peace agreement in place, implementation challenges remain due to a lack of political will among signatories. Participants emphasised that this has contributed to delays in reforms and continued instability.

They further noted that mistrust among political actors has historical roots, including divisions dating back to earlier conflicts. This mistrust has contributed to the politicisation and ethnicisation of political disagreements, which has in turn deepened divisions within communities.

The delegation emphasised that building unity among communities is essential for holding political leaders accountable and advancing sustainable peace. They also highlighted the importance of strengthening public understanding of civic processes to enable meaningful participation in governance.

Finally, they expressed appreciation for the TFIM training and highlighted the role of churches and Islamic councils working together in mediation. They requested further support to strengthen neutral community-based mediation forums that can facilitate dialogue at local level.

The Ambassador shared reflections from her recent visit to Juba, noting Finland's ongoing development support in South Sudan, including investments in telecommunications infrastructure in partnership with local companies. She emphasised the importance of strengthening infrastructure as a foundation for development and stability.

She also inquired about preparations for upcoming elections and the inclusiveness of political dialogue processes. In response, South Sudan participants noted ongoing efforts to promote dialogue and expressed concerns about whether elections would be fully fair, while emphasising the importance of ensuring they remain peaceful.

An additional question was raised regarding the role of women in peacebuilding. Participants highlighted that South Sudan has strong women-led peace structures, including women mediators, coalitions, and unions actively advocating for peace and representation. They noted that although policy commitments exist, implementation of gender quotas remains limited and requires stronger international support.

The Ambassador encouraged continued engagement on inclusion, particularly the empowerment of women in civic education and peace processes.

Reflections from Somalia

The Somalia delegation acknowledged the presence of an active Finnish Embassy and reflected on the complex political and governance challenges in the country. They noted that ongoing political contestation and lack of clarity regarding federal governance structures continue to create tensions between the federal government and member states.

They highlighted challenges related to governance coordination, external influence, and competing political agendas. At grassroots level, they noted the presence of strong civil society organisations, but also emphasised the gap between civil society engagement and political will.

Participants further observed that the Horn of Africa is affected by broader geopolitical tensions, including global power rivalries and regional conflicts. They emphasised that these dynamics affect not only security but also mediation and humanitarian conditions.

A proposal was raised for the establishment of a regional "Africa Peace Parliament" or platform for mediators, which could support structured dialogue and regional cooperation. Participants suggested that organisations such as FCA and the TFIM Network could contribute to shaping such an initiative.

The Ambassador responded by highlighting the importance of strengthening the private sector as part of peacebuilding efforts. She noted that economic development, trade, and job creation are closely linked to democratic stability and long-term peace.

Reflections from Ethiopia

The Ethiopian participants reflected on the importance of regional collaboration and noted that engagements during the workshop had revealed strong similarities in conflict dynamics across the Horn of Africa.

They emphasised the importance of strengthening justice systems and enhancing cooperation between countries in the region. Participants highlighted that embassies, IGAD, and the African Union can play a critical role in holding governments accountable and supporting grassroots peacebuilding efforts.

They further noted that conflicts in Ethiopia are diverse and interconnected, reinforcing the need for coordinated conflict prevention strategies and trust-building initiatives.

Participants stressed that religious leaders and community actors hold significant influence and should be central to peacebuilding efforts. They also highlighted the importance of linking peace initiatives with private sector development, digitalisation, and youth employment opportunities.

The Ambassador noted Finland's continued engagement in Ethiopia, including support to civil society and development cooperation. She also reflected on global funding challenges, including reductions in development assistance and the impact of international crises on donor priorities.

She emphasised that resilience-building, private sector engagement, and sustainable development are key priorities moving forward. She further noted that Ethiopia's upcoming hosting of COP32 presents an important opportunity to link peace, climate action, and development.

Cross-Cutting Reflections

Across all discussions, several key themes emerged:

- The interconnected nature of conflicts in the Horn of Africa and beyond
- The importance of regional cooperation and cross-border peacebuilding
- The central role of civil society, religious leaders, and insider mediators
- The need for inclusive processes, particularly involving women and youth
- The importance of addressing political will and trust deficits in peace agreements
- The role of economic development and private sector engagement in sustaining peace
- The growing impact of global geopolitics on local conflicts

Participants consistently emphasised that sustainable peace requires both top-down political commitment and bottom-up community engagement.

An example was shared from South Sudan, where church-led mediation successfully resolved a local conflict involving loss of lives, demonstrating the effectiveness of faith-based mediation mechanisms in de-escalating violence.

Participants expressed appreciation for the Ambassador's engagement and reaffirmed the importance of continued collaboration between embassies, civil society, and traditional and faith-based mediators.

The discussion reinforced the shared understanding that peacebuilding in the region requires coordinated efforts across multiple actors, sustained investment in local capacities, and stronger linkages between policy-level engagement and community-based mediation.

Visit to the African Union

The TFIMs also visited the African Union and were taken on a guided tour of the institution, where they received explanations on its structure, mandate, and work in promoting peace, security, and integration across Africa. The tour provided insights into the AU's peace and security architecture and its role in supporting conflict prevention and mediation efforts on the continent, as well as the importance of collaboration with regional and grassroots actors in advancing sustainable peacebuilding.

The platform also met with colleagues from the Mediation and Dialogue Division at the African Union to update them about the plans for the platform and identify key opportunities for engagement with the AU. MDD colleagues shared about the department's broader mandate and work and reflected especially on the Sudan peace process, the challenges, and opportunities for engagement with the TFIM Platform. It was suggested to have a quarterly online meeting between key MDD platforms such as Panwise and the country-level TFIM platforms.



Conclusion and Next Steps

The Platform for Tradition and Faith-Oriented Insider Mediators (TFIMs) launch and course brought together mediators from South Sudan, Somalia, Sudan, and Ethiopia for four days of intensive learning, reflection, and practical engagement.

Across the sessions, participants strengthened their understanding of conflict dynamics in the Horn of Africa, with emphasis on the interconnected nature of political, social, cultural, religious, and economic drivers of conflict.

The training reinforced the central role of insider mediators as trusted actors within their communities, particularly through traditional and faith-based structures that remain critical entry points for dialogue and peacebuilding. Through conflict analysis exercises and country group presentations, participants identified key drivers of violence such as intercommunal tensions, resource competition, political fragmentation, displacement, hate speech, and weak governance systems. They also highlighted the importance of distinguishing between positions and underlying interests when designing mediation interventions.

A strong emphasis was placed on inclusion, particularly the meaningful participation of women and youth in mediation processes, as well as the importance of addressing power dynamics, identity, and legitimacy.

Participants reflected on how intersectionality and positionality shape access to mediation spaces and influence effectiveness, while also recognising the resilience and contributions of women and young mediators in challenging environments.

High-level engagement, including discussions with the Ambassador of Finland in Ethiopia and the African Union, expanded the perspective to regional and global dimensions of conflict. The exchange highlighted the interconnectedness of crises in the region and reaffirmed the need for coordinated efforts between local actors, regional institutions, and international partners in advancing peace and stability.

Next Steps

- Participants will refine and develop concept notes for the TFIM small grants programme.
- Country groups will strengthen internal coordination mechanisms, including communication platforms and joint working arrangements to support collaborative proposal development.
- The TFIM platform will continue through monthly virtual meetings for peer learning, experience sharing, and technical support among members.
- Mapping and engagement of traditional and faith-based leaders will be prioritised as key entry points for mediation and conflict prevention.
- Proposals will intentionally integrate women and youth as active mediators and beneficiaries, with attention to addressing barriers to meaningful participation.
- Continued engagement with partners, including FCA and other implementing organisations, will support alignment, learning, and future collaboration.
- Participants will prepare for upcoming virtual sessions and future convenings of the TFIM platform, building on lessons from the training to strengthen mediation practice and regional cooperation.

- Coordination mechanism with the AU MDD team will be explored and set up.

Overall, the launch of the platform and training course marked an important step in strengthening a coordinated network of insider mediators committed to advancing inclusive, locally driven, and sustainable peacebuilding across the region.
