The Network for Religious & Traditional Peacemakers

Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

Bridging the Tracks

The Roles of Tradition and Faith-Oriented Insider Mediators in Formal Peace and Political Processes in Africa

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Cover image: Hadja Rashida Mamba, Vice President for a National Muslim Women's organisation in Central African Republic (RELEFCA), working with Christian religious leaders against hate speech and division between Muslims and Christians following the 2013 civil war.

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Abbreviations

ANE	National Elections Authority, Central African Republic
APP	Action Plan for Peace, South Sudan Council of Churches
APPR	Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation, Central African Republic
CAR	Central African Republic
CCM	Christian Council of Moçambique
CCSP	Center for Security Studies and Conflict Research
EIASC	Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council
EIFDDA	Ethiopia Interfaith Forum for Development Dialogue and Action
FRELIMO	Frente de Libertação de Moçambique / Moçambique Liberation Front
IRCE	Interreligious Council of Ethiopia
JISRA	Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action
KAIPTC	Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre
NCCK	National Council of Churches of Kenya
NCTC	National Counter Terrorism Centre, Nigeria
NRTP	Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers
P/CVE	Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism
PRCRC	Platform of Religious Confessions of the Central African Republic
R-ARCSS	Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
RENAMO	Resistência Nacional Moçambicana / Mozambican National Resistance
SSCC	South Sudan Council of Churches
SUPKEM	Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims
TPLF	Tigrayan People's Liberation Front
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WMC	Women Mediators Across the Commonwealth
WPS	Women, Peace and Security
YPS	Youth, Peace and Security

Executive Summary

Tradition-and Faith-Oriented Insider Mediators (TFIMs) play vital yet under-examined roles in formal peace and political processes across Africa. Rooted in religious or traditional authority and embedded in their communities, they are among the first to sense rising tensions, the most trusted to intervene, and the last to disengage during crises. While their contributions to local-level conflict resolution are widely recognized, their engagement in formal, high-level arenas such as peace negotiations, national dialogues, and constitutional reforms remains poorly understood, inconsistently supported, and structurally sidelined.

This report sees that as a gap worth addressing. TFIMs are uniquely positioned as cross-track brokers, with relationships that span both grassroots communities and high-level political spaces. Their ability to move between these tracks and to integrate the spiritual, moral, and political dimensions of dialogue and reconciliation makes them well-placed to enrich the design and delivery of formal peace and political processes.

Drawing on more than 40 interviews and case studies from Ethiopia, Mozambique, Kenya, South Sudan, Nigeria, Cameroon, Somalia, and the Central African Republic (CAR), this report applies a political economy lens to examine how power, legitimacy, and institutional design shape the roles of TFIMs in peace and political processes: how they are included, on what terms, and with what influence.

The report addresses three core research questions:

1. **What roles do TFIMs play in formal peace and political process, and what makes their contributions distinctive?**
2. **What barriers constrain their meaningful inclusion, and how are these shaped by political, institutional, and normative dynamics?**
3. **What enabling conditions could support TFIMs to participate safely, strategically, and sustainably?**

Key Findings

Findings from this research show that TFIMs are contributing to formal peace and political processes across Sub-Saharan Africa in diverse and often underrecognized ways. Some serve as formally recognized mediators, such as in Mozambique, where senior religious figures helped broker the peace agreement that ended the civil war. Others work as backchannel diplomats, such as in Nigeria, where Muslim scholars and interfaith leaders engage behind the scenes to challenge violent narratives and reduce tensions. Some act as conveners of cross-track platforms, such as in Kenya, where the Ufungamano Initiative brought together faith leaders, civil society, and political actors to shape constitutional reform. Others again function as moral and civic anchors during political transitions, such as in CAR, where interreligious councils and traditional leaders have helped stabilize the political environment and prepare communities for elections. Across these contexts, TFIMs mediate between formal actors and affected communities, drawing on moral authority, social legitimacy, and contextual knowledge to connect political agreements with local expectations and foster broader societal acceptance.

However, these contributions often unfold despite, not because of, the conditions surrounding them. TFIMs face significant and intersecting barriers to meaningful participation in formal spaces.

These include political gatekeeping and institutional hierarchies that privilege professionalized actors and technocratic approaches, tokenism and symbolic inclusion, where TFIMs are invited to the table without meaningful space to influence outcomes, as well as professional biases, where TFIM practices are overlooked or sidelined. Women and youth TFIMs face additional gender and age-based barriers that limit their credibility and influence. As a result, peace infrastructures frequently benefit from TFIMs informally, while failing to invest in their meaningful participation.

Against this backdrop, the report draws together lessons from empirical cases, interviews, and existing research to identify concrete enabling conditions that can help unlock the potential of TFIMs in formal peace and political processes. These include:

- **Embedding TFIMs in mediation architectures through liaison mechanisms, advisory councils, or designated envoys.**
- **Establishing coordination platforms that create structured opportunities for engagement, feedback, and influence across tracks.**
- **Providing tailored capacity support, including mediation training, process literacy, and strategic accompaniment, while protecting TFIMs' autonomy and legitimacy.**
- **Offering financial, legal, and political safeguards that enable safe, long-term participation in volatile or contested contexts.**

Recommendations

Strengthening TFIMs inclusion requires action across multiple levels. The report offers recommendations tailored to key actor groups:

- **Governments and regional bodies should formalize the inclusion of TFIMs in peace and political processes, building on platforms such as the African Union's Panel of the Wise, FemWise, and the WiseYouth Network.**
- **Donors should provide long-term, flexible support adapted to TFIMs' ways of working, including trust-based funding, care for local legitimacy, and adaptive programming.**
- **Civil society and TFIM networks can enable peer learning, amplify underrepresented voices, and help document grounded mediation practices.**
- **Multilateral actors should integrate TFIMs into peace infrastructures and cultivate long-term partnerships that go beyond symbolic gestures.**

TFIMs are not a substitute for professionalized mediation actors, but they bring access, legitimacy, and moral leadership that formal actors often lack. In fragile and contested contexts, they provide crucial linkages between elite agreements and community trust. Investing in their meaningful inclusion is therefore a strategic imperative for building more legitimate and resilient processes.

Participant at the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers' Consultation in Bangui, CAR. 2025.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, religious leaders, traditional authorities, and other socially embedded actors who draw on faith or custom to mediate conflict — referred to in this report as *Tradition- and Faith-oriented Insider Mediators (TFIMs)* — have long played vital roles in resolving disputes, promoting reconciliation, and maintaining social cohesion. TFIMs operate within culturally grounded systems of legitimacy and authority, offering moral guidance and conflict resolution rooted in values, rituals, and social relationships that resonate deeply with their communities (Mubashir & Vimalarajah, 2016). In contexts marked by state fragility, contested legitimacy, or weak formal institutions, TFIMs often step into roles that other mediators are ill-equipped to fulfil.

Although widely recognized for their contributions at the grassroots level, TFIMs remain underutilized and undervalued in formal peace and political processes such as peace negotiations, national dialogues, and constitutional reforms (Bramble et al., 2023). These arenas tend to be dominated by political actors, international mediators, and professionalized civil society organizations considered "legible" to governments and donors. By contrast, the culturally embedded practices of TFIMs often fall outside formal mediation frameworks or donor-driven designs.

This disconnect reflects more than a lack of recognition. It signals a deeper structural gap in the design of peace architectures. In many contexts, TFIMs hold sustained access to communities and constituencies that are otherwise absent from formal political spaces. Their engagement can help build trust in formal processes, mediate underlying tensions that threaten elite negotiations, and support the translation of formal agreements into outcomes that resonate with lived norms and values. In this way, TFIMs can enhance the legitimacy and sustainability of peace and political processes. Yet, their roles often go unacknowledged or are reduced to symbolic gestures of inclusion, particularly in the case of women and youth TFIMs, who face additional barriers within both religious and political hierarchies (Schraml & Vimalarajah, 2023).

Despite these challenges, there are diverse and compelling examples of TFIMs shaping formal processes across the region through recognized intermediation, informal diplomacy, cross-track convening, and normative brokerage. This report draws on empirical examples from seven countries: Mozambique, South Sudan, Ethiopia, the Central African Republic (CAR), Kenya, Nigeria, and Somalia. Yet, across these contexts, TFIM engagement often remains ad hoc and dependent on shifting political incentives, donor priorities, and institutional arrangements. Understanding the conditions that enable or constrain TFIM participation is therefore essential to designing more effective and inclusive peace and political processes.

This report adopts a political economy lens to examine how the inclusion of TFIMs can be better supported, structured, and scaled. In doing so, it aims to move beyond descriptive accounts of their contributions and instead highlight the deeper power dynamics, institutional arrangements, and strategies that shape their ability to influence peace and political outcomes.

The report is intended to support donors, international mediators, and national peace actors seeking to design more inclusive and resilient processes across Sub-Saharan Africa.

1.2 Research Questions and Approach

This report is guided by three interrelated research questions that speak to both analytical insight and practical relevance for policy and peace mediation actors:

1. What roles do TFIMs play in high-level peace and political processes, and what makes their contributions distinctive?
2. What barriers constrain their meaningful inclusion, and how are these barriers structured by political and institutional dynamics?
3. What enabling conditions can support TFIMs to participate more strategically, safely, and effectively?

To address these questions, the report adopts an analytical framework that combines political economy analysis with multi-track peacebuilding theory to examine how power, institutions, and interests shape the roles and inclusion of TFIMs. Drawing on insights from applied political analysis (Hudson & Leftwich, 2014), the approach explores how informal norms, gatekeeping dynamics, and political incentives influence who participates in peace and political processes and under what conditions. At the same time, multi-track peacebuilding theory[1] (Lederach, 1997; Kiyala & Harris, 2022) offers a framework for understanding how TFIMs operate across levels of engagement, often serving as cross-track intermediaries who bridge community grievances and high-level negotiations. Together, these approaches support a practical understanding of both the structural constraints and strategic entry points for enhancing TFIM engagement.

1 Here used in reference to theories of mediation and negotiation across tracks, including community-to-elite bridging roles.

1.3 Methodology

This report uses a comparative, multi-country case study approach that combines national-level analysis with actor-focused case material to develop a comparative yet contextually grounded understanding of how TFIMs operate, what enables or constrains their inclusion, and how more strategic support can be designed. The analysis is grounded in interviews with 45 people (29 male, 16 female, of which five were youth) conducted between mid-2024 and September 2025[2]. Interviews were carried out with TFIMs, government officials, peace practitioners, civil society actors, and representatives of regional and international organizations. They consisted of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with 39 individuals and one group interview with 6 people.

The depth of engagement varied by context. Fieldwork in Ethiopia, including 24 in-person interviews, forms the most substantial empirical base and informs three distinct case studies featured in this report. Additional in-person interviews were conducted in Mozambique, South Sudan and CAR. Interviews with actors from Kenya, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Somalia were conducted remotely. As mediation processes in many contexts are highly localized, informal, and sensitive, remote data collection can limit contextual immersion and access to a broader range of actors.

Interview sampling followed a purposive logic, drawing initially on the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers (NRTP) and its regional partners to identify known TFIMs. Snowball sampling was then used to expand the pool of participants. All interviews followed ethical research protocols. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and consented to the use of their insights. Anonymity was maintained unless the individual's role was already public and citing them posed no additional risk. One such exception is Bishop Dinis Sengulane of Mozambique, whose mediation work between political parties FRELIMO and RENAMO is well-documented.

Interview data was supplemented by participation in strategic consultations and workshops organized by the NRTP and its partners. These included: (i) a consultation on electoral preparedness and peacebuilding with religious and traditional leaders in South Sudan (March 2024); (ii) a consultation on electoral preparedness and religious actors' peacebuilding roles in CAR (April 2025); and (iii) two regional strategy development sessions organized by NRTP with its members in Kenya (September 2024) and Nigeria (October 2024). These engagements surfaced examples of both barriers and enablers across different political and institutional contexts.

Transcripts and field notes were coded thematically using qualitative analysis software. The coding framework was structured around the study's analytical lens and focused on themes such as legitimacy, institutional access, gatekeeping, co-optation, and the relational positioning of TFIMs within national peace infrastructures. Data was triangulated across interviews, workshops, literature, and media sources to strengthen credibility.

This qualitative, case-based methodology does not aim to offer a representative picture of processes in the region. Rather, it seeks to generate context-rich insights into the diverse ways TFIMs engage in mediation across varied institutional, political, and mediation settings. By identifying grounded patterns and cross-contextual dynamics, the report aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the roles, barriers, and enabling conditions that shape TFIM engagement and to thereby inform more strategic and inclusive approaches to supporting TFIMs in peace and political processes.

1.4 Structure of the Report

The report is structured to reflect the logic of the research questions and to build a cumulative understanding of how TFIMs engage in formal peace and political processes. It moves from conceptual foundations to actor-level dynamics, and then to the structural and strategic factors that shape TFIM exclusion or inclusion.

Section 2 introduces key terms and debates in the literature on religious peacebuilding, insider mediation and inclusion before it presents the analytical framework, which combines a political economy lens with multi-track peacebuilding theory.

Section 3 examines empirical examples of TFIMs influencing formal peace and political efforts. It uses case studies to explore four modes of engagement: formal participation, informal diplomacy, convening cross-track platforms, and normative leadership.

Section 4 analyzes the political, institutional, and normative barriers that limit TFIM inclusion. Using a political economy lens, it explores how practices of gatekeeping, tokenism, co-optation, and intersectional exclusion shape uneven recognition and access.

Section 5 identifies enabling conditions that can support TFIMs to engage more strategically, safely, and effectively. It explores institutional, legal, and financial mechanisms that can strengthen TFIM roles without undermining their autonomy or grassroots' legitimacy.

Section 6 presents recommendations for donors, mediation actors, national governments, and regional institutions to help structure TFIM inclusion in ways that enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of peace and political processes.

Section 7 concludes with reflections on the evolving roles of TFIMs, the risks of continued marginalization, and key implications for future policy, practice, and research.

Hadja Rashida Mamba, Vice President for a National Muslim Women's organisation in Central African Republic (RELEFCA), working with Christian religious leaders against hate speech and division between Muslims and Christians in the country.

2. State of the Field and Analytical Framework

2.1 Research and Praxis

RELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING

Religious peacebuilding is a well-established field that examines how faith-based actors and institutions contribute to conflict resolution, reconciliation, and social cohesion. Foundational works in the religious peacebuilding scholarship have long emphasized the “ambivalence of religion” and its dual potential to incite violence or build peace, depending on how it is mobilized (Appleby, 2003; Gopin, 1997; Smock, 2006; Sampson, 2007). Religion is neither inherently good nor bad for peacebuilding; its impact depends on political, economic, and social factors. Scholars have highlighted how religious actors draw on moral discourse, spiritual authority, and deep-rooted community ties to facilitate reconciliation, shift conflict narratives, and strengthen post-conflict social cohesion (Abu-Nimer, 2004; Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009). These dynamics are particularly pronounced in Sub-Saharan Africa, where religion and tradition remain deeply intertwined with public and political life (Ludovic, 2021; Manyonganise, 2023).

More recent debates call for a context-sensitive and holistic integration of religion within peacebuilding frameworks, urging greater recognition of indigenous spiritualities, hybrid cosmologies, and culturally grounded worldviews (Ayinde, 2025; Omer, 2020).

At the same time, feminist and decolonial scholars have critiqued the often male-dominated, institutional focus of religious peacebuilding, pointing to the bureaucratization of faith-based networks and the risks of instrumentalization in countering violent extremism (Hayward, 2015; Isike, 2017; Bouta et al., 2015; Sager, 2010; Giorgi, 2022; Ishaku et al., 2021).

While this evolving literature offers rich insights into religious and traditional actors' roles in community-level peacebuilding, trauma healing, and moral advocacy, their engagement in political transitions, formal mediation, or national dialogues remains relatively underexamined. A handful of recent studies (e.g., Bramble et al., 2023; Klocek, 2024; Ogenga et al., 2024) have begun to explore these dynamics, but there is still limited systematic analysis of how such actors shape high-level peace and political processes or how their legitimacy is negotiated within broader institutional and governance frameworks.

INSIDER MEDIATION

Insider mediation is a second body of work that provides direct conceptual grounding for this report. The literature on insider mediation foregrounds the importance of proximity, contextual fluency, and relational trust in effective peacebuilding (Lederach & Wehr, 1991; Wilhelm, 2021; UNDP, 2014, 2020). Aided also by the broader "local turn" in peacebuilding discourse, which highlights the need for peace processes to be locally owned, led and implemented (UN, 2018), insider mediation forms a crucial part of a broader rethinking of how peace is built from within. Insider mediators, by virtue of their embeddedness in conflict-affected societies, are often uniquely positioned to navigate sensitive social divisions, access excluded constituencies and maintain long-term engagement across conflict cycles. This has been particularly evident in cases of intercommunal violence, natural resource disputes, and violent extremism, where formal mediation structures may be absent or distrusted (Shire, 2021; Mubashir et al., 2016).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, insider mediation is frequently practiced by traditional authorities, religious leaders, or local civic actors who derive legitimacy from historical roles and social proximity rather than formal institutional mandates. While regional case studies have illustrated these dynamics well (e.g., Duursma, 2020; Zanker, 2014; Mubashir, 2016; Dudoet, 2016), the literature remains heavily skewed toward subnational or community-level processes. Emerging practice frameworks (e.g., UNDP, 2014; 2020, Berghof Foundation, 2024) seek to better support insider mediators, but empirical studies on their roles in high-level peace and political processes remain limited. For actors like TFIMs, whose work often spans formal and informal arenas, understanding these interactions is critical to assessing their strategic relevance and the barriers they face.

INCLUSION LITERATURE

A third body of literature concerns inclusion in peace and political processes. Inclusion here refers to the meaningful participation of diverse actors in shaping the direction, content, and outcomes of negotiations or transitions, particularly groups historically excluded from power (Paffenholz, 2014; Hirblinger & Landau, 2020). Frameworks such as Women, Peace and Security (WPS), Youth, Peace and Security (YPS), and subsequent frameworks for civil society participation have helped embed inclusion as a guiding principle in international responses (UN, 2018; Paffenholz et al., 2017; Ghais, 2022).

Despite this progress, some scholars and practitioners caution that inclusion is often implemented in narrow or symbolic ways. Practices such as seat quotas, scripted consultations, or top-down selection processes can create the appearance of participation without shifting power or redistributing influence (Bell & Pospisil, 2017; Cuhadar, 2020; Aeby & Pring, 2021). The inclusion discourse also tends to focus on social identity categories (e.g. women, youth, ethnic minorities) or sectoral stakeholders (e.g. NGOs, human rights defenders) rather than actor archetypes such as TFIMs.

In contexts like Sub-Saharan Africa, where legitimacy is often diffuse, plural, and contested, such formalist approaches risk excluding actors whose authority does not conform to bureaucratic models. Moreover, inclusion debates tend to foreground individual agency, overlooking the structural and institutional architectures that govern access and recognition. For TFIMs, who may lack legal status, funding, or political backing, these constraints shape not just their participation, but also the degree to which their contributions are acknowledged, valued, or acted upon.

SITUATING THIS REPORT

Together, these bodies of literature position TFIMs as culturally grounded and socially embedded actors whose contributions to formal peace processes remain underexplored. Building on these insights, this report applies a combined analytical framework of political economy and multi-track mediation to examine how TFIMs engage in, influence, and are shaped by political processes across Sub-Saharan Africa.

The report advances existing research in three main ways:

First, it brings together rich empirical evidence on TFIM engagement in formal peace and political processes, where their contributions have been present but seldom documented systematically.

Second, it moves beyond focusing on what individual TFIMs do to situate their roles within broader political and institutional ecosystems. This perspective foregrounds how their participation is structured, enabled, or constrained by broader peace architectures.

Third, it contributes conceptually and methodologically by combining multi-track peacebuilding theory with political economy analysis. This hybrid lens shifts the focus from counting participation to understanding power and under what political conditions insider influence becomes possible.

Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers' Regional Strategic Consultation in Abuja, Nigeria. 2025.

Figure 1 Key Concepts

Term	Definition
Peace and Political Processes	Formal, high-level efforts to resolve violent conflict and (re)build governance, including negotiations, national dialogues, constitutional reforms, and post-crisis transitions (Barnes, 2009; Bell & Pospisil, 2017). In line with the report's political economy lens, these processes are understood as deeply political and contested arenas shaped by power, interests, and institutional gatekeeping (Paffenholz, 2014; Joshi & Mason, 2011). They are often elite-led—a term used here to describe processes dominated by state, party, or institutionally controlled actors, rather than to denote social status per se. While typically initiated or managed by formal authorities or international mediators, their legitimacy and sustainability depend on broader inclusion and responsiveness to diverse sources of social and moral authority.
Mediation	A facilitated process of dialogue, negotiation, or conflict transformation involving a third party. This report adopts a broad understanding of mediation that includes both formal and informal, direct and indirect, high- and cross-level engagement, reflecting evolving practice in insider mediation and multi-track peacebuilding (Bercovitch & Gartner, 2009; Wallensteen & Svensson, 2014). Within this scope, mediation may involve unofficial facilitation of dialogue, quiet diplomacy, moral persuasion, narrative reframing, or convening cross-actor platforms to foster understanding and shared agendas.
Multi-Track Mediation	A framework that recognizes peace engagement across interconnected levels of society: Track 1 (state and elite), Track 2 (civil society and professional mediators), and Track 3 (community and grassroots actors). Track 1.5 captures semi-official or hybrid actors who bridge formal and informal spaces. Building on Lederach's (1997) notion of the "peacebuilding pyramid," cross-track linkages are seen as essential to translating elite agreements into social legitimacy and channeling community perspectives upward (Kiyala & Harris, 2022).
Insider Mediators	Socially embedded actors whose legitimacy derives from relational trust, moral credibility, and cultural fluency rather than external neutrality or formal mandates (Lederach & Wehr, 1991; Wilhelm, 2021). Insider mediators operate within the social and political ecosystems of the conflict, often engaging flexibly across levels. Their proximity enables access to hard-to-reach constituencies, long-term engagement, and culturally resonant approaches to reconciliation and dialogue (UNDP, 2014; 2020).
TFIMs (Tradition- and Faith-Oriented Insider Mediators)	A specific category of insider mediators grounded in religious or traditional authority. TFIMs include imams, priests, chiefs, elders, and interfaith leaders who engage in both informal and formal peace efforts, drawing on moral legitimacy and cultural norms (Mubashir & Vimalarajah, 2016). The term "orientation" underscores that these actors may draw on, but are not confined to, formal religious or traditional institutions. Many combine spiritual and customary practices with civic, political, or advocacy tools. While some engage directly in mediation, others influence peace processes through moral leadership, dialogue facilitation, advocacy, or violence prevention. What unites them is their ability to bridge social and political divides, translate across levels, and connect elite decision-making with community legitimacy.

2.2 Analytical Framework

This report adopts a hybrid analytical framework that brings together political economy analysis and multi-track peacebuilding theory to examine how power, legitimacy, and institutional design shape the inclusion and influence of TFIMs in formal peace and political processes.

Political economy analysis emphasizes how formal institutions, informal norms, and actor interests interact to shape political inclusion (Hudson & Leftwich, 2014; Bercovitch & Schneider, 2000; Wennman, 2000). It focuses on understanding the incentives, power structures, and gatekeeping mechanisms that determine whose participation is accepted, resisted, or instrumentalized. In the context of formal peace processes, this perspective helps unpack how inclusion is governed not only through formal mandates or legal frameworks, but also through normative hierarchies, donor logics, and elite bargains that define legitimacy and authority (Putzel & Di John, 2012; Paffenholz, 2014).

Applied to TFIMs, this lens brings into view the often opaque factors that shape their roles in formal processes, such as informal gatekeeping by political elites, the privileging of secular, professionalized civil society in peace architectures, contested perceptions of religious and customary authority, and the lack of institutional pathways to recognition and influence. It also allows for comparative analysis of how TFIM legitimacy is constructed, constrained, or challenged across different national contexts and conflict trajectories.

Alongside this structural analysis, the report draws on multi-track peacebuilding theory to examine how TFIMs engage across different levels of mediation efforts. Rather than operating within a single track, TFIMs often serve as cross-track connectors, bridging vertical divides between communities and national elites, and horizontal divides across conflict parties, identity groups, or regions. Their engagement is often fluid and situational, translating political agendas into culturally resonant terms, channeling local grievances into national arenas, or reframing elite deadlock through shared moral or spiritual narratives.

While multi-track frameworks highlight TFIMs' connective potential, political analysis illuminates the rules, hierarchies, and power dynamics that shape whether their roles are acknowledged, supported, or sidelined. Together, these perspectives offer a framework for a grounded and strategic understanding of both the contributions TFIMs make and the conditions that enable or inhibit their influence in formal processes.

Figure 2 A political economy lens of TFIMs as cross-track brokers

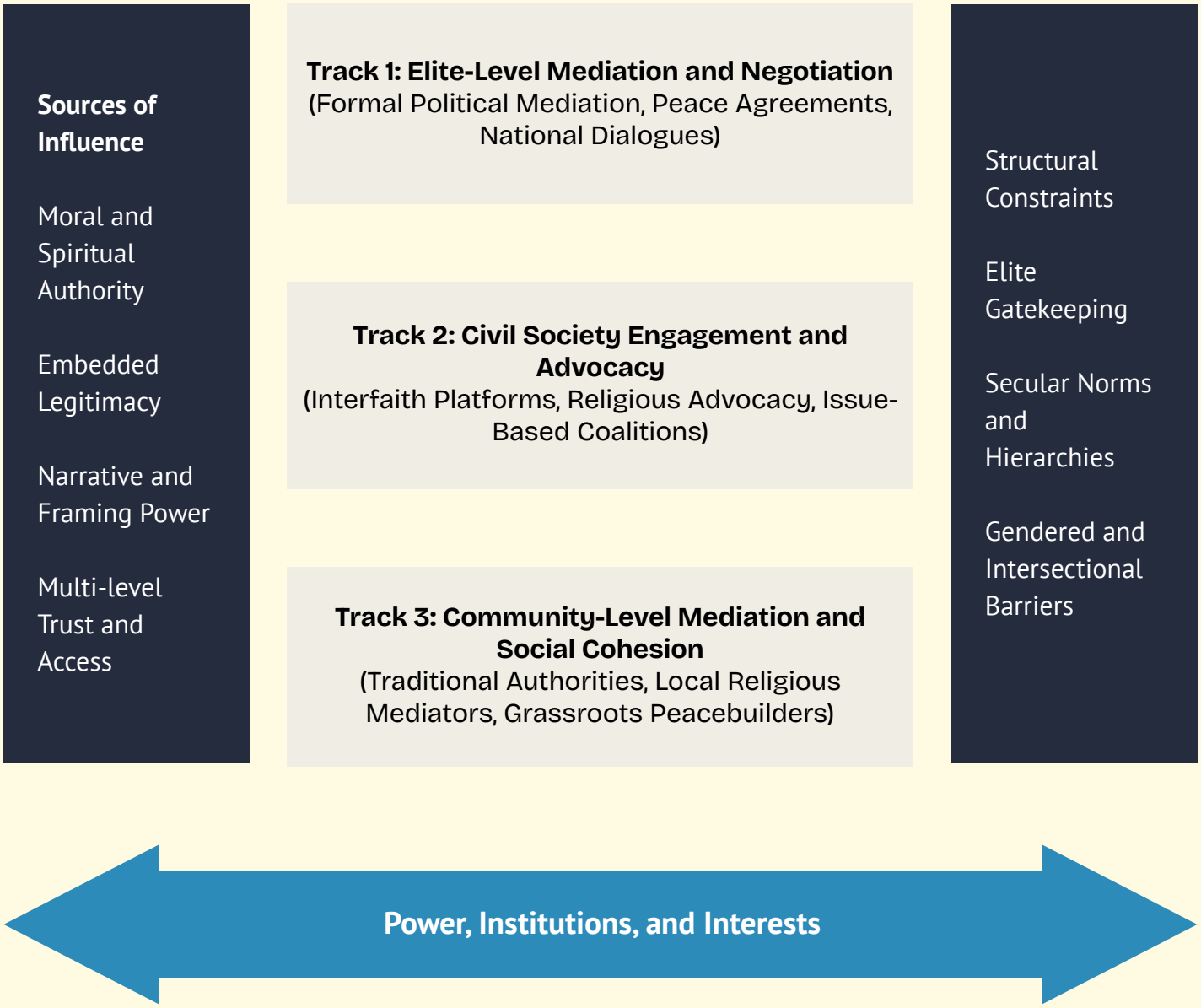


Figure 2 presents the analytical framework that guides this report. At its core is the tracks model, which identifies three levels of engagement. Surrounding this core is a political economy lens that explains the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. On the left, sources of influence reflect the distinctive assets TFIMs bring to peace mediation. On the right are the structural constraints that often hinder TFIMs' visibility and influence in formal processes.

This framework underpins the structure of the report. Section 3 focuses on actor agency and influence, exploring the diverse roles and contributions TFIMs play across tracks. Section 4 maps the structural and institutional constraints that limit their meaningful inclusion. Section 5 examines enabling conditions and support strategies that can move TFIMs from symbolic presence to strategic participation in formal peace and political processes.

3. Modes of TFIM Engagement in Formal Processes

This section responds to Research Question 1 by examining how TFIMs contribute to formal peace and political processes in Sub-Saharan Africa. Prior research has identified a range of modalities through which religious and traditional actors engage in peace and political processes. These include direct participation at the negotiation table, observer roles, consultation mechanisms, inclusive commissions, problem-solving workshops, and forms of public or moral pressure such as mass action and advocacy (Bramble et al., 2023). More targeted studies of TFIMs further emphasize these actors' roles in fostering peaceful coexistence, mediating violent conflict, and mobilizing communities for nonviolent social change (Mubashir & Vimalarajah, 2016).

Building on these foundations, the present report synthesizes these varied typologies into a four-part framework that reflects both the empirical cases and the report's political economy lens. The modalities are not mutually exclusive but often intersect and evolve across time. They include formal participation in peace architectures, where TFIMs are embedded in Track 1 structures as recognized mediators or interlocutors (section 3.1.); backchannel diplomacy and informal influence involving quiet, unofficial mediation that helps shape formal outcomes (section 3.2.); platform building across mediation tracks, where TFIMs convene parallel or cross-track processes to amplify community voices and influence national agendas (section 3.3.); and moral brokerage, where TFIMs help legitimize peace processes, shift public narratives, and embed negotiations in shared moral frameworks (section 3.4).

It is important to note that most examples discussed here focus on male TFIMs, reflecting both the historical gender imbalance in formal peace structures and the barriers that continue to limit women's and youth's participation in visible, high-level mediation roles. These dynamics are examined further in later sections.

3.1 Formal Participation in Peace Architecture

While TFIMs rarely hold formal roles in high-level peace negotiations, there are notable exceptions. Often, these are cases where TFIMs have strategically positioned themselves within Track 1 processes out of their own initiative and become indispensable.

This subsection examines three such cases: the role of Bishop Dinis Sengulane and the Christian Council of Mozambique (CCM) in brokering the peace agreement that ended the country's civil war, the South Sudan Council of Churches' (SSCC) involvement in the revitalized peace agreement and Tumaini peace initiative, and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council's (EIASC) mediation of the Somali–Afar conflict in Ethiopia.

These cases show that when institutional actors recognize the trust and convening power of TFIMs, their contributions can be transformative for facilitating negotiation and for anchoring national processes in community participation and legitimacy.

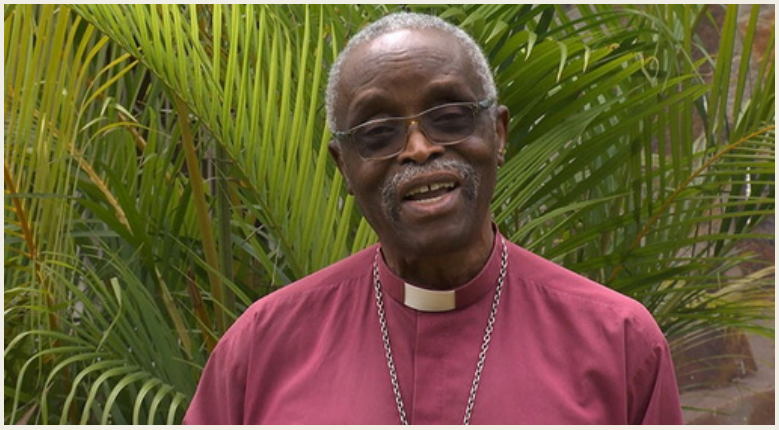
MOZAMBIQUE: UNLOCKING POLITICAL STALEMATES THROUGH MORAL AUTHORITY AND RELATIONAL ACCESS

The first case offers a compelling example of how TFIMs can shift political incentives and overcome elite deadlock in protracted conflict settings.

Mozambique's 16-year civil war (1977–1992) between the ruling Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) party and Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO) insurgents was characterized by deep mutual distrust and polarization. There were multiple attempts at negotiation that all collapsed, in part due to Cold War geopolitics and the absence of a trusted domestic broker. In this context, Bishop Sengulane, then Anglican Bishop of Lebombo, emerged as a credible intermediary who would play a catalytic role in getting the two sides to talk. When interviewed for this study in April 2025, the Bishop underlined how his engagement was driven not by an official mandate, but rather, by a deep sense of moral responsibility:

"In my case, I felt that as a bishop, therefore a follower of Jesus Christ, I have no other choice but to be a peacemaker...It is part of our vocation."

–Bishop Sengulane, Mozambique



Bishop Sengulane.
Photo: https://opais.co.mz/tag/dom-dinis-sengulane/.

The churches in Mozambique have long played a significant role in social services, peacebuilding and community development. In the early 1980s, CCM began mobilizing church members across the country to quietly encourage the government to consider dialogue with the RENAMO leadership. At the same time, Bishop Sengulane initiated discreet engagement with the leadership of both parties. This dual strategy of bottom-up societal pressure combined with behind-the-scenes relationship-building would eventually open up a space for conversation in an otherwise closed and hostile political environment. As Bishop Sengulane explained:

"We said that each church should try to convince, but in a very silent way, its members to ask the government to talk ... And we started to talk to the government, arguing it was necessary for them to talk to the other side .... This was a slow process. Only in 1986, at the end of 1986, there was a positive attitude."

–Bishop Sengulane, Mozambique

By the late 1980s, these efforts had established informal lines of communication between FRELIMO and RENAMO. Bishop Sengulane was not simply relaying messages; he was a moral voice trusted by both sides. His standing as the head of a national church, combined with the CCM's affiliation with global religious networks like the World Council of Churches, enabled them to navigate tense political spaces. Bishop Sengulane noted that it was precisely their religious anchoring that shielded them from suspicion:

"The fact that we are religious leaders means that we are not seen as someone who is looking for a job ... A religious leader is not perceived to have any ulterior motive."

–Bishop Sengulane, Mozambique

These efforts paved the way for formal negotiations, which were eventually mediated by the Sant'Egidio Community in Rome and culminated in the 1992 General Peace Accord. While the formal talks progressed in Italy, Bishop Sengulane and the CCM launched a national outreach campaign to prepare citizens for peace. One of its most iconic efforts was the Transforming Arms into Tools initiative that converted surrendered weapons into farming tools and sculptures. This became a world-renowned project by linking disarmament to reconciliation and hope (see e.g. Tester, 1996).

Although Bishop Sengulane never held an official mediator title, his work was instrumental in catalyzing formal talks and sustaining post-war peace. This case illustrates how TFIMs can influence high-level political dynamics by straddling grassroots and political spheres and drawing on faith-based values that transcend partisan interests.

SOUTH SUDAN: FAITH-BASED OVERSIGHT IN THE REVITALIZED PEACE AGREEMENT AND TUMAINI INITIATIVE

The second case of formal inclusion outlines how the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) has held roles within peace implementation and oversight structures in the country.

Following five years of brutal civil war, the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) was signed in 2018. Although the SSCC was not involved in drafting the agreement, it was granted official representation in key oversight bodies. These included two seats on the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC) tasked with monitoring implementation and one seat on the Revitalised Strategic Defence and Security Board (RSDSRB), which oversaw security arrangements during the transition period (R-ARCSS, 2018, Chapter 8). Additionally, the SSCC was recognized as a stakeholder to be consulted in the constitution-making process (Chapter 6).

These appointments gave the Council formal visibility and opportunities to speak in Track 1 decision-making spaces. At the same time, the SSCC remained active in public life, issuing statements, facilitating grassroots' reconciliation, and critiquing elite power-sharing arrangements. One member described the reach that the religious and traditional leaders have, and the enduring trust and influence the Council draws on, as follows:

Participants at the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers' National Consultation in Juba, South Sudan. 2024.

"We have got the platform, we have the pulpit (...) every day of the week wherever people gather there's a priest to talk to, there's the traditional leader to talk to (...) That moral authority cannot be compromised."

–Male SSCC Member, South Sudan

As R-ARCSS implementation eventually stalled amid political inertia and contestation, the SSCC's dual role as monitor and moral voice became increasingly important. SSCC leaders continued behind-the-scenes diplomacy, urging political actors to honor commitments, calm tensions, and uphold inclusive reforms. As one religious leader explained:

Many times, what is being done behind the scenes is not recorded, but I think there's a lot of consultation going on (...) Although we have a lot of challenges, the church still retains the respect of the political leaders."

–Male religious leader, South Sudan

Much of this work built on the SSCC's Action Plan for Peace (APP), launched in 2015 and rolled out nationally through Inter-Church Committees. The APP promoted reconciliation, dialogue across ethnic and political divides, and inclusion of women's voices across the country (SSCC, 2022).

When the Tumaini Initiative emerged in 2024 to engage armed actors excluded from R-ARCSS, the SSCC stepped in again, hosting a consultative forum in Nairobi and offering logistical and spiritual support to help frame the talks in moral terms. A civil society representative recalled the impact of these efforts as follows:

"They prayed for us, (...) for everyone. And that was big in terms of projecting the power of the church (...) all the churches in Africa are with us. So, you the politicians, you have to open your eyes."

–Male Tumaini representative, South Sudan

Taken together, the SSCC experience illustrates how TFIMs can strengthen formal peace processes by anchoring implementation in public legitimacy, amplifying marginalized voices, and creating moral pressure on political elites. Their formal roles in R-ARCSS oversight bodies gave them access and leverage, while their ability to operate across political and societal divides enabled ongoing, adaptive engagement. While not mediators in the narrow sense, the SSCC played crucial, structured roles in sustaining peace architectures and bridging the gap between elite deals and grassroots' expectations.

RELIGIOUS MEDIATION IN THE SOMALI-AFAR CONFLICT IN ETHIOPIA: SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY WHERE SECULAR AND POLITICAL APPROACHES FAIL

The third case illustrates how TFIMs can step into spaces of political failure and become de facto facilitators of high-level peace processes. In this case, religious leaders filled a vacuum left by repeated breakdowns in state-led negotiations, using shared religious identity and cultural rituals to unlock a stalled peace process.

The backdrop to the Somali-Afar conflict is rooted in Ethiopia's ethnic federalist system, which while designed to reflect territorial autonomy, has also generated recurrent conflicts along ethnic and administrative lines (Lie & Mesfin, 2018). The Somali–Afar border dispute has been one of the most entrenched conflicts, rooted in overlapping territorial claims exacerbated by regional political rivalries (see e.g. Yasin, 2010). Violence has repeatedly flared between communities and regional special forces, and successive rounds of political talks have failed to yield lasting peace agreements.

In this context, the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council launched a faith-based mediation initiative in 2024. Recognizing the shared Muslim identity of both communities, the EIASC mobilized religious leaders from both regions to engage in negotiations. As one member explained:

> ***"The EIASC ...began facilitating negotiations between the two sides, with the green light from the government ...For decades, ethnic-based, secular dialogue efforts have been attempted, but the conflict persisted. Now, the EIASC and Muslim leaders are trying to bring a new approach to peace."***
>
> ***–Male religious leader, Ethiopia***

While the secular federal dialogue frameworks had been structured around ethnic constituencies, the EIASC provided an alternative moral and social language. By foregrounding shared faith rather than competing identities, the EIASC opened space for a different kind of trust and recognition. As an EIASC member described:

> ***"The EIASC president started to bring discussions ... he brought the religious leaders from both territories together, cultural leaders, tribal leaders. Since both communities are Muslim, he used that religious bond .... they met for discussions, shared prayers, and even broke the Ramadan fast together."***
>
> ***–Male EIASC member, Ethiopia***

Acts such as joint prayers and shared iftar became powerful rituals of reconciliation, replacing the polarizing language of territorial claims with a spiritually grounded sense of unity. After months of facilitated dialogue, the process culminated in a reconciliation gathering in Samara in early 2025. Religious leaders from both regions attended, and the symbolic power of fasting and praying together marked a significant turning point.

The process, while led by religious actors, gained the recognition and logistical support of the Ministry of Peace, with the State Minister attending the final prayer ceremony. Yet it remained a faith-driven initiative:

> ***"There was support from the Ministry of Peace, there was government involvement ... which was excellent ... but it was the religious leaders' initiative."***
>
> ***–Male member of Ethiopian Muslim Development Agency***

The Somali-Afar case highlights several key strengths of TFIMs in formal peace processes. First, the EIASC's deep social embeddedness and moral credibility allowed them to command trust in an environment where political actors were discredited or viewed with suspicion. Second, their use of shared religious identity demonstrates how symbolic and spiritual frameworks can be mobilized to create space for reconciliation and de-escalate entrenched identity-based tensions. Third, the case showcases hybrid legitimacy, in that a mediation process that initiated informally gained recognition and support from formal state institutions, illustrating how TFIMs can evolve into Track 1.5 actors that retain legitimacy across tracks.

Afar and Somali intellectuals, leaders, and community members gather to discuss sustainable peace, leading to the creation of the Afar-Somali Peace Forum (AFSOM). 2024-25. Source: https://afarintellectuals.org/portfolio/year-1-setting-the-path-for-sustainable-peace/.

3.2 Informal Diplomacy and Backchannel Mediation

While 3.1. examined cases where TFIMs have been granted or claimed space in formal peace architectures, such opportunities are not always available or even possible. In many fragile or conflict-affected settings, formal negotiations may be absent or stalled, leaving no structured track for official mediation. This section examines cases where TFIMs work without formal mandates or institutional anchoring through informal channels to de-escalate violence and lay the groundwork for eventual political settlements.

The first case, from Somalia, illustrates how religious and customary leaders have become de facto mediators in the absence of state authority. The second, from Nigeria, shows how informal faith-based diplomacy has helped to sustain dialogue and reduce tensions in a context of violent extremism.

INSIDER INFLUENCE IN THE ABSENCE OF THE STATE: RELIGIOUS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS AS DE FACTO MEDIATORS IN SOMALIA

In Somalia, the collapse of centralized governance since 1991 has left a vacuum in formal conflict resolution mechanisms, although the country has evolving federal and state-level governance structures that play an important role in peace and mediation processes. Within this context, religious and customary leaders have become central to mediating violent clan-based conflicts, convening rival factions, and sustaining localized peace. These TFIMs operate alongside and even substitute formal processes, functioning as de facto Track 1 mediators based entirely on moral legitimacy and social embeddedness. Mediation processes in Somalia are typically collective and rooted in clan-based systems, where elders, religious leaders, and community representatives engage through structured dialogue forums (Shir) guided by customary law (Xeer).

Abdisalam Mohamoud Ahmed is a Somali elder and religious leader who has mediated over 80 clan- and region-based conflicts since the late 1980s. He was drawn into this work by his father, who was also a mediator, and described mediation as both a cultural inheritance and a moral imperative:

"In 1991, when the national or central government of the Somali clans collapsed, it became a kind of obligation for intellectuals to take on this work... it's like being a fire extinguisher, or an emergency specialist, going in between the clans to stop the fighting or minimize the conflicts."

–Abdisalam Ahmed, Somalia

Abdisalam Ahmed, a Somali elder and religious leader, describing mediation as both a cultural inheritance and a moral imperative.

Ahmed further explained that he had experienced a range of different pathways into conflict mediation, including invitations from local authorities, or simply acting out of personal responsibility and faith. This reflects the informal yet highly responsive nature of TFIM work in Somalia, shaped by social proximity and moral responsibility rather than by institutional mandate:

> ***"When conflict happens, there are several ways you might get involved. One possibility is that the local administration or institutions reach out to you... Another scenario is that one of the clans may ask you to mediate... A third approach is internal. Sometimes your own values, your faith, or your sense of responsibility pushes you to act... And sometimes, you're just caught in the middle... Maybe your clan, your neighbor, or your close community is involved."***
>
> ***–Abdisalam Ahmed, Somalia***

Despite the lack of formal status, actors like Ahmed perform structurally equivalent roles to formal mediators in more institutionalized settings. Their authority comes from a reputation earned over years of relational accountability.

This case illustrates a model of TFIM engagement that challenges conventional distinctions between mediation tracks, as they carry out the functions of Track 1 actors without the titles, resources, or institutional backing. Their legitimacy allows them to fulfill the functions of formal actors in the absence of a functioning state.

Peace mediation process in Somalia. 2009.

STRATEGIC OPACITY IN NIGERIA'S P/CVE EFFORTS

In contrast to contexts where TFIMs secure formal roles in peace processes or step in where the state is absent, Nigeria offers another model: one of strategic opacity. Here, some TFIMs deliberately avoid visibility and institutional affiliation to ensure their safety and maintain access to volatile constituencies. In this case, influence unfolds through informal networks, cultural resonance, and carefully curated distance.

Nigeria's complex landscape of religious, ethnic, and political tensions has long fueled identity-based violence, from herder–farmer clashes to Boko Haram's insurgency. Religion is often politicized, instrumentalized by both violent actors and state authorities, making open engagement risky for those working on prevention or mediation. Against this backdrop, religious leaders affiliated with the Da'wah Institute and allied networks have pioneered a low-profile but highly targeted approach to preventing violent extremism.

Their method centers on narrative intervention. Through surveys and fieldwork in mosques and communities, they identified the persuasive frames used by recruiters to Boko Haram and used some of these former recruiters to deliver the messages, maximizing authenticity and resonance with the target audience:

> ***"You don't get a Christian or a Sufi trying to counter a Salafi. It doesn't matter how good your argument is, it's dead on arrival based on who you are. You need someone on the far right to challenge the extreme far right... Former recruiters, once convinced, became our best trainers."***
>
> ***–Male TFIM, Nigeria***

But this credibility came at a cost. To protect both the trainers and the broader initiative, the work had to remain invisible. If the state were seen to support former extremists, backlash could derail the entire effort. At the same time, any visible association with government actors would discredit the initiative in the eyes of vulnerable communities. TFIMs thus maintained strict boundaries: no state funding, no media coverage, no facilitator names shared with officials:

> ***"If the government knew you had anything to do with Boko Haram recruitment, you're in serious trouble. And if the community thought you're with the government, you're finished. We cannot receive government funding. We cannot bring facilitators to meetings with the state. It all has to be private. No media, no names."***
>
> ***–Male TFIM, Nigeria***

This strategic invisibility extended to every aspect of programme delivery. Trainings were never branded as counter-extremism. Instead, they used culturally resonant and ideologically neutral language: Unity in Diversity, Sharia Intelligence, Realistic Alternatives to Violence. Even donor logos were removed to preserve grassroots trust.

> ***"The name of the training programs says nothing about Boko Haram. It sounds vague on purpose. And we only work with people already willing to counter violence, those with security awareness, cultural sensitivity, and credibility in their communities."***
>
> ***–Male TFIM, Nigeria***

Though publicly invisible, these networks maintain discreet links with state actors. According to a TFIM interviewed for this study, government officials are aware of the work and at times provide quiet facilitation through operational space, protection, or simply non-interference. This relationship, while informal, constitutes a form of tacit Track 1.5 engagement, where TFIMs help stabilize national peace and security dynamics without being formally integrated into peace architectures.

This case illustrates how TFIMs in politically charged environments can exercise high stakes influence through strategic opacity, which becomes a protective and enabling condition preserving access, autonomy, and trust where formal engagement would be too risky. Similar to the Somali case, it highlights how informal, morally grounded actors often underwrite national stability from the margins, even when their contributions remain publicly invisible.

The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers' Regional Strategic Consultation. Abuja, Nigeria. 2025.

3.3 Platform Builders Across Tracks

In contexts where formal processes are narrow, elite-driven, or disconnected from public concerns, TFIMs often act as platform builders. They create spaces that link grassroots dialogue to national decision-making, bridging trust gaps between citizens and institutions. By convening diverse actors across mediation tracks, TFIMs expand who participates, what issues are discussed, and how legitimacy is built.

This subsection highlights two examples: the Ufungamano Initiative in Kenya, where an interfaith coalition created a nationally recognized alternative to state-led constitutional reform, and Ethiopia's National Dialogue, where TFIMs mobilized parallel consultations and agenda-setting platforms to challenge exclusion and broaden participation. Together, these cases show how TFIMs can broaden tightly controlled political processes, make them more inclusive, and strengthen the connective tissue between formal negotiations and public legitimacy.

THE UFUNGAMANO INITIATIVE AS A PARALLEL PLATFORM FOR CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

In Kenya, TFIMs have played transformative convening roles during moments of political transition. A defining example is the Ufungamano Initiative, where religious leaders helped transform public dissent into a structured national platform for reform.

Amid growing demand for constitutional change in the late 1990s, President Daniel Arap Moi's government sought to control the process through parliament, sidelining civic and religious actors. In defiance, a coalition of faith-based institutions and civil society groups launched the Ufungamano Initiative as an independent alternative. As one member recalled:

> *"At the end of the 1990s, Kenyans were agitating for the review of the constitution ... there was a difference of opinion between the political class led by the then-president ... who felt that the review process should be purely a political process. And we, as the religious leaders from the different faith communities in Kenya, who felt it should be a people-led process."*
>
> *–Sheikh Ibrahim Lethome, Kenya*

The Ufungamano brought together a diverse coalition that included the Inter-Religious Council of Kenya, the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCK), the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM), the Hindu Council of Kenya, professional associations, youth movements, and women's organizations. Religious leaders served as core conveners, using their institutional reach to organize public hearings, gather citizen input, and articulate shared demands for democratic reform. The interfaith approach and broad societal legitimacy of religious leaders in this process helped unify disparate voices and build pressure for genuine participation (Murigu, 2003).

By the early 2000s, the country had two parallel constitutional review processes, one launched by the parliament and the Ufungamano initiative led by religious leaders. Initially dismissed by the government, the Ufungamano process gained momentum through public backing and pressure from domestic and international allies. A negotiated merger eventually brought key Ufungamano representatives into the official constitutional review commission, thus translating a parallel grassroots initiative into formal Track 1 engagement.

"One thing that we discovered was that as religious leaders, if we come together, we could be able to push for an agenda ... So actually, through the Ufungamano initiative, it was realized for the first time in Kenya, the power of religious leaders in advocating for changes in this country."

–Sheikh Ibrahim Lethome, Kenya

Sheikh Ibrahim Lethome. Source: https://www.facebook.com/CounterTerrorismKenya/videos/sheikh-ibrahim-lethome-secretary-general-of-jihad-for-all-highlights-the-success/3862072584059176/. 2024.

The Ufungamano Initiative did more than shape the trajectory of the constitutional reform: it reconfigured the terrain of political engagement in Kenya. By convening diverse coalitions and holding space for citizen input, TFIMs disrupted elite monopolies and demonstrated the power of strategic platform-building in contested political spaces. Even without formal mandates, their actions forced recognition and ultimately helped embed broader public ownership in the reform process. The legacy of Ufungamano underscores how TFIMs can wield institutional and moral authority to influence political outcomes far beyond their traditional domains.

THE EIASC AS A CROSS-TRACK CONVENOR IN ETHIOPIA'S NATIONAL DIALOGUE

In Ethiopia, the role of the EIASC in the country's National Dialogue offers a compelling example of how TFIMs can act as cross-track convenors that mobilize community voices and generate structured inputs from below.

As discussed in Section 3.1, Ethiopia has experienced decades of violent conflict, political fragmentation, and eroded public trust. In response, the federal government launched a National Dialogue process in 2021, positioning it as an effort to rebuild national consensus and legitimacy (NDRS, 2021). While the initiative was welcomed in principle, it has drawn widespread criticism for its top-down structure, lack of transparency, and exclusion of key societal groups (Ashenafi & Deng, 2022; CARD, 2024).

A particularly pointed critique has been the failure to recognize religion as a distinct identity category in the Dialogue's participation framework. Rather than allocating seats for religious communities, the Commission grouped participants under broad labels like "teachers" or "community leaders," leaving faith-based concerns unaddressed.

Ethiopia's National Dialogue Commission. Source: https://issafrica.org/iss-today/ethiopia-s-national-dialogue-needs-time-and-an-interim-report#:~:text=The%20National%20Dialogue%20Commission%20(NDC)%20of%20Ethiopia,%20Inviting%20contributions%20from%20the%20Ethiopian%20diaspora. August 2025.*

"The Commission has not created a separate category for religious identity. So when Muslims want to talk about faith-based grievances, they have to channel them through other identities—like 'teacher' or 'community leader'."

–Male Muslim activist, Ethiopia

Concerned that Muslim perspectives would be sidelined, the EIASC launched its own parallel consultation process. Leveraging its national network, the EIASC convened internal deliberations to consolidate Muslim community priorities. This resulted in a structured nine-point agenda with 47 sub-items, addressing long-standing grievances around religious freedom, education, representation, and state discrimination.

This agenda was submitted directly to the National Dialogue Commission and followed by sustained engagement. The EIASC's proactive move not only secured an opening for Muslim voices within the process but also prompted other faith groups to organize their own platforms for participation:

"The Muslims were the first to really push. But once they did, we also saw space open for other denominations to bring our concerns."

–Male Catholic leader, Ethiopia

Recognizing both the need for grassroots preparation and the potential of faith-based outreach, the Dialogue Commission encouraged the EIASC to lead civic education efforts to engage more meaningfully with the National Dialogue process. As one EIASC representative explained,

"As soon as we submitted our agenda to the Commission, we were advised by them—and we also had the idea ourselves—that we should help our community understand the national dialogue process and prepare to participate meaningfully... So we trained about 100 or more people at the national level... then descended down to the regional level. We trained thousands of people on these nine agendas."

–Male EIASC representative, Ethiopia

The EIASC's role illustrates how TFIMs can act as cross-track conveners even in constrained or exclusionary settings. Without formal invitations, the Council built an autonomous platform that translated religious concerns into structured input for national deliberation. Through internal mobilization, strategic framing, and engagement with both grassroot communities and the national Commission, it created a mechanism for influencing the process from below.

While the ultimate trajectory of Ethiopia's National Dialogue remains uncertain, the EIASC's efforts show how TFIMs can reconfigure formal processes by expanding the range of actors and agendas involved.

3.4 Moral Brokers in Political Transitions

During moments of political transition, public trust often erodes and formal institutions struggle to maintain credibility. In such environments, TFIMs frequently serve as moral brokers: trusted figures who use moral authority and social standing to defuse tension and rebuild confidence in political institutions.

This subsection presents three cases that illustrate this role. In the Central African Republic, religious and traditional leaders are working to stabilize the pre-election climate through civic education and discreet mediation. In Tigray, Ethiopia, TFIMs have facilitated post-war reconciliation and reintegration following the Pretoria Agreement. A combined case from Nigeria and Cameroon highlights women TFIMs who act as moral brokers within polarized societies, shaping public narratives and civic engagement despite structural exclusion. Together, these examples show how TFIMs help anchor transitions in shared values and restore legitimacy where institutional trust is fragile.

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC (CAR): MORAL BROKERS IN CONTEXTS OF DEMOCRATIC FRAGILITY

A first example of moral brokerage comes from CAR, where religious and traditional leaders have emerged as actors who help frame the stakes of political processes in ways that de-escalate tensions and restore trust.

CAR has experienced decades of conflict driven by struggles over political power, control of natural resources, and deep-seated ethnic and religious divisions. Despite the signing of the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation (APPR) and the Bangui Peace Agreement in 2019, CAR remains deeply unstable. Political tensions intensified following the July 2023 constitutional referendum, which removed presidential term limits and extended the term from five to seven years. In the lead-up to the 2025 general elections, TFIMs have played a stabilizing role by encouraging peaceful civic behavior and framing the stakes of political processes in ways that de-escalate tensions and restore trust.

"Traditional and religious leaders have a greater role than political figures - because they are the ones who know the population. They are always close to the people. They understand their mentality and know how to keep things stable."

–Male religious actor, CAR

The Platform of Religious Confessions of the Central African Republic (PCRC) exemplifies this moral brokerage role. Founded in 2013 amid rising sectarian violence, the interfaith platform has evolved into a respected civic voice that quietly mediates political tensions while publicly promoting peaceful norms. It engages both national authorities and international actors, often acting as an informal diplomatic channel. As a Catholic youth leader explained:

"The PRCRC has played a crucial, very important role — recently and in the past (...) these mediations happen quietly, behind the scenes. It's a kind of lobbying."

–Male Catholic youth leader, CAR

During the 2023 constitutional referendum and into the current electoral cycle, PCRC leaders warned of growing exclusion and called for broader participation in dialogue. Their messaging underscored the dangers of marginalizing opposition groups, armed actors, and disillusioned youth, framing inclusion not just as political necessity but as a moral imperative.

"The government must open up to the opposition. Many people are excluded right now. As long as all layers of society are not brought together, we cannot go into elections and hope for a peaceful outcome."

–Female religious leader, CAR

The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers' and Finn Church Aid's National Consultative Workshop in Bangui, CAR. April 2025.

Traditional authorities likewise serve as frontline stabilizers. In collaboration with the National Elections Authority (ANE), local chiefs facilitate voter card distribution, monitor unrest, and redirect grievances toward legal mechanisms rather than violence. As one traditional leader described:

"Before the elections, our collaboration with the ANE involved helping distribute the voter cards (...) During the elections, we keep an eye out to see if there might be problems (...) After the elections, if people are unhappy, (...) our role is to continue informing people that if there are problems, they should go through legal and judicial channels to resolve them—not through violence."

–Traditional chief, CAR

Through such actions, TFIMs reframe civic duties like voting as peaceful, communal acts rather than flashpoints for violence. A traditional chief emphasized:

"An election is not a war (...) Religious and traditional leaders have this role of raising awareness, of informing, so that people understand the necessity of elections."

–Traditional chief, CAR

Their influence is especially salient in regions still affected by armed groups, where peace agreements remain fragile. There, traditional leaders help monitor local implementation and address grievances before they escalate. While often working outside formal Track 1 structures, TFIMs have maintained a steady presence in moments of national importance. Their contribution lies in their ability to help citizens interpret complex political moments through familiar moral frameworks. This soft power lends credibility to national processes and bolsters civic trust.

"It is actually the wish of the authorities that we work alongside them... If a fire breaks out, we are the ones ready to help."

–Male religious leader, CAR

In sum, the CAR case underscores the value of TFIMs as moral anchors that can offer critical support to political transitions in a context where the rule of law is contested, and legitimacy must be built from the ground up.

RELIGIOUS LEADERS AS POST-AGREEMENT STABILIZERS IN TIGRAY

A second example from Ethiopia's Tigray region illustrates the often-overlooked role of TFIMs as stabilizers in the critical period following a formal peace agreement. While most attention tends to focus on mediation leading up to elite-level deals, this case shows how TFIMs can be decisive in consolidating peace from below when formal mechanisms are fragile.

The armed conflict in Tigray, which began in 2020, resulted in massive displacement, widespread suffering, and deep institutional ruptures. The 2022 Pretoria Agreement between the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) formally ended hostilities, however, it did not resolve all underlying tensions. Frictions emerged between the TPLF and the newly appointed interim regional administration, threatening to undermine the agreement's implementation.

In this tense and uncertain setting, it was not formal peace infrastructure nor international envoys that proved most effective in holding the peace, but rather, the discreet, relational work of trusted religious leaders. According to a development partner supporting mediation efforts in the region:

> ***"I was in Tigray, talking to the Tigray interim administration, and what they were telling me is that thanks to the religious leaders, the conflict or the tensions that they had with TPLF were minimized ... we are supporting the mediation processes, and in the end, the one that works better is the dialogue with the religious leaders."***
>
> ***–Female international development partner, Ethiopia***

These religious mediators operated quietly, using their networks to engage both sides at a moment when political dialogue remained fragile, and formal mechanisms lacked trust. This example highlights how TFIMs can play stabilizing roles in moments of transition, sustaining fragile agreements by restoring interpersonal relations.

NIGERIA AND CAMEROON: WOMEN FAITH LEADERS EXPANDING ROLES AND LEGITIMACY IN MEDIATION

This final example shows how women faith-based mediators are reshaping expectations around who can lead peace efforts. Despite facing double levels of gender discrimination form both societal prejudices and the patriarchal nature of religious institutions, customs, and practices (Schraml and Vimalarajah (2023), these women are expanding the boundaries of leadership and anchoring peacebuilding in everyday religious and community life.

Globally, women remain vastly underrepresented in formal mediation roles. They make up less than 10 percent of negotiators and just under 14 percent of mediators (UN, 2023). In many African contexts, women of faith face even more barriers because their leadership is questioned in both religious and political spaces. Still, across the region women TFIMs are stepping into this gap and building trust where institutions have failed.

In Nigeria, for example, women mediators have played key roles in bridging deep divides between Christian and Muslim communities. One senior mediator shared that traditional rulers began to recognize the value of including women, saying that conflicts were being resolved faster and more effectively than before.

"Traditional rulers are saying, 'Oh, we actually missed a lot when we did not include women. Because women are at our tables, we are resolving conflict faster than it used to be.'"

– Elder Justina Mike Ngwobia, Nigeria

One powerful example comes from central Nigeria, where Christian farming communities and Muslim Fulani pastoralists were locked in cycles of violent retaliation. Women trained through the Women Mediators Across the Commonwealth (WMC) network led negotiations that resulted in a peace agreement later endorsed by local authorities.

"It is women now that are actually leading the mediation process... They agreed and had resolutions. And they agreed themselves that we will come back to the Bassa Local Government (...) where the resolution will be read out to everyone."

– Elder Justina Mike Ngwobia, Nigeria

Another initiative followed the 2010 Jos riots, where interreligious tensions flared after local elections. In response, women faith leaders formed interfaith platforms that trained young peacebuilders and organized outreach projects. Supported by the Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA) project, these efforts included murals painted by youth from different religious backgrounds, promoting shared identity and peace.

"They have created what we call Walls of Peace (...) It doesn't matter now whether it's a Christian or a Muslim. They all work together."

–Elder Justina Mike Ngwobia, Nigeria

Elder Justina Mike Ngwobia, Executive Director of Justice, Peace and Reconciliation Movement (JPRM) and founder of the WOPEN Initiative for Youth and Women Empowerment.

Meanwhile, in Cameroon, women religious leaders are building trust and influence in areas where formal authority has broken down due to protracted conflict between separatist forces and the state. In the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest regions, they have created local peace committees and community protection systems, often in areas where the government is absent or mistrusted. These committees help mediate disputes, monitor tensions, and provide essential services.

"We created community-based protection systems with people that were elected by their communities to represent them in addressing issues that concern their communities."

– Laura Anyola Tyfon, Cameroon

Research by Schraml and Vimalarajah (2023) notes that women faith-based mediators gain legitimacy through sustained community presence and moral authority. In many cases, they are seen as more trustworthy and less politically compromised than their male counterparts. This reputation has helped them access spaces and actors that are closed to others, especially in politically sensitive or high-risk areas. Many also work closely with male allies in religious institutions to shift mindsets and transform patriarchal systems from within.

Together, the cases from Nigeria and Cameroon highlight how women TFIMs are not only building peace but also changing assumptions about who has the legitimacy to do so. Their ability to connect across religious divides, gain trust, and mobilize communities shows why their leadership is essential, especially in places where formal peace efforts tend to overlook or exclude women. In fragile and divided contexts, their work is a foundation for lasting, inclusive peace.

3.5 Synthesis: How TFIMs Contribute and What Shapes Their Effectiveness

The cases presented in this section illustrate the diverse and often underrecognized ways in which TFIMs contribute to peace and political processes. While their roles vary widely by context, four broad modalities emerged: participation in formal mediation structures, backchannel and informal diplomacy, convening cross-track dialogue platforms, and reshaping social expectations during political transitions. Across them, TFIMs often navigate multiple roles and tracks simultaneously.

What unites these cases is the central insight that TFIMs are already playing essential roles, whether formally recognized or not. In some settings, their contributions complement formal mediation by expanding its reach, legitimacy, or inclusivity. In others, TFIMs substitute for absent or stalled official processes, creating spaces for dialogue where none exist. Across cases, their efforts often sustain a form of continuity in fragile or fragmented mediation landscapes.

Table 2 Key takeaways from the TFIM case studies

Case	TFIM Role	Key Contributions	What the Case Demonstrates
Mozambique – Bishop Sengulane and CCM	Recognized Track 1 mediator and grassroots convener	Quiet diplomacy, national mobilization, "Transforming Arms into Tools" campaign	TFIMs as central actors bridging elite negotiations with grassroots legitimacy
South Sudan – SSCC in R-ARCSS & Tumaini	Institutionally embedded mediator	Formal oversight roles, behind-the-scenes diplomacy	TFIMs with sustained formal recognition and multi-level influence across political divides
Ethiopia – Somali–Afar Mediation	Informal Track 1.5 mediator	Brokered regional peace with tacit government support	TFIMs stepping into elite-level gaps through local legitimacy and non-state brokerage
Somalia – National Stabilization	Vacuum-fillers and moral interlocutors	Maintained inter-clan dialogue, bridged civic-state divides	TFIMs occupying political vacuums and legitimizing informal peace structures

Case	TFIM Role	Key Contributions	What the Case Demonstrates
Nigeria – Da'wah Institute & Faith Networks in P/CVE	Strategically opaque mediators	Quiet diplomacy, counter-narratives, discreet state engagement	TFIMs leveraging ambiguity to mediate sensitively in volatile and securitized spaces
Kenya – Ufungamano Initiative	Parallel platform convener and moral challenger	Citizen-led hearings, interfaith-civic coalitions, constitutional reform proposals	TFIMs as conveners of alternative platforms that challenge and redirect political trajectories
Ethiopia – EIASC and National Dialogue Agenda	Agenda-setter and civic mobilizer	Channeled community concerns into national dialogue process	TFIMs shaping inclusion pathways from below in contexts of formal exclusion
CAR – PRCRC and Traditional Leaders in Elections	Electoral stabilizers and moral authorities	Civic education, hate speech prevention, informal mediation	TFIMs reinforcing democratic legitimacy through culturally grounded civic engagement
Ethiopia – Tigray Post-War Mediation	Post-agreement confidence builders	Quiet mediation between interim authorities and TPLF	TFIMs sustaining fragile transitions by building trust where formal mechanisms lack credibility
Nigeria & Cameroon – Women TFIMs in Securitized and Patriarchal Spaces	Community mobilizers, quiet mediators	Discreet engagement in reform processes, interfaith youth initiatives, preventing escalation	Women TFIMs navigating dual gendered and political exclusion to influence peace and reform through informal channels

The examples mapped in this section provide a foundation for the rest of the report. Section 4 interrogates the political economy of inclusion and why TFIM roles remain marginal, fragmented, or conditional. The analysis shifts from the TFIMs themselves to the political, institutional, and normative environments that shape whether, how, and on what terms they are able to engage. Section 5 then builds on these contributions, showing how their existing roles can serve as entry points for more strategic engagement.

4. Structures of Exclusion: How Power, Politics and Institutions Shape TFIM Marginalization

The cases in Section 3 showcased the various roles TFIMs can and do play in peace and political processes. However, across these cases, their engagement has often been the result of claiming space rather than being formally invited or supported by institutional mechanisms.

This section addresses Research Question 2 by examining the structural, political, and institutional factors that constrain TFIM participation. Applying a political economy lens, it investigates how authority, legitimacy, and access are negotiated and contested, and how these dynamics shape who has access to formal spaces.

The analysis is structured around five intersecting barriers: (4.1) gatekeeping and elite control over peace architectures; (4.2) tokenistic or symbolic inclusion without decision-making power; (4.3) co-optation and loss of autonomy; (4.4) operational insecurity and lack of institutional support; and (4.5) intersectional exclusions based on gender, age, and identity.

The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers' Regional Strategic Consultation. Abuja, Nigeria. 2024.

4.1 Gatekeeping and the Control of Peace Architecture

Formal peace and political processes are shaped by gatekeeping dynamics that determine who is deemed legitimate to participate. This section argues that such gatekeeping reinforces existing power hierarchies, systematically constraining the inclusion of TFIMs.

Decisions about access are not merely technical, they are deeply political acts. Who gets to sit at the table is tightly regulated, often through formal selection procedures or more subtle criteria that define what counts as neutrality, legitimacy, or professionalism. For TFIMs, exclusion rarely stems from a lack of influence or credibility but from mismatched norms: their embeddedness in communities, faith-based authority, or customary roles can be seen as too political, too informal, or incompatible with the institutional logic of formal processes.

The experience of faith-based peacebuilders in Cameroon illustrates this dynamic. In the conflict-affected Anglophone regions, religious actors have sought to initiate dialogue and mediation efforts amid ongoing violence and political repression. However, a faith-based mediator involved in these efforts described how centralized bureaucratic control effectively blocked any initiative not explicitly sanctioned by the executive:

> ***"The country has been set up in a way where everything comes from the capital... within this [Anglophone] crisis, they set up special statutes for the two regions. But then you still have the governor, appointed by the executive, who oversees everything. If he does not authorize, how do you go ahead?"***
>
> ***–Laura Anyola Tyfon, Cameroon***

Group work with Catholic Women Organization as Faith Mediators in Bamenda 2018. Women Faith-Based Mediators in Cameroon. https://www.peacemakersnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Cameroon-WFBM-study.pdf.

In this context, even modest attempts to convene dialogue must pass through highly centralized and politicized approval channels. Gatekeeping here operates here through outright exclusion, where actors are unable to act independently without risking state obstruction or reprisal. This underscores how the architecture of state control can limit not only formal participation but also informal or preventive efforts that fall outside sanctioned structures.

Gatekeeping can also take more subtle forms. In Ethiopia, for example, one interfaith platform described how they were excluded from a recent high-level dialogue event, while they claimed another more state-aligned body working in the same space was invited. A member explained:

> ***"The [other platform] is under the government, you know. It's run by the government ... And when the government wants to engage faith communities, they then do it through that platform...Because the government will have the upper hand ... There was recently a dialogue meeting about how peace can be ensured, with actors from around the world. Yet, the government didn't invite us."***
>
> ***–Female member, Ethiopia***

Here, inclusion was not absent, but rather, curated. Religious actors perceived as politically compliant were recognized by the government and invited to the event, while more independent voices were sidelined. This type of selective empowerment undermines the diversity and credibility of faith-based engagement and limits the ability of TFIMs to raise critical or community-specific concerns.

Gatekeeping may also be exercised through control over operational permissions. In Kenya, a TFIM network engaged in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) described how reliance on approvals from the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) would cause delays or disruptions to their programming:

> ***"In Kenya, any activity to do with P/CVE has to be coordinated by the NCTC ... And that comes with a lot of challenges, because sometimes we'd want to sustain certain programmes, but we have to wait until we are able to get the resources ... We have to keep on waiting for somebody to appreciate our work, then come in and support our projects."***
>
> ***–Sheikh Ibrahim Lethome, Kenya***

Although not a formal Track 1 setting, this example highlights how operational dependency on state agencies, even while framed as coordination, can restrict the agency and responsiveness of TFIM networks. Such bottlenecks can create misalignment between community needs and program implementation.

Finally, international actors can also act as gatekeepers, often unintentionally so. Donor ecosystems tend to privilege professionalized civil society actors with legal registration, financial systems, and results-based reporting. As others have noted (Mubashir & Vimalarajah, 2016; Schraml & Vimalarajah, 2023), this creates a structural bias against TFIMs, who may operate through informal networks, oral traditions, or religious norms that resist bureaucratic codification.

The examples in this section show that gatekeeping takes many forms, ranging from outright exclusion to more subtle forms of sidelining. Yet in all cases, gatekeeping functions as a key mechanism through which power is reproduced by filtering participation and privileging certain actors over others. Understanding gatekeeping dynamics is therefore essential for diagnosing the structural roots of TFIM marginalization. It also helps explain why many TFIMs choose to work through informal channels or develop parallel mechanisms of influence.

Women faith-based mediators consultation during the National Dialogue Conference in Helsinki, Finland. 2022.

4.2 Tokenism and Symbolic Inclusion

Tokenistic participation allows peace and political processes to project inclusivity without meaningfully redistributing influence. In many cases, TFIMs are present, but in highly curated ways that confine their roles to the symbolic margins. Religious or traditional leaders may be invited to open ceremonies with prayers, offer moral guidance, or appear on public platforms, yet their inclusion rarely extends to the spaces where agendas are set or decisions are made. Such symbolic inclusion serves to legitimize processes in the eyes of communities while simultaneously maintaining elite control over substantive outcomes.

This dynamic was visible in Ethiopia's National Dialogue process. At the 2022 launch event, prominent faith leaders were invited to offer prayers and invoke messages of unity across religious lines. Yet multiple informants emphasized that this ceremonial role did not translate into any structural influence over the design or decision-making surrounding the National Dialogue process:

> ***"They were invited to open the sessions with prayers... But when it came to choosing agendas or deciding who sits at the table, the religious sector was not structurally accounted for."***
>
> ***–Male religious leader, Ethiopia***

The consultative process for the Dialogue included agenda-setting sessions at local and regional levels. In order to select participants, the Commission classified Ethiopians into nine identity categories, which included teachers, community leaders, public servants, and others. Religion/religious identity was not one of them. As a result, even where religious leaders or faith-based organizations were present, they had to speak through other labels — like "teacher" or "community leader". The implications were that faith-based concerns got diluted or sidelined, as the following quote illustrates:

> ***"In our group, I raised an issue that directly affects Muslim students — that girls are not allowed to wear hijab during national exams. But people in the group said that's not a national agenda. It was dismissed, like it's a personal concern or local matter. So even though we're invited, some of our issues are not seen as important enough to be on the table."***
>
> ***–Female Muslim youth leader, Ethiopia***

As noted in Section 3.3, some TFIMs responded to this marginalization by establishing parallel deliberation spaces, where they could consolidate faith-based agendas and push for recognition. However, not all actors have the capacity, access, or political space to organize such alternatives.

Tokenistic inclusion carries several risks. When TFIMs are publicly associated with state-led peace processes they cannot meaningfully influence, they may appear complicit in decisions that do not reflect their communities' needs or concerns. If such processes fail, or are perceived as elite-driven or exclusionary, TFIMs can face reputational costs.

This dilemma places TFIMs in a precarious position. Engaging symbolically may preserve relationships and allow for indirect influence, yet it can also entrench their exclusion if ceremonial roles become a substitute for structural participation. Conversely, refusing to engage risks being shut out entirely, with little ability to shape outcomes or advocate for community priorities.

The next section examines how tokenism may slide into co-optation, when TFIMs are not only sidelined but also instrumentalized to advance dominant narratives, sometimes at the cost of their autonomy and long-term credibility.

Women Faith Based Mediators Training. Accra, Ghana. 2024

4.3 Co-Optation and Erosion of Autonomy

Co-optation functions as a containment strategy that offers inclusion while undermining autonomy. Unlike outright exclusion or tokenistic participation, co-optation draws TFIMs into peace processes on terms that ultimately serve elite or political interests. This selective empowerment blunts their critical voice and constrains independent action, an effect well-documented in peacebuilding literature (Pouligny, 2005; Bell & Pospisil, 2017).

For TFIMs, this is a particularly precarious dynamic. Their influence depends not on formal authority but on public trust and credibility. When those qualities are compromised through partisan alignment or entanglement with external interests, their legitimacy erodes.

An illustration of this dynamic was recounted by an informant from CAR, where religious and traditional leaders have long played frontline roles in peacebuilding and electoral preparedness. He underlined that religious leaders "should not publicly show affiliation with a political party", as that compromises their ability to act as neutral. However, he described how this boundary is increasingly breached:

"Nowadays, there are religious leaders who are with the MCU [the ruling party] who clearly belong to that party, and it's visible to everyone. Recently, on the occasion of the 9th anniversary of the ruling party, imams and pastors were invited to attend and offer prayers. I was among those invited. When I realized it was a purely political event, I refused to go. But others went, because they had an interest in doing so."

–Male Muslim leader, CAR

Even when the intentions of religious leaders are principled, public perception matters deeply. In fragile contexts, the appearance of political alignment can cast suspicion on their efforts and weaken their ability to mediate impartially. As one traditional leader explained:

"When a traditional or religious leader is biased, it causes a problem ... That's why these leaders must remain neutral. This allows them to do their work as mediators and inform the population. Because when they speak, people listen. But if they are partisan, people tend to ignore them and they won't really fulfill their role."

–Male traditional leader, CAR

The same dynamic was echoed in South Sudan, where a TFIM reflected on how proximity to political leadership corrodes the moral authority that underpins their work:

"We, as religious leaders and traditional leaders, we need to be this moral voice so that we can be respected. And here is the thing, at times, we let ourselves be compromised by political leaders and in that regard we lose that respect, we lose the moral ground."

–Male TFIM, South Sudan

While these examples illustrate the risks of political co-optation, similar concerns arise when religious or traditional leaders are drawn into relationships of material dependence. One peace actor in Nigeria described how political actors strategically offer large financial contributions to religious institutions, compromising their independence:

"Challenge number one, there's always been efforts to compromise religious leaders. Mostly for religious leaders that accommodate politicians in their institutions with huge donations, and we feel that this compromises the religious leaders, and they will not be able to talk objectively."

–Male TFIM, Nigeria

Co-optation grants access but simultaneously erodes the independence and credibility that constitute TFIMs' unique leverage. Their role is inherently precarious: positioned close enough to power to exert influence, yet reliant on community trust for legitimacy. Sustaining this balance requires clear boundaries, principled positioning, and often difficult choices about when and how to engage.

The next section explores how such challenges are compounded by operational constraints ranging from security risks to limited recognition and resource scarcity that further complicate TFIMs' engagement in high-level processes.

4.4 Operational Risks and Lack of Support

Operational precarity severely constrains the ability of TFIMs to engage meaningfully in peace and political processes. Their work often unfolds amid physical threats, political retaliation, reputational risks, and acute resource scarcity. These conditions are further intensified by the absence of formal recognition or institutional protection (Schraml & Vimalarajah, 2023; Bramble et al., 2023). Such vulnerabilities not only curtail the scope and consistency of TFIM engagement but also expose mediators themselves to significant personal danger and systemic neglect, undermining the sustainability of their contributions.

DIRECT SECURITY RISKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

For TFIMs, the same embeddedness that grants access to conflict dynamics also heightens their exposure to violence. Operating in volatile environments, their frontline role seldom comes with the protection, mandates, or resources afforded to state or international actors. When violence erupts or peace efforts falter, they often bear disproportionate personal risk.

A vivid example comes from Mozambique, where Bishop Dinis Sengulane, long respected for his role in the original FRELIMO–RENAMO peace process, was drawn into a dangerous confrontation during renewed tensions in the mid-2010s. RENAMO's leader had agreed to surrender weapons and requested that Sengulane and other religious leaders oversee the handover. They accepted, but the planned peaceful surrender turned into a volatile standoff when government troops suddenly intervened.

Sengulane was able to mediate between the parties and defuse the situation. Although the situation was resolved, Sengulane's impartiality was later questioned, triggering threats against him:

> *"They were furious. They said that we sold Dhlakama [the RENAMO leader] ... There was a threat from RENAMO that Dinis Sengulane would never put his feet in the sand again."*
>
> *–Bishop Sengulane, Mozambique*

In Somalia, traditional elders engaging in local dispute resolution efforts have faced similar risks. One informant described how elders are often asked to respond to violent crime in areas where state security forces are absent or ineffective, at great personal risk:

"Sometimes, violent crimes are committed by a group of youngsters, or of criminals ... and the security sector doesn'tknow how to respond. Elders try to step in to deal with them, but they don't have the tools to deal with organized criminal groups ... And some have been executed and killed, ... also humiliated for trying to intervene."

–Abdisalam Ahmed, Somalia

These accounts underscore the asymmetric burden placed on TFIMs. They are often expected to be the first to respond to crises, but with limited tools, resources, or protection. When outcomes are contested, they can be scapegoated by either side, jeopardizing both their physical safety and public standing.

POLITICAL BACKLASH AND REPUTATIONAL RISK

TFIMs' moral authority can be both their greatest asset and their most serious liability. In repressive or highly politicized environments, TFIMs risk being targeted not only for their actions but for what they symbolically represent, especially when their work is perceived as critical of the state or aligned with external agendas. As an example, a female peace activist in South Sudan recounted how she was targeted after speaking at a women-led peace conference:

"I preached on that verse of Matthew chapter 5 verse 9 [Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God] ... After two days, I was followed into my house ... they started pushing me and said I have to go with them to their office ... They say I'm dividing people and the message that I preach, I insulted the government." –Female TFIM, South Sudan

She was detained for three days and subjected to verbal and physical abuse. Even after her release, she remained under surveillance.

A similar dynamic was reported in Cameroon, where women-led initiatives that emerged in response to the Anglophone crisis were rapidly shut down or forced into exile:

"Since the conflict began... many women-led organizations popped up. And most of them were silenced. They are out of the country as refugees, as asylum seekers... When you build such capacity and don't engage in protection, all those efforts go in vain."

–Laura Anyola Tyfon, Cameroon

These examples underscore that without legal protections or institutional recognition, TFIMs can be easily targeted. Their grassroots visibility makes them influential, but also vulnerable. As we return to in section 4.5, this vulnerability is often gendered: women TFIMs may face compounded risks, including gender-based violence, social sanction, or exclusion, simply for occupying public religious or political space.

RESOURCING CONSTRAINTS AND DONOR CONDITIONALITIES

Chronic underfunding reinforces the structural exclusion of TFIMs from formal peace architectures. Operating without sustained financial support, many mediators struggle to sustain or scale their work. As discussed in Section 4.1, donor systems often privilege formal organizations with established infrastructure and standardized reporting frameworks, placing many TFIMs at a disadvantage.

The consequences of this disconnect are clear in practice. A Kenyan TFIM working on the reintegration of returnees from extremist groups described how donor-driven approaches often clash with local realities:

> ***"We've seen challenges with funding that comes with conditionalities. We know that some donors ... would want to very quickly maybe come up with socioeconomic programmes to support the returnees, and sometimes we would feel that the approach is not okay ... 'Listen to us, we have been with these people'. Some [donors] want to tick boxes, but we don't want to tick boxes. We want interventions that actually are effective."***
>
> ***–Sheikh Ibrahim Lethome, Kenya***

Even when funding is secured, visibility requirements can create reputational and political risks in sensitive or repressive contexts. Public association with foreign donors may erode community trust or invite government scrutiny, yet donors often insist on visible branding. As one Nigerian TFIM explained:

> ***"We have to be clear; this is off the record... But many [donors], they just can't accept that their logo will not show....Public media display with donors is a kiss of death."***
>
> ***–Male TFIM, Nigeria***

TFIM's contributions often remain illegible to systems built around project cycles, visibility metrics, and linear reporting. Viewed through a political economy lens, such operational vulnerabilities reflect deeper systemic biases that leave TFIMs structurally sidelined.

The next section explores how these constraints intersect with gender, age, and identity to shape who is recognized and supported, and who is overlooked or silenced.

4.5 Intersectional Barriers: Gender, Age, and Social Norms

Legitimacy in peace processes is socially coded through gendered, generational, and institutional norms that privilege senior, male, and formally affiliated actors. These intersecting exclusions stem not only from patriarchal or gerontocratic traditions within religious and customary systems, but also from systemic dynamics within broader peace processes, donor frameworks, and political institutions.

GENDERED EXCLUSIONS

Women TFIMs often lead transformative work in mediation, trauma healing, and civic dialogue, yet remain symbolically included or entirely absent from high-level forums (UN Women, 2021; Schraml & Vimalarajah, 2023; Schirch, 2020). These exclusions are not simply gendered, but compounded by overlapping identity markers such as age, religious affiliation, ethnicity, geography, and socioeconomic status, which together shape visibility and access. As one female faith-based leader from CAR explained:

"There's the issue of structure and how women's lives are viewed, often affected by a sort of male superiority complex ... it becomes a problem, if she wants to assert herself or take a position. I believe these are the kinds of obstacles I personally encounter often."

–Female faith-based leader, CAR

Male allies within mediation spaces also highlight the imbalance. A Somali TFIM emphasized that women mediators often achieve breakthroughs at the grassroots yet remain unacknowledged:

"When women mediators intervene, half the battle is already won. ... But this work is not recognized. Women mediators need to be recognized, to be empowered, and to get training and tools to work."

–Abdisalaam Ahmed, Somalia

Other informants in this study highlighted tokenistic forms of inclusion. For example, a female TFIM in Cameroon recounted how women were invited to the country's National Dialogue in 2019 but sidelined from real decision-making:

"In 2019, when they convened the Grand National Dialogue for Cameroon, women were invited to be part of the conference. But it was just for the opening session. So for the real discussions, women were left out. Women are brought into whatever concerns peace as a second thought."

– Laura Anyola Tyfon, Cameroon

Similarly, in Ethiopia, formal mechanisms to ensure women's participation often remain performative when underlying patriarchal norms go unaddressed. In reference to the country's ongoing National Dialogue:

"There were mechanisms outlined on paper to ensure women's participation, and the commissioners were highly encouraging of women's engagement. But in practice ... we tend to include women symbolically, rather than truly engage them ... Even though the environment was good, the process is still embedded in a patriarchal culture."

–Female CSO, activist, Ethiopia

GENERATIONAL BARRIERS

Youth TFIMs face parallel dynamics of exclusion. While youth-led initiatives ranging from digital peace campaigns to local mediation councils are gaining traction across the continent, youth's presence in national mediation structures is limited. This gap is striking given that young people often constitute the majority of the population and are disproportionately affected by conflict. As a youth representative to the Tumaini Talks in Kenya reflected on this:

"I'm the only youth representative in the process, unfortunately, although we have tried to say ... in fact, our numbers should be more ... But the mediation has been hesitant to accept that."

–Male youth representative, South Sudan

These exclusions are not only structural, but often also internalized. Deep-seated social norms cast women and youth as supporters rather than leaders, often leading to self-censorship, diminished confidence, and limited opportunity. Meaningful inclusion, therefore, cannot be reduced to quotas or symbolic gestures; it requires reimagining how legitimacy and authority are defined within mediation architectures, religious institutions, and donor systems alike.

4.6 Synthesis: Understanding the "Rules of the Game"

This section has unpacked five interlocking barriers that constrain the participation of TFIMs in formal peace and political processes. Viewed through a political economy lens, these barriers reflect the "rules of the game" that determine who holds authority, how legitimacy is defined, and whose interests peace architectures ultimately serve. The exclusion of TFIMs is therefore not the result of oversight or capacity gaps, but of incentive structures that privilege formal actors, elite norms, and externally imposed models of mediation.

Across the five barriers, a layered picture emerges. At the macro level, governments and donors control access to mediation spaces through opaque and often politicized criteria. At the meso level, institutional designs and funding modalities reward alignment with technocratic and professionalized forms of mediation, marginalizing relational and community-rooted approaches. At the micro level, TFIMs face overlapping risks—from insecurity and reputational damage to resource scarcity and social exclusion—that limit their ability to sustain or scale their influence. These dynamics interact and reinforce one another, constraining the ability of TFIMs to scale their contributions or sustain influence across mediation tracks.

Table 3: Summary of barriers to TFIM participation

Barrier	Description	Manifestations
Gatekeeping	Elite control of peace architectures limits TFIMs access unless strategically aligned with power holders.	Restricted invitations; exclusion from core discussions; donor preference for professionalized actors.
Tokenism and Symbolic Inclusion	TFIMs are invited for public rituals or moral endorsement which creates appearance of diversity without granting access to real decision-making power.	Opening ceremonies without follow-up roles; lack of coordination mechanisms; minimal agenda influence.
Co-optation and Loss of Autonomy	TFIMs are selectively empowered in ways that undermine their independence and critical voice.	Pressure to align with political or donor narratives; compromised neutrality through funding.
Operational Vulnerabilities	Lack of security, funding, and formal recognition exposes TFIMs to personal and operational risk.	Threats, arrests, and violence; funding inaccessibility.
Intersectional Barriers	Women and youth face compounded exclusion due to gender, age, and social norms.	Absence from formal negotiations; symbolic inclusion; internalized marginalization.

Importantly, TFIM engagement is not binary. It occurs along a continuum from symbolic inclusion to structural participation, with many mediators exercising influence in the grey zones between formal recognition and informal legitimacy. While their ability to navigate these spaces demonstrates significant political agility, resilience cannot substitute for reform.

Without deliberate efforts to reshape the underlying incentives, norms, and institutional designs that regulate access to mediation power, TFIM contributions will remain precarious and underleveraged. The next section turns to these reform possibilities.

Participants at the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers' consultative workshop on peaceful elections in Juba, South Sudan. 2024.

5. What Makes Strategic TFIM Engagement Possible: Enabling Conditions

Transforming TFIM engagement from ad hoc to strategic requires shifting the incentive structures and institutional logics that govern inclusion in peace processes. As section 3 showed, TFIMs operate in vastly different contexts and engage in peace and political processes in varied ways. Yet, as Section 4 highlighted, such engagements are often constrained by structural, political, and normative barriers that hinder meaningful participation.

This section addresses Research Question 3, identifying the enabling conditions that can move TFIM participation beyond symbolic inclusion toward structural integration, drawing on what has worked in the empirical cases discussed earlier in the report. Section 5.1 examines how TFIMs can be embedded in peace infrastructures through roles or mandates that reflect their distinct legitimacy and positioning. Section 5.2 considers the role of liaison bodies and coordination platforms in facilitating more structured engagement across tracks. Section 5.3 examines how capacity support can be designed to strengthen TFIMs. Finally, Section 5.4 outlines the institutional, legal, and financial protections that are essential for TFIMs to engage safely and for that engagement to be sustained over time.

Traditional actor consultation in Oman. 2024

5.1 Embedding TFIMs in Peace Architectures

Embedding TFIMs meaningfully in peace architectures requires rethinking how legitimacy is defined and whose authority is recognized. In many peace and political processes, participation is framed through institutional representation through political parties, formal civil society, and technical experts. Actors like TFIMs, whose authority derives from religious, customary, or community-based legitimacy, often fall outside these categories. Their inclusion is typically ad hoc or dependent on elite discretion rather than institutional design.

From a political economy perspective, this exclusion reflects how power is organized and reproduced within peace processes. Yet, as several cases in this report show, when systems are made to recognize plural sources of legitimacy, TFIMs can reshape both process and outcome.

Kenya's constitutional reform process illustrates this dynamic. As discussed in Section 3.3, religious and civil society coalitions launched the Ufungamano Initiative after rejecting a top-down constitutional review process in the early 2000s. Through sustained public mobilization, they pressured the government to merge the two processes, ultimately securing formal representation and influencing the design of the new Constitutional Review Commission. Their engagement ensured that the 2010 Constitution formally recognized traditional justice systems (Article 159(2)(c)), an institutional shift that embedded community-based legitimacy within the national legal framework.

A similar example can be seen in CAR, where the 2023 constitutional reform established a Chamber of Traditional Chiefs as a permanent consultative body. While still early in its implementation, this type of structural recognition can help ground political processes in culturally meaningful ways.

These cases underscore that embedding TFIMs is not about symbolic presence but redesigning process architecture to accommodate different modes of authority. Where national forums are rigidly elite-driven or donor-templated, TFIMs' relational and context-specific ways of working often clash with formal procedures. As one South Sudanese expert cautioned,

> ***"I really believe that [traditional leaders] are disempowered the moment you bring them into the national forum. ...We really need to find ways of taking the center of gravity to the rural areas where the chiefs are empowered and where they really can have some input."***
>
> ***–Male peacebuilding expert, South Sudan***

Similarly, a Cameroonian peace actor described how a well-intentioned effort by an international peacebuilding organization to involve religious leaders fell flat because it demanded that senior religious leaders attend six-day workshops every quarter—“inconceivable,” she said, for actors embedded in pastoral and community life.

Such examples reveal that embedding TFIMs requires adjusting the way processes are typically structured and run. This means designing processes that are flexible in how they hold meetings, make decisions, and engage with communities to aligning more closely with the relational and context-driven ways TFIMs operate. Such a shift is not merely technical, but rather, a political act that redistributes influence. When designed intentionally, such inclusion enhances legitimacy, deepens social buy-in, and strengthens the sustainability of political settlements.

Consultation and prayer meeting with the delegates to the Tumaini Initiative, South Sudan Peace negotiations in Kenya. 2024.

5.2 Creating Coordination Mechanisms that Bridge Divides

TFIMs' ability to influence peace and political processes depends not only on whether they are invited in, but on whether mechanisms exist to sustain their engagement. Without structured coordination, participation tends to be ad hoc or limited to ceremonial openings, as seen in Section 4.2. Platforms such as liaison bodies, interfaith councils, and multi-stakeholder forums can help transform sporadic involvement into sustained, strategic influence.

These mechanisms function as connective tissue in fragmented peace ecosystems. They create predictable channels for TFIMs to engage with governments, civil society, and international actors. From a multi-track peacebuilding perspective, they enable what John Paul Lederach (1997) described as vertical integration between elite negotiations, civil society initiativesand community-based mediation. While TFIMs often move fluidly across these tracks, their bridging potential only becomes effective when supported by structured, long-term coordination. Several examples from the case material exemplify this potential.

In South Sudan, the SSCC has served as a trusted liaison body throughout cycles of conflict and negotiation. Through quiet diplomacy and consistent relationship-building, it has maintained access to both government and opposition actors. Its credibility stems from presence and persistence, qualities that formal coordination helps sustain over time. Women's faith networks have complemented this work, creating spaces where community, church, and government actors interact regularly. As one participant explained:

> ***"...It built a bridge between the women of faith and the women from the community and the woman from the government. Now we have that linkage... it bridges that gap, it's no longer there. Now we can talk with the government top leadership.... the door is open for us."***
>
> ***–Female member of women's faith network, South Sudan***

In Mozambique, during the post-war transition of the 1990s, the People's Preparation for Peace campaign led by Bishop Dinis Sengulane and the CCM performed a similar bridging role. While formal negotiations unfolded in Rome, the CCM mobilized nationwide consultations to prepare communities for peace and channel local concerns into the national dialogue. This process inspired the Transforming Weapons into Art project and helped ensure that elite-level negotiations were informed by community realities.

In Kenya, interfaith coordination has taken a more formalized shape. Bodies like the Interreligious Council of Kenya and the Ufungamano Initiative have created durable platforms for engagement across electoral cycles and constitutional reform efforts. By maintaining structured dialogue with state actors and surfacing local grievances, they have become durable hubs for accountability and civic engagement.

What makes these platforms effective is not simply their convening power but their ability to translate between systems. When well-designed, they create space for joint strategizing, peer learning, and shared problem-solving, aligning the relational and spiritual ethics of TFIMs with the procedural expectations of formal mediation.

From a political economy perspective, coordination mechanisms offer a politically feasible route to inclusion. They expand the circle of legitimate actors without necessarily threatening elite control, while increasing the system's capacity to absorb feedback, course-correct, and sustain legitimacy over time. They need not always be formalized by law, but they do require continuity, mandate, resourcing, and accountability.

The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers' Regional Strategic Consultation. Abuja, Nigeria. 2025.

5.3 Building Capacity Without Undermining Legitimacy

Strengthening TFIM capacity is vital, but only if it reinforces the legitimacy that makes them effective. As discussed in Sections 4.3 and 4.5, TFIMs are often excluded from formal mediation on the grounds that they lack the "technical" skills required for negotiation or policy influence. This perceived skills gap is used either intentionally or unintentionally to justify marginalization, and capacity-building is frequently proposed as the solution. However, it is too often designed through external templates that do not do justice to the values, relationships, and knowledge systems that underpin TFIM authority.

Previous research has cautioned that international actors tend to approach insider mediation with normative overreach, attempting to retrofit TFIMs into professionalized models that do not reflect their ethos or methods (Hellmüller, 2013; Millar, 2018). The goal should not be to turn TFIMs into Track 1 professionals, but to strengthen their voice and effectiveness while protecting their social and moral grounding.

This challenge is particularly acute for women and youth TFIMs, who often lead reconciliation and trauma healing efforts at the community level while they remain invisible or undervalued in national structures. A Cameroonian peacemaker reflected on the challenge of making women's efforts "legible" to external actors:

> ***"Women are resourceful, but it remains a challenge how to package it ... in a way that makes sense to the Western world .... If they could be trained on how to package their resources well, they would be impactful."***
>
> ***– Laura Anyola Tyfon, Cameroon***

Some examples demonstrate how capacity enhancement can strengthen, not dilute, legitimacy. In southern Ethiopia, local organizations have supported traditional mediators such as the Hadis (mother figures) and Abagadhas (father figures) through training in mediation, advocacy, and communication. These efforts aim to complement their culturally grounded authority with relevant skills, enhancing voice without imposing external logic.

> ***"We work to empower the Hadis through training in mediation, advocacy, and communication .... we're supporting them with formal tools so they can continue to serve their communities in modern contexts."***
>
> ***–Female CSO activist, Ethiopia***

Peer learning emerged across interviews as another underdeveloped but powerful form of support. TFIMs from Somalia, Nigeria, CAR, and Cameroon highlighted the value of horizontal, cross-country exchange and intergenerational mentorship to build confidence, solidarity, and strategic awareness:

> ***"We need exposure to international methods, to learn what is going on in the world.... How others solve their conflicts, including mechanisms like arbitration or other traditional systems. Learning from the world would help us adapt."***
>
> ***– Abdisalaam Ahmed, Somalia***

Several relevant initiatives already exist. Training programs by the African Union, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Berghof Foundation, and the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC) have worked to support insider mediators through tailored modules that respect local knowledge and modes of engagement[3]. However, uptake remains uneven, and many TFIMs are unaware of such opportunities.

Another recurring idea across interviews was the need for knowledge continuity and documentation. Several informants noted that TFIM-led peace efforts often go unrecorded, leading to loss of institutional memory and weakening of historical legitimacy. One Somali TFIM proposed a "knowledge window" to on conflict-resolution mechanisms:

> ***"The Network could consider creating a ... platform to collect and document conflict resolution mechanisms from each country under its own mandate ... This could become a valuable book or reference tool on conflict management systems."***
>
> ***–Abdisalaam Ahmed, Somalia***

Ultimately, capacity-building should not seek to professionalize TFIMs into formal mediators, but to strengthen their ability to act as authentic brokers across mediation tracks, strengthening their strategic engagement without severing their community roots.

5.4 Support Structures that Sustain and Protect

TFIMs cannot sustain meaningful engagement without structures that protect their safety, autonomy, and well-being. Across the cases in this report, mediators described being overstretched, under-resourced, and at times endangered. Even the most trusted actors struggle to maintain influence without predictable systems of support.

Financial resourcing is a first and persistent gap. Most TFIMs rely on voluntary contributions or community offerings, reflecting strong local ownership but limiting reach and continuity. Traveling to mediate disputes or attend national consultations often comes at personal expense. To bridge this divide, funding mechanisms must be flexible and low-barrier, for example, pooled interfaith funds, community peacebuilding grants, or endowment models housed within religious institutions. Whatever the format, financial support must align with TFIMs' norms of discretion and trust rather than imposing external branding or visibility requirements.

Moral and political recognition also matter. In polarized settings, peace efforts can easily be politicized, and TFIMs risk suspicion, backlash, or alienation from both authorities and their own communities. Recognition, whether through memoranda of understanding, advisory roles, public commendation, or invitations to national forums, can validate their work and bolster protection, particularly when salaries, security, or visibility are lacking. As one Somali TFIM noted:

> *"There is a missing element, which is ... there is no moral support ... They may need, not even the financial issue only, but they need moral support, to be recognized."*
>
> *–Abdisalaam Ahmed, Somalia*

Yet recognition must be carefully balanced. Whereas too little visibility limits support, publicity can be dangerous. A Nigerian TFIM working in the prevention of violent extremism explained:

> *"So there are a number of awards in the PVE area that we have rejected because your name would be announced, it would be published, and it's a kiss of death. And I think unfortunately some of these major donor organizations just don't understand that."*
>
> *–Male TFIM, Nigeria*

Protection is equally vital. TFIMs in countries such as Cameroon and Somalia described threats, harassment, and forced displacement linked to their peace work. Protective measures can include legal assistance, safe convening spaces, and digital or physical security protocols. Where TFIMs are embedded in formal processes, risk assessments and contingency plans should be standard practice.

Care and healing must also be part of protection. Many TFIMs carry the trauma of the communities they serve. One woman mediator recounted how repeated exposure to violence left her emotionally depleted:

> ***"Each time I talk about it, I feel vulnerable. I feel like crying because it was really putting our lives into danger. ... And I tell you that by the time I finished that work, I was also traumatized ... The healers have been wounded. Who will heal the healers?"***
>
> ***–Female TFIM, Nigeria***

After attending a mediation training that included trauma-healing and self-care components, she reflected:

> ***"It was something that actually changed me, even the way I take care of myself now ... I know how to be present. I know how to meditate now. And I know how to really call myself back, if I am really stressed, with a lot of duties. More training should come, more funding should come."***
>
> ***–Female TFIM, Nigeria***

Such accounts highlight that sustainability is as much about psychosocial resilience as about funding or visibility. In summary, TFIMs cannot be expected to act as strategic peacebuilders without strategic support. Financial, moral, legal, and protective structures must be designed to sustain their work while preserving the relational legitimacy that makes them effective. Investing in TFIM support systems redistributes resources and influence toward more locally grounded forms of peacebuilding, thereby expanding the absorptive capacity of peace architectures and anchoring them more firmly in the social fabrics they aim to repair.

Consultation and prayer meeting with the delegates to the Tumaini Initiative, South Sudan Peace negotiations in Kenya. 2024.

5.5 Synthesis: From Fragmented Engagement to Strategic Inclusion

The shift from symbolic participation to strategic inclusion depends on building systems that value TFIMs as integral actors within peace architectures. TFIMs are often among the first to detect tensions and the last to disengage during crises. Their access, trust, and ability to navigate across social, moral, and political spheres offer unique advantages that cannot be replicated by state or international actors alone. But this potential remains underutilized when engagement is limited to ad hoc invitations or ceremonial roles, or when they lack the capacity or resources needed to sustain their work.

This section identified four interrelated domains that determine whether and how TFIMs can engage meaningfully in formalpeace and political processes. Together, they point to the types of design choices, coordination practices, and political commitments that make such inclusion possible.

Somalia District Council Formation Process. 2021.

Table 4: Enabling strategic TFIM engagement

Challenge	Enabling Condition	Illustrative Strategies
Peace architectures prioritize political/institutional actors and sideline relational legitimacy	Design frameworks that recognize multiple sources of legitimacy, including tradition and faith	Reserved seats or co-chair roles for TFIMs in commissions or dialogue bodies; Advisory councils rooted in traditional/religious authority; Hybrid structures that combine formal and informal mandates
Engagement is ad hoc, unstructured, or dependent on personal networks	Establish platforms and liaison mechanisms that enable structured cross-track engagement	Faith/tradition-based liaison offices; Inter-track dialogue forums convened by TFIMs; Mandated roles in secretariats to coordinate across actor categories
Support to TFIMs undermines autonomy or dilutes grassroots legitimacy	Design capacity-strengthening that protects independence and community trust	Peer-to-peer learning rooted in shared worldviews; Reflexive training models integrating spiritual/ethical traditions; Support for self-organized TFIM networks or councils
TFIMs face insecurity, burnout, or lack sustainable support	Build protective and enabling support structures	Legal status or recognition frameworks for TFIMs; Core funding or pooled donor support for interfaith/traditional councils; Psychosocial and security support mechanisms, particularly for women and youth TFIMs

Across these domains, a recurring insight is the importance of co-design and contextual fit. TFIMs are not a homogenous category, and the mechanisms that support their inclusion must reflect the particularities of local religious and traditional systems, power dynamics, and historical relationships with the state.

Ultimately, the shift from symbolic to strategic inclusion of TFIMs hinges on designing systems that value their unique contributions, not as substitutes for formal mediators, but as actors with distinct forms of legitimacy that can bridge political processes and societal needs. The next section turns these insights into concrete recommendations.

6. Strategic Recommendations: Toward a Structured System for TFIM Engagement

Strategic inclusion of TFIMs requires systemic reform in how peace and political processes are conceived, resourced, and governed. As this report has shown, TFIMs act as essential bridges between state and society, connecting formal negotiations with the social and moral fabric that sustains peace. Yet their contributions remain constrained by structural exclusion, normative misrecognition, and limited support systems.

The recommendations that follow are designed to translate the report's political economy insights into action, addressing the institutional, relational, and resource conditions that shape whether TFIMs can participate meaningfully and safely. Organized by actor group, these recommendations offer principles for context-sensitive adaptation and long-term investment in inclusive and locally grounded peace architectures.

Religion and Mediation Course for participants from the Horn and East Africa in Tanzania. September 2024.

6.1 Governments and National Peace Infrastructures

National authorities play a central role in shaping the environments in which TFIMs can operate safely and meaningfully. Key actions include:

- **Institutionalize TFIM engagement through clearly mandated roles within national peace architectures.**
  - This could take the form of advisory councils, co-chair positions in dialogue processes, or formal consultative mechanisms within peace commissions, electoral boards, or constitutional reform bodies.

- **Ensure legal recognition of traditional and faith-based conflict resolution systems.**
  - Where appropriate, such recognition should be embedded in constitutional provisions, statutory frameworks, or peace policy instruments. Ensure these roles are clearly mandated and not merely symbolic.

- **Create structured interfaces between TFIMs and formal institutions.**
  - Liaison offices, interface bodies, or joint task forces can help bridge gaps between insider knowledge and institutional decision-making and enable structured, ongoing engagement.

- **Protect TFIMs from risk or retaliation.**
  - In volatile settings, proactive risk assessments, public affirmation of their neutrality, and rapid response mechanisms are essential to shield TFIMs from violence, retaliation, or reputational harm.

- **Establish transparent processes to identify credible TFIMs**.
  - Governments can support the identification of TFIMs through community-led assessments of legitimacy, ensuring that representation reflects diverse regions, generations, and genders.

Role of Traditional Leaders and Actors in Mediating to Prevent Atrocity Crimes Consultation Process in Abuja, Nigeria. 2022.

6.2 Regional and Multilateral Bodies (e.g. AU, RECs, UN)

Continental and regional organizations are uniquely positioned to set norms, convene cross-border networks, and elevate TFIM roles in peace efforts. They can:

- **Create structured pathways for TFIM's to contribute to regional peace processes, advisory panels, and observer missions,** recognizing their unique access and legitimacy in hard-to-reach or high-risk areas.
- **Support national governments to design inclusive peace infrastructures** that reflect local forms of legitimacy, including early-stage involvement of TFIMs in process design not only during outreach or implementation.
- **Recognize and elevate TFIM voices in continental frameworks** such as the AU Mediation Support Unit, including by investing in the inclusion of women, youth, and marginalized groups within these bodies.
- **Facilitate regional platforms for coordination and learning to enable TFIMs to exchange strategies and insights across countries facing similar challenges.** This includes support for South–South learning platforms and intergenerational knowledge transfer.
- **Recognize and elevate indigenous mediation systems** such as gadaa, xeer, or palaver as complementary sources of knowledge that can enrich formal peacebuilding efforts.

Women faith-based mediators training and advocacy engagement as part of the JISRA project in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. 2024.

6.3 Donors and International Partners

International partners can play a catalytic role by resourcing TFIM engagement without distorting its foundations. They can:

- **Provide flexible and accessible funding mechanisms** that support TFIM initiatives without requiring formal NGO registration. This includes pooled grants, travel stipends, emergency protection funds, and long-term institutional support for interfaith or traditional councils.

- **Support capacity-building tailored to TFIM's working styles,** such as oral and peer-based learning, mentoring, and training in areas like process design, facilitation, and engagement with political actors. Such programs should be co-designed with TFIMs and avoid imposing technocratic models.

- **Support coordination platforms** that connect TFIMs with civil society, political actors, and mediation infrastructures on an ongoing basis, not only in times of crisis. These platforms can be hosted by national peace infrastructures, religious councils, or neutral convening bodies.

- **Provide discreet moral recognition and visibility** such as quiet diplomacy, acknowledgment in public events, or closed-door consultations to affirm the value of TFIM engagement without exposing them to political risk.

Representatives of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, Finn Church Aid, the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, and the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers hosted a seminar in Helsinki, Finland on Sudan's conflict within the wider context in the Horn of Africa. 2025.

6.4 TFIM Networks and Civil Society Allies, Including NRTP

TFIM networks and allied civil society actors can shape the terms of engagement and build more sustainable models of inclusion. They can:

- **Document and disseminate mediation practices** across countries and regions through knowledge platforms, oral history projects, and practical toolkits rooted in lived experience. This strengthens legitimacy and cross-context learning.

- **Develop ethical guidelines and codes of conduct** for TFIMs engaging in national or regional processes, to reinforce internal accountability and collective positioning.

- **Strengthen coalitions across generations, faith traditions and geographies** to amplify influence and ensure that diverse forms of insider legitimacy are included and sustained. Prioritize the inclusion of women and youth in all strategic initiatives.

- **Engage in strategic advocacy with state and international actors** to reshape perceptions of TFIMs from informal participants to essential partners in peacebuilding, emphasizing their role as co-creators of process design, not just community messengers.

Participants engaging in an overview of group mediation process during the UN Religion and Mediation Course in Dakar, Senegal. 2023.

7. Conclusion

This report sets out to better understand how TFIMs engage in formal peace and political processes in Sub-Saharan Africa. Drawing on empirical cases from Ethiopia, Mozambique, Kenya, South Sudan, Nigeria, Cameroon, Somalia, and the Central African Republic, it examined the diverse ways TFIMs contribute to mediation, the barriers that limit their inclusion, and the enabling conditions that can help unlock their potential.

Section 1 outlined the rationale for the report: although TFIMs are often central to local peacebuilding, their influence at national levels remains poorly understood and inconsistently supported. Section 2 presented the conceptual framework, combining political economy analysis with a multi-track peacebuilding lens to move beyond actor-centric accounts and examine the institutional, normative, and political structures that shape inclusion and exclusion. Section 3 examined four modalities of TFIM engagement, from formal mediation roles to informal diplomacy, convening dialogue platforms, and acting as moral authorities in moments of political transition. Section 4 explored the structural, political, and intersectional barriers that TFIMs face, while Section 5 outlined conditions that can enable TFIMs to engage safely, effectively, and on their own terms. Section 6 translated these insights into practical recommendations for governments, donors, regional bodies, and TFIM networks.

This report is needed because too often, peace and political processes remain disconnected from the actors and institutions that hold legitimacy at the community level. TFIMs work to bridge this gap, yet they are often left without formal recognition, sustained support, or protective frameworks. While some are engaged informally through ad hoc channels, many remain excluded from the design and decision-making of national processes. At a time when the political space for mediation is increasingly challenged by political fragmentation, contested legitimacy, and skepticism from the public, TFIMs offer a crucial link between national negotiations and local realities.

A few insights stand out. First, TFIMs are already active in formal processes, though their engagement often occurs through informal or parallel channels that go undocumented and under-supported. Second, their legitimacy is relational rather than institutional: it derives from moral authority, spiritual leadership, and rootedness in cultural and communal life. These are qualities that cannot be replicated through technical expertise alone. Third, symbolic engagement or normative co-optation can undermine this legitimacy. Without careful design, efforts to include TFIMs risk weakening the very attributes that make them effective. Last, meaningful engagement depends not on isolated acts of inclusion but on systems that recognize, support, and protect TFIMs while enabling them to operate across levels without being absorbed into elite-led processes.

For policy and practice, the implications are clear: TFIMs need to be intentionally integrated into peace infrastructures through structured, context-sensitive mechanisms. This may include legal recognition, coordination platforms, flexible funding, peer learning, and safety protections. But inclusion should not come at the cost of autonomy, and support must reinforce, not replace, what makes TFIMs effective in the first place.

The findings also point to important limitations. This study is not a comprehensive mapping of TFIMs across the continent, nor does it claim universal applicability. Much of the evidence comes from a select number of cases and informants, and while care was taken to reflect diverse voices, including those of women, youth, and traditional leaders, some perspectives remain underrepresented.

More research is therefore needed to track TFIM impact over time and analyze how different types of gendered, generational, religious, and traditional legitimacy intersect and shape their roles and constraints across different contexts. Comparative studies across political systems and mediation formats could further illuminate the diverse strategies TFIMs use to assert influence.

Looking ahead, regional and continental stakeholders such as the African Union, national governments, donor agencies, and TFIM networks could collaborate toward developing a shared framework or protocol for engaging TFIMs in national and regional peace efforts. This could build on existing mechanisms like the AU's Panel of the Wise, FemWise, and the WiseYouthNetwork, while creating new pathways that are grounded in local realities and institutionalized for long-term impact.

Ultimately, peace processes are only as inclusive as the actors they empower. Centering TFIMs is not about idealizing tradition or faith but about recognizing the diverse moral and relational foundations of sustainable peace. Strengthening mediation systems from the inside out means creating space for the actors who already carry legitimacy in the eyes of their communities. In doing so, there is a chance not only to broaden participation, but to deepen the foundations of peace itself.

Painted wall in Juba, South Sudan.

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