

Social Mediation as a Grassroots Method Fostering Sustainable Community Collaboration

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Abstract

This article introduces social mediation as a non-formal dispute resolution process and a widely applicable conflict resolution tool. Placed in a theoretical framework on conflict resolution and intergroup contact, social mediation is discussed in its capacity to provide an inclusive, grassroots approach to build sustainable social bonds and community resilience. The article employs an autoethnographic methodological angle and examines how social mediation was used in Cyprus through a series of workshops that engaged members from across the geographically de facto partitioned communities of the ethnically divided Mediterranean island. So far, findings suggest that social mediation is effective in empowering citizens from across cultures and professional affiliations to engage with social conflict resolution and foster sustainable peace.

Keywords: Conflict resolution, Social Mediation, Sustainable communities, Peacebuilding

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to introduce social mediation as a non-formal conflict resolution tool that empowers everyday citizens to engage with the resolution of a social conflict through non-legal and non-political routes. The findings and discussion are based on a series of social mediation workshops and activities undertaken in Cyprus from May 2018 to January 2022 as part of a project initiative aiming to deliver the tool to prospective social mediators. The project engaged participants from a plethora of diverse backgrounds, including participants from across the island's geographically partitioned communities – Greek and Turkish Cypriots. The workshops

were interactive in nature and introduced participants to the tool of social mediation both through the theory and rationale behind its application, as well as through simulated work, for which participants became either the mediator or a disputant in a realistic conflict scenario. The workshops concluded with reflection and evaluation of the tool by participants, and discussions on its applicability within the Cypriot context.

For the purposes of the social mediation project, the term 'social mediation' was defined as:

A process for creating and repairing social bonds, leading to peaceful resolutions of conflicts in daily life in which an impartial and independent party seeks, by organising exchanges between persons and institutions,

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to help them to improve a relationship or to resolve a conflict opposing them. (Jokinen, 2014)

Social mediation's main objective is to achieve community self-reliance by altering conflict patterns, and to cultivate sustainability by rebuilding and strengthening society's social fabric. It can be best understood as a conflict resolution tool, as it aims to restore, foster, and sustain peace within and across communities. More specifically, social mediation can be seen as a mechanism for conflict transformation; what Ramsbotham and Woodhouse (1999) identify as one of the three stages of conflict resolution, alongside the stages of conflict containment and conflict settlement. Conflict transformation refers to the tools and mechanisms employed within the framework of peacebuilding, to establish peace and reconciliation in the long-run and achieve sustainable collaboration and trust between former rivals.

Through its peacebuilding attributes, social mediation aims to foster sustainable communities by contributing to resilience within communities and across divided societies. The tool can be of particular significance to the latter, as divided societies are characterised by identities with a 'high political salience' sustained over a long period of time (Kachuyevski and Olesker, 2014: 305), leading to distance, mistrust, and aggression between individuals from opposing groups of people (Daly and Sarkin, 2007: 70). Magis (2010: 401) defines community resilience as the "existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterised by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise". The tool of social mediation aims to act as a resource for ensuring community resilience in societies characterised by increased uncertainty and change, such as societies in conflict.

Social mediation as a tool for conflict resolution and prevention is applicable on a wide range of levels, due to its adaptable and non-formal, community-oriented nature. As a tool that empowers the disputants to find their own solutions within a mutually agreed setting and timeframe, social mediation can serve interpersonal quarrels, disputes within professional settings, family, neighbourhood or community disagreements, but also severe ethnic and national conflicts. For the latter, social mediation can complement political processes for conflict management and state-building and involve the wider public more directly in processes of drafting peace settlements.

According to Antoniou (2018a, 2018b), Cyprus provides rich ground for applying social mediation, not only for small-scale interpersonal and communal conflict, but also for addressing the country's protracted ethnic conflict that keeps the island's communities geographically partitioned for decades.

This paper introduces the theory and practice of applying social mediation as a conflict resolution tool and uses the case study of Cyprus to discuss its effectiveness in achieving community resilience through sustainable community

collaboration. More specifically, the paper provides an overview of the theoretical framework which underpins the concept of social mediation, to then review the social mediation initiatives implemented in Cyprus as of 2018, with an emphasis on the workshops organised in the academic year 2019-2020.

Using an autoethnographic methodological approach (Foley, 2002; Soyini Madison, 2006), we author this paper through our direct engagement with the workshops and overall initiative analysed, providing direct reflection of personal observations, while incorporating the feedback and input of workshop participants. The findings are then discussed in reference to peacebuilding, and sustainable collaboration, with the former discussed in reference to intergroup contact, and the latter assessed through the Sustainable Development Goals as an internationally acknowledged metric of sustainability.

2. Social Mediation in Theory

Social mediation is placed within the conceptual framework of conflict resolution. According to Deutsch (2006), conflict resolution is a problem-solving approach that resolves a conflict through the cooperation of involved parties, granting them with mutual benefits. The vast scope of conflict resolution tools and mechanisms can be best illustrated through three stages: (1) the short-term necessity of conflict containment; (2) the medium-term process of conflict settlement, through a political agreement; and (3) the long-term goal of conflict transformation through reconciled relations between the conflicting parties. Graf *et al.* (2007) argue that the first two stages include the military, legal, and diplomatic components of conflict resolution, which, if implemented alone, will yield superficial and non-sustainable peace settlements across disputants. The authors emphasise the necessity of ensuring sustainable peace through the implementation of conflict transformation mechanisms.

Conflict transformation aims at building what Galtung (1969) has referred to as *positive peace*, a form of meaningful and collaborative peace that goes beyond the mere absence of violence and ensures equal, reciprocal and mutually beneficial relations for the members of the formerly rival communities. The set of mechanisms and approaches employed to achieve conflict transformation are referred to as peacebuilding. Scholarship on peacebuilding suggests that the practice has evolved through four generations, with first-generation peacebuilding referring to non-military interventions through which external actors assisted societies in conflict establish sustainable peace. Fourth-generation peacebuilding has highlighted the need for locals to be equal contributors to peacebuilding processes, as they hold valuable knowledge of a conflict's dynamics and idiosyncrasies (Richmond *et al.*, 2011; Roberts, 2011). Social mediation focuses on achieving conflict transformation and fostering sustainable peace through the engagement of local stakeholders. It can thus be

identified as a fourth-generation peacebuilding mechanism, while it can also be conceptualised as a complementary tool for conflict settlement and state-building.

To effectively introduce community perspectives derived from the Cyprus context, it is important to outline extant literature and the theoretical framework informing social mediation as a tool for sustainable community collaborations. Social mediation can be defined as a tool of facilitated communication for conflict prevention, de-escalation and rehabilitation that extends beyond the scope of legal and political forms of mediation. It can be correlated to peer mediation, which is a “structured process consisting of specific steps to help disputants define and solve a problem” (Daunic *et al.*, 2000: 95) that is often applied in school settings.

Social mediation can also be associated with community mediation, which Hedeén (2004: 101) defined as a form of conflict resolution that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people”, and one that emphasises “individual self-determination, community self-reliance, and equal access to justice for all”. Pavlich (1996) saw community mediation as part of a wider set of alternative conflict resolution formats that are perceived as more effective than litigation in settling people-to-people disputes. With research on social mediation still at a premature level, reference to analogous alternative dispute resolution formats of mediation – within the broader context of conflict resolution – enables this discussion to put social mediation in context. More specifically, social mediation is introduced in its contemporary application through a wide framework of applied mediation that covers both interpersonal and community forms of conflict, while it can also act as a complementary tool to processes of political and legal mediation.

Through this conceptual framework, social mediation has been applied to the context of the Cyprus conflict as a tool of facilitated communication that enables non-formal, community-oriented conflict resolution. In designing its application, we relied on the principles of Allport’s (1954) Contact Hypothesis, which provides a set of optimal conditions that enable positive and meaningful contact and can achieve prejudice reduction.

While having been extensively discussed for its advantages and disadvantages as a reference point in conflict resolution work (Farmaki, 2017; Janoff-Bulman and Werther, 2008; Pruitt and Kim, 2004), Allport’s Contact Hypothesis has been thoroughly applied in peacebuilding interventions to deeply divided societies (Hammack *et al.*, 2013; Maoz, 2011). According to Allport, optimal contact can be achieved through four conditions: (1) equal status between the parties involved; (2) their contact being endorsed or supported by a social or institutional authority; (3) established collaboration between the parties; and (4) acknowledgment of a common goal.

Social mediation adopts a format that satisfies all four of these conditions. The social mediator acts as the commonly

accepted authority that endorses the contact between the parties (second condition) and, through the ground rules set for the mediation process the social mediator ensures the parties’ equal status (first condition). The fourth condition, which is often the goal of resolving or preventing an identified conflict, is the factor that achieves the parties’ wilful consent to actively engage in the mediation process and the reason to inaugurate their collaboration (third condition).

Sustainable Community Collaboration

Establishing positive peace as an end goal in peacebuilding processes entails to ensure meaningful collaboration across former conflict rivals and doing so in a sustainable manner. It is therefore critical, when assessing the extent to which this goal can be achieved, to make it a tangible and measurable goal to the greatest extent possible.

As highlighted through peacebuilding and intergroup contact scholarship, collaboration can be effectively identified through initiatives that bring members of disputing parties together, to jointly work on a common goal and to tackle common societal challenges, or other factors that may trigger future conflict escalation. Meaningful collaboration can also be measured through initiatives of collaborative work in periods of crisis or transition, showcasing increased community resilience across a divided society. Applying the social mediation tool through the workshops analysed in this paper incorporates elements of intergroup contact and meaningful collaboration for a common goal. At the same time, the workshops and conference implemented in 2020 onwards also addressed the common crisis of the pandemic, in addition to addressing the case study of the Cyprus conflict. The component of collaboration can therefore be directly assessed through the paper’s findings.

The notion of sustainability, however, has been less straightforward to define, measure, and assess. Critiqued for being a vague concept (Phillis and Andriantiatsaholainaina, 2001), sustainability – in its social, economic, and environmental capacities – has faced the challenge of being a value-oriented principle that can be interpreted in more than one way, generating an ambiguity that makes it hard to measure in practice (Saarinen, 2013). For the purposes of this paper, and the social mediation initiative, sustainability has been addressed through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), an elaborate set of indicators within 17 thematic areas as set forth by the United Nations to act as an international reference point for putting sustainability in practice. With a focus on establishing sustainable peace, the ability of social mediation to achieve sustainability will be examined in reference to SDG 16, the goal on *Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions*.

The following section explains how this was applied in the Cyprus context through workshops and activities aimed at empowering local citizens from across the divide to becoming agents of conflict prevention, de-escalation, and resolution.

3. The Case of Cyprus

The ‘Cyprus Question’, or the ‘Cyprus Problem’ as it is often referred to, has a decade-long history starting from the first half of the twentieth century to date. In 1878, the United Kingdom took over the administration of the island of Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean from the Ottoman Empire, which it eventually annexed at the start of the First World War, when the two empires found themselves in opposing camps (Kornioti, 2020). The local population comprised of various ethno-religious groups, among which the ethnically Greek and ethnically Turkish Cypriots engaged in increasing political hostility in the course of the twentieth century, which turned violent for the first time in 1958. Since the end of the nineteenth century the Greek Cypriots had openly declared their desire to be unified with Greece, in the same way as other islands primary in the Aegean had gradually achieved that following the establishment of the Greek State, while in parallel the Turkish Cypriots pursued a policy for the partition of the island, based on claims of insecurity.

As a compromise between Turkish, Greek and British interests, the island was eventually given independence in 1960, with the three States becoming guarantors of the new Republic of Cyprus, which was governed by a rigid, constitutionally defined partnership between the constitutionally defined ‘Greek’ and ‘Turkish’ communities, which were distinguished in the Constitution on the basis of ethnic origin, religion, mother tongue, and cultural traditions.¹ The conflicting priorities of each community, however, quickly destabilised the new State and led to the eruption of armed violence between the two in the last days of December 1963. Though violence subsided by late 1964, political and public life on the island never fully recovered, and a new climax was reached in July 1974 when Turkey invaded the island, leading to its *de facto* partition (Constantinou, 2008).

The island’s two major ethno-religious groups, the Greek and Turkish Cypriots, have been geographically partitioned since, with the Greek Cypriot community and the Republic of Cyprus controlling the island’s south, and the Turkish Cypriots controlling the island’s north, under the self-proclaimed and internationally unrecognised by all States apart from Turkey, ‘Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)’. The communities are separated by a buffer zone formed by the 1974 ceasefire line, which is administered by the United Nations Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP). All relations between the two side are regulated through various Technical Committees and other ad hoc solutions mediated by UNFICYP and the UN good offices. Despite decades-long negotiations, a mutually agreed peace settlement is yet to be achieved. In the absence of a mutually agreed peace settlement, the conflict has been characterised as frozen and intractable (Sozen, 2006; Makriyianni and Psaltis, 2007). At

the same time, due to the lack of violence, some commentators have also characterised this a ‘comfortable conflict’, which ‘can easily pass off as peace’, to both locals and non-locals (Adamides and Constantinou, 2012).

The above historical background is important to contextualise the environment within which the social mediation project was conceptualised, implemented and developed. With this discourse in mind, we have introduced social mediation to locals from both communities, in order to evaluate the extent to which social mediation can assist processes of conflict prevention, de-escalation, and resolution for the partitioned communities of the divided island. Social mediation within the context of Cyprus can, therefore, constitute a peacebuilding tool, addressing reconciliation through a long-term engagement of individuals from both communities with the purpose of establishing meaningful contact and cooperation. The success of any peacebuilding effort on the island – including the use of social mediation as a conflict resolution tool – will be evaluated based on its contribution to the community’s sustainable collaboration. The notion of sustainable collaboration is used here to differentiate between the current status of a mere absence of violence, or what Galtung (1969) refers to as negative peace, and the community’s transition to a state of meaningful contact, cooperation, and reconciliation, otherwise known as positive peace (*ibid.*).

This attempt to engage in peacebuilding work for Cyprus on an intercommunal scale is not the first for the island, which counts peacebuilding discourse and efforts of over four decades, engaging leaders, active citizens, and the public from both communities. The first formal initiative for peacebuilding work after partition can be traced back in the late 1970s, when the Greek-Cypriot mayor of Nicosia and the respective Turkish Cypriot community leader collaborated for the continuation of operations for the city’s common sewerage system in the absence of diplomatic relations for the *de facto* divided capital city. The initiative was named *The Nicosia Master Plan* and continued its course for cooperation on mutual urban planning projects expanding beyond the sewerage system’s operations. Hadjipavlou and Kanol (2008) record civil society peacebuilding initiatives prior to geographical partition, and more specifically problem-solving workshops engaging participants from the two communities. The first was held in 1966 and it was a five-day intercommunal workshop led by John Burton (Hadjipavlou and Kanol, 2008).

In the 1980s, at a time when intercommunal movement was rare and only under exceptional circumstances, the United Nations provided a space under their auspices for members of the two communities to meet and discuss. US-based academics Kelman and Doob organised the Interactive

¹ Republic of Cyprus Constitution 1960, art 2; The Constitution recognises three smaller ‘religious groups’, as opposed to ‘communities’, which have been legally integrated

under the ‘Greek community’. These are the Armenians, the Maronites and the Latins (i.e. Catholics).

Problem-solving Workshop (1984) and Operation Locksmith Workshop (1985) respectively (Keashly and Fisher, 1990; Hill, 1982). Ron Fisher subsequently delivered a series of conflict resolution workshops among members of the partitioned communities of Cyprus; the workshop format employed was referred to as the *Interactive Conflict Resolution* approach and was introduced in a 1997 publication (Fisher, 1997). Interest for intercommunal engagement further increased in the 1990s, and received support from international peacebuilding agencies, such as UNDP (Jarraud *et al.*, 2013). New opportunities for collaboration across the divide involved local civil society leaders, as well as academics. Rothman (1999:177), who delivered the 1994 Cyprus Conflict Resolution Consortium, highlighted that Cyprus offered “an incubator for conflict resolution scholars as they apply their skills to a relatively non-volatile but none the less deeply intransigent conflict”. This approach indicated the amplified international interest of academics and conflict resolution practitioners to assist dialogue processes in Cyprus and provide opportunities for reconciliation across the members of the island’s partitioned communities.

Undoubtedly, this interest paved the way for local civil society to develop structures of intercommunal cooperation, especially once regular intercommunal interaction became possible through measures that eased crossing from one side to the other in April 2003. This development paved the way for local civil society to develop structures of intercommunal cooperation and, in the post-2003 era-built momentum for a wider peace movement, and a peace-oriented civil society, that operated on an intercommunal basis. The first physical venue that hosted members of Nicosia’s peace-oriented civil society and acted as a multicultural community centre was the Home of Cooperation, a restored multifunctional space within an accessible part of Nicosia’s UN-administered Buffer Zone.

Nevertheless, despite the substantial progress made on intercommunal contact and collaboration over the last four decades, the local peace-oriented civil society has been criticised for only being available to Nicosia’s elites (Autesserre, 2014; Ladini, 2009), with members of the local peacebuilding community admitting that the outreach of their work has moved negligibly beyond the streets of Nicosia’s Buffer Zone and divided city centre (Antoniou, 2019). One of the challenges that was identified was the often externally imposed nature of peacebuilding efforts supported by international donors, preventing the local peace movement to establish itself organically and sustainably.

Social mediation is therefore introduced as a tool that can address the challenge of inorganic peacebuilding structures, as it is a conflict resolution tool that aims to directly empower the individuals applying it. In recognition of the significance intercommunal dialogue carries in the context of the intractable Cyprus conflict, social mediation aims to foster community-based agency and establish non-formal, facilitated dialogue for addressing the island’s protracted state of division.

In the Cyprus context, the notion of a divided society has predominantly referred to the island’s decades-long division, between its ethnically Greek and Turkish communities. Enhancing the collaboration between the two communities lies at the centre of the project, yet the application of social mediation has also addressed other types of societal divisions, such as racism and xenophobia, bullying, gender inequality, and other forms of non-political, social, and interpersonal disputes. Social mediation is therefore employed to address conflict of various forms at the interpersonal, community, and intercommunal levels for the Cypriot society.

4. Methodology

For the purposes of assessing social mediation as a peacebuilding tool, in its capacity to foster sustainable community collaboration, we have adopted an ethnographic and more specifically autoethnographic methodological approach. This approach allows us to identify and incorporate our capacity as involved members of the community of Social Mediators examined and acknowledge our personal bias for the purposes of assessing this tool. While our own reflections and observations are incorporated, this does not prevent our methodological design from keeping other participants’ feedback central to the study’s data and findings.

Autoethnography, a combination of ethnography and autobiography (Reed-Danahay, 1997) is a form of critical ethnography that dissolves the divide between the researcher and the observed and is open to informing a study through not only external testimonies, but also introspection, intuition, and personal memory (Foley, 2002). Ellis *et al.* (2011) describe autoethnography as the systematic analysis of personal experience to understand cultural experience. In a similar vein, Adams *et al.* (2017) acknowledge the merging between personal experience and social life and identify autoethnography as the means for illustrating processes of understanding socio-political practice. Autoethnography has also been applied in the Cyprus context, in reference to identity, place attachment, and the two communities (Boğaç, 2020; Adil, 2019). In the context of social mediation, autoethnography has been used to portray our engagement with the tool in the process of understanding its usability and impact.

The table below illustrates the social mediation activities from which data was collected for the purposes of this study, and highlights the number of participants in each:

WORKSHOP DATE	PROJECT	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
14-15 July 2018	Pilot Workshop	15
9 – 10 November 2019	Social Mediation in Practice	13
30 Nov – 1 Dec 2019	Social Mediation in Practice	15
25-26 January 2020	Social Mediation in Practice	23
22-23 February 2020	Social Mediation in Practice	5
26-27 February 2021	Social Mediation for Social Transitions	31
20 November 2021	Identity, Culture & Social Mediation for Cyprus	5

Workshop participants engaged organically, through a public open call to participate in social mediation workshops for free. As workshop organisers, we ensured that the workshops were accessible to anyone interested to participate, with an emphasis on bringing together individuals from both Cypriot communities.² This resulted in a mixed audience of Cypriot and non-Cypriot participants. The ‘Social mediation for Social Transitions’ project took place almost entirely online, due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, which allowed for the participation of persons who were not physically in Cyprus. Since then, we have been striving to ensure both in person and remote access to the training. To further facilitate the process, English is the working language of the workshops, with the possibility of interpretation for Greek and Turkish speakers. Other than these logistical arrangements, we did not enforce any quota on the final numbers of workshop participants to ensure the participants’ organic motivation to attend, leading to uneven participant numbers across workshops. Autoethnography was then applied to process the participant feedback and reactions to the workshop through reflection and reflexivity, in addition to the participants’ written feedback through brief survey forms.

5. Social Mediation in Practice

The workshops were based on the *Handbook on Social Mediation in the Community: A guide for Practitioners* (Amura *et al.*, 2018), which was published by ICLAIM prior to the pilot workshop in May 2018. At the time, existing research on social mediation was minimal and case-study specific, restricting its applicability to multiple forms of

conflict. The aim of the handbook was to offer a user-friendly manual for professionals who would be interested in applying social mediation across a wider range of sectors and under varying conditions.

The Handbook offers an introduction to social mediation through a theoretical and practical framework. It not only gives explicit, clearly identified criteria about the characteristics and values a social mediator needs to adhere to, but it also gives a full description of practical steps to be followed when identifying and addressing a conflict. It addresses conflicts at the *micro* (interpersonal), *meso* (group) and *macro* (community) levels, as well as across three different timeframes: conflict *prevention*, *resolution* and *rehabilitation* stages. Preventive social mediation can be applied in group settings where tension in social relations rises, and the social mediator can implement community, group, or intercultural activities, with the aim to raise awareness of different points of view, in order to increase understanding and reduce prejudices between opposing views.

In the resolution stage, the social mediator employs strategies that aim at finding a solution to the ongoing conflict. It is of primary importance for both opposing individuals/parties to give their consent to participate in the mediative process, in order to find a commonly agreed solution. Even once an agreement is achieved, however, the social mediator needs to continue supporting the parties during the implementation of the agreement, through the continuation of preventive actions, with the aim for community members or the individuals in conflict to embed the skills and attitudes necessary that will help them face the conflict in a non-aggressive manner (Amura *et al.*, 2018).

The Handbook stresses the importance of starting with deconstructing the conflict, aiming to identify the factors that led to its escalation. It then proceeds with practical advice on core issues, such as the neutrality of the social mediator, the importance of the voluntary participation of all the parties, and the principles of confidentiality and good faith. Lastly, it offers guidance on three alternative procedural approaches in the resolution stage, namely Facilitative, Evaluative and Shuttle Mediation. The facilitative approach is used when the mediator needs to facilitate the entire conflict resolution process, until a commonly agreed resolution is achieved. The evaluative approach, on the other hand, requires more sessions between each party to the conflict and the mediator separately before the conflicting parties are brought together. Facilitative mediation may shift into evaluative mediation, in cases where the parties become inflexible, leading to non-constructive sessions that constantly fail to reach a resolution (Amura *et al.*, 2018). In cases where the parties do not agree to meet each other, a mediator can employ shuttle mediation, where they

² Whereas an in-depth analysis of reactions and approaches to social mediation by members of each community separately is of great interest and significance, deviations in the opinions and perspectives shared did not indicate a community-based

divergence and therefore, training participants were not distinguished based on their community membership for the purposes of examining social mediation as a tool.

take the initiative to meet with each party separately, until a resolution to the problem is achieved. Shuttle mediation is particularly useful in situations where a lot of negative feelings, aggression and mistrust do not allow a constructive meeting that would include both parties and the mediator.

Adopting an intercultural perspective, the Handbook was designed with the Cypriot socio-political reality in mind. This includes the intractable ethno-political conflict, the island's *de facto* partition since 1974, and the observance of worrying trends in racism and xenophobia. The Handbook was additionally informed by the socio-political context beyond Cyprus, and dynamics of interpersonal and intercommunal discourse, as well as socio-economic triggers of conflict regionally and internationally. Social phenomena associated with increased social tension, contribute to escalations in both smaller and larger-scale conflicts within and across communities, and to this end, the theoretical approaches and practical interventions illustrated within the Handbook are designed to easily adjust to varying socio-political contexts.

The Handbook and the accompanying materials were made publicly available through a project-specific website, which remains active and aims at sharing freely accessible practical and academic resources on social mediation. Following the launch of the website and the project overall, a two-day pilot training workshop addressing social workers, governmental officials, welfare officers, educators, community leaders, youth workers and civil society professionals, was held in July 2018. Participants received training on the use of social mediation as a conflict resolution tool, and offered positive feedback on its applicability, as well as its ability to empower citizens and address conflict more effectively.

The workshop's promising outcomes led to four additional workshops under the 'Social Mediation in Practice' project, which was supported by the British High Commission in Nicosia and took place during the 2019-2020 academic year. From the outset the project had an intercommunal outlook, aiming to bring together people from both the Greek-Cypriot and the Turkish-Cypriot communities. Nonetheless, all training sessions were open to participants of any ethnic background, political affiliation, professional capacity, or educational background, attracting a significantly broader pool of participants, including migrant communities. During the four training workshops, a total of sixty persons were trained, 25 per cent of whom were male. One third of the participants were Turkish-Cypriots, and 18% were non-Cypriot nationals, whereas the rest of the participants were Greek Cypriots. Among the participants there were university students, lawyers, primary and secondary education teachers, police officers, lawyers, civil society professionals, artists, and civil servants.

The 'Social Mediation in Practice' workshops culminated in a Social Mediation Conference, held in September 2020. While scheduled to take place earlier in 2020, the delivery of the conference was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and was eventually delivered in hybrid mode, enabling remote

attendance as well. Initially aimed to serve as a concluding event for that specific project, seeing the participants' interest in continuing their work on social mediation, the conference instead served as an opportunity to identify next steps for coordinated action, and to launch the *Social Mediators' Network* as a formal forum under which workshop participants could exchange views, experience, good practices and other useful information on the application of social mediation. Therefore, the Social Mediation Conference served as the inaugural meeting of the Network, instead.

The approach throughout the 'Social Mediation in Practice' project was interactive at heart, making it possible to incorporate participant feedback in future training and applications of the social mediation tool. Following the successful implementation of these early workshops we have retained the loose structure of the training sessions, to allow participants to bring to the discussion the points that feel most relevant to them, as opposed to guiding the discussion ourselves, in our capacity as trainers. In this way, participants had the opportunity to familiarise with the 'mediative environment', by analogy, where the trainers only guide the discussion, without imposing their own views and perspective to the participants.

6. Findings

The enthusiasm and the lively discussions that took place at every training session suggested that there was immense potential in the development and implementation of social mediation in Cyprus and beyond. This was reinforced by the fact that many Network members grasped the opportunity to put their newly obtained skills into practice shortly after they were introduced to the method, which displayed the empowering and emancipating character of social mediation as an inclusive and people-oriented conflict resolution tool.

Many 'Social Mediation in Practice' participants were eager to continue working with the social mediation tool, receive additional training, and engage in collaborative social mediation initiatives with other participants. Responses collected after the completion of each workshop indicated that the overwhelming majority of participants found social mediation to be a useful and relevant tool for addressing conflict – interpersonal, professional, communal, or political – within the Cyprus context. Additionally, many found social mediation to be an empowering tool and one that should be promoted and applied more widely.

With the project having been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and in particular the closure of checkpoints through which members of the public can cross from one part of the island into the other, the first session of the conference discussed the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on intercommunal and other social relationships. Participants readily shared their personal experience of interrupted intercommunal movement amidst the pandemic. For many, moving across the divide was frequent for family, recreational and professional purposes. It was interesting to listen to participants

highlighting how the consequences of the pandemic affected those with intercommunal activity and movement more severely. In that regard, participants agreed that had social mediation been applied in ways that involved policymakers and practitioners, the consequences of interrupting intercommunal movement would be more clearly portrayed for decision-making purposes, and many of the challenges faced could potentially be avoided, with more constructive measures being implemented for the containment of the pandemic.

Relevant to the first session, the second session of the conference focused on how social mediation can complement political processes towards a peace settlement for divided Cyprus. The applicability of social mediation in political conflict was suggested and supported during the 'Social Mediation in Practice' workshops, by a considerable number of participants, who stated that a desirable next step for applying social mediation would be to train and actively involve political stakeholders, such as decision-makers, government officials, and civil society professionals. The purpose of their involvement would be to allow members of the public from both communities to participate in the political peace process through an alternative consultation process designed along the lines of the social mediation method.

The third session of the Conference focused on opportunities for the application of social mediation broader, with particular reference to the professional environment, and the practical difficulties social mediators may face in their attempts to use social mediation within their respective environment. Though the feedback received from their earliest attempts with applying social mediation was overall positive, participants also acknowledged difficulties, including among others, the need for further development of their skills, uncertainty and lack of confidence in terms of personal bias and neutrality, as well as the lack of confidence in their communication skills with the parties to the conflict. A challenge highlighted by a number of participants who had applied – or attempted to apply – social mediation at work were also problems with overcoming workplace hierarchies and the lack of support from superiors. This discussion assisted in identifying future training needs.

The decided Network objectives were: (1) to identify ways to assume the social mediator role responsibly; (2) to create opportunities for peer-to-peer training; (3) to raise awareness on social mediation among key stakeholders; and (4) to promote a culture of social mediation in pursuit of its benefits for the broader society. In line with the project's earliest conception, network members came predominantly from the Greek Cypriot and the Turkish Cypriot communities. As the project grew however, the Network now counts 30 members, from across three continents (Europe, Asia and Africa). This was possible due to the online expansion of the project in the period after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to delays in the working plan of the Network. Nonetheless, despite the difficulties in holding

in-person meetings, the pandemic gave us the opportunity to provide one training entirely online on the theme of 'Social Mediation for Social Transitions', supported by the University of Central Lancashire Centre for Sustainable Transitions, and a hybrid training on 'Identity, Culture and Social mediation for Cyprus', once again with the support of the British High Commission in Nicosia. Both projects were co-implemented by the University of Central Lancashire – Cyprus (UCLan Cyprus) and ICLAIM and followed a structure and methodology similar to the one tested under the 'Social Mediation in Practice' project. Contrary to that initial project, however, the specificity of the chosen themes called for an enriched theoretical lens, that would inform participants more concretely on issues pertaining to 'social transitions' and 'identity,' 'culture' and 'divided societies' respectively. The online/hybrid format was especially beneficial for the Network, which was now joined by participants beyond Cyprus.

7. Critical Reflections and Discussion

We went through the delivery of social mediation training with the aim of establishing a multiplier effect of trained social mediators across the communities of Cyprus. Our initial vision was that the training and workshops would pave the way for social mediated discussions to take place throughout Cyprus and beyond, and to be led by the participants of the social mediation workshops, the social mediators. This visualisation, however, proved to be based on the formal setting of a mediated discussion, which takes place through a more formal and bureaucratic procedure of obtaining written consent, and sitting on a negotiating table, at equal distance from the participating parties. As social mediation revealed its multifaceted applicability, we came to acknowledge that the nonformal character of the tool is also reflected on the multiple, nonformal ways social mediators choose to apply it, while maintaining its principles of mediator neutrality and party consent.

Through participant testimonies, social mediation was a tool that informed informal conversations with peers facing a dilemma or concern – conflicts that were both interpersonal and intrapersonal. Social mediation became a reference for the social mediators for assessing an argument of friends or family members and applying mediating principles before making an intervention. Social mediation was also a reference point for two or more mediators to raise issues of concern in applying social mediation, identifying cases where conflict of interest prevailed, understanding the tool's restrictions.

In addition to the chameleon-like applicability of social mediation principles beyond formal mediation settings, a second realisation of the tool's significant contribution to conflict resolution was the opportunity to apply it reflectively. While social mediators – including ourselves as social mediation trainers – embraced this tool with the aim of resolving conflicts between others, the tool had a remarkable effect in engaging the social mediators in reflection about their own exposure to intrapersonal, interpersonal and community

conflicts. Looking at our own everyday quarrels, personal dilemmas, arguments with our children, parents, or siblings, and our adaptation to stressful work environments, was significantly revised through the lens of social mediation, as we almost subconsciously considered multiple perspectives, external conditions, and possible solutions with an increased level of empathy.

Applying social mediation through Allport's Contact Hypothesis conditions proved easy, as the four conditions lie at the heart of the social mediation format as discussed earlier. Consequently, the conditions can be upheld through the diversity of forms social mediation may take as a versatile nonformal tool and establish the grounds for meaningful contact enabling the reduction of prejudice among rival and antagonistic perspectives. The tool affirmed its effectiveness in offering facilitated dialogue to contested and difficult topics, including the topic of intercommunal relations on the island and what would a future of a reconciled Cyprus look like. Social mediation, therefore, holds the capacity to inform efforts for a peace settlement in Cyprus, by engaging locals both on a monocommunal and intercommunal level as direct stakeholders in discussing, understanding, and attempting to resolve the island's intractable conflict from their personal perspective. Allport's Contact Hypothesis was the central theoretical reference for Cyprus' early, pre-millennial, intercommunal peacebuilding workshops (Hadjipavlou and Kanol, 2008). A key difference that the Social Mediation workshop format has adopted is that it does not engage participants as mere contributors to an externally designed and facilitated conversation, but instead provides them the tools to understand and apply facilitated dialogue themselves. Through this emancipatory approach, which enables peacebuilding beneficiaries to become trained ambassadors of conflict resolution dialogue, the effectiveness and replication of problem-solving intercommunal workshops is expected to significantly increase.

With regards to the tool's contribution to sustainability, this study employed the indicators of SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, to provide a measurable reference to assessing its contribution to sustainable peace. SDG 16 has a total of ten indicators; 1 and 2 refer to violence, 3, 4, 5, and 9 to justice, corruption, and crime, 6 and 8 to strong local and global institutions, 10 to fundamental freedoms, and 7 to inclusive and participatory decision-making at all levels. While indicators 1 and 2 can be addressed with both political and social forms of mediated dialogue, social mediation is directly relevant to indicator 7, as the tool can significantly enhance decision-making processes in civil, professional, and governmental institutions by enabling the inclusion of all involved stakeholders in an equal and safe manner. The nonformal character of social mediation takes it beyond the level of formal institutions, as its nonformal applicability can also inform small-scale decision-making and problem-solving involving more than one party. Most importantly for the end goal of sustainable peace, social mediation can make political peace processes more inclusive, participatory, responsive, and

representative by directly engaging citizens in mediated discussions in parallel to politically mediated negotiations taking place at the leadership level – a scenario that directly applies to the case of Cyprus.

8. Conclusions and Outlook for the Future

Applying social mediation in Cyprus provided valuable insights on the areas of its applicability, through the priorities set forth by the workshops, which constituted a first step in the establishment of an inter-communal, and indeed multi-national, network of social mediators, committed to actively engaging in conflict resolution on the island. It is noteworthy to see that the local social mediators saw direct applicability of social mediation in the Cyprus peace process, highlighting it as a tool for increased civic participation, transparency and enhanced democratisation of the local peace process.

A valuable realisation is that social mediation goes beyond small-scale, community conflict resolution, to empower citizens of societies experiencing ongoing conflict – such as in the case of Cyprus- in becoming active agents in peacebuilding. The ability of social mediation to enhance local participation in peacebuilding suggests that social mediation becomes a key mechanism in what Richmond *et al.* (2011) define as fourth generation peacebuilding, by engaging locals inclusively, regardless of their professional, educational, and socio-political background.

In reference to its peacebuilding capacities, social mediation can thus be considered as a tool for increased community resilience and sustainability, specifically for divided societies and communities transitioning from conflict. Providing everyday citizens with a non-political and non-legal conflict resolution tool increases civic engagement in peace-making and peacebuilding processes. This allows citizens to engage with transitional processes of uncertainty and change more directly, and more confidently. Social mediation can, therefore, support the development of more resilient societies, and contribute to sustainable peace.

At the time of writing efforts are underway to build broader collaborations, across wider themes. Various steps in that direction have been taken since the summer of 2021 onwards, including the opportunity to present the project at the 2021 Global Solutions Forum in Dubai, on 18 January 2022. There the project was one of five global solutions, with four other projects from Turkey, Colombia, Thailand, and Bangladesh, as a global innovator for the promotion of the SDGs. The potential of social mediation contributing to SDG 16 through direct contribution to inclusive and participatory decision-making and the tool's input on additional, closely related SDGs on gender and social inequalities is set to be further explored through the tool's expanded applicability.

These promising observations on the applicability of social mediation suggest that additional research should be conducted to validate its role and impact in a wider variety of contexts beyond Cyprus, but also specifically for societies

experiencing and transitioning from conflict. The broad applicability of social mediation as a conflict resolution tool is yet to be fully understood, and future research on its format, replication, and conditionality can offer valuable insights towards its effective employment.

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