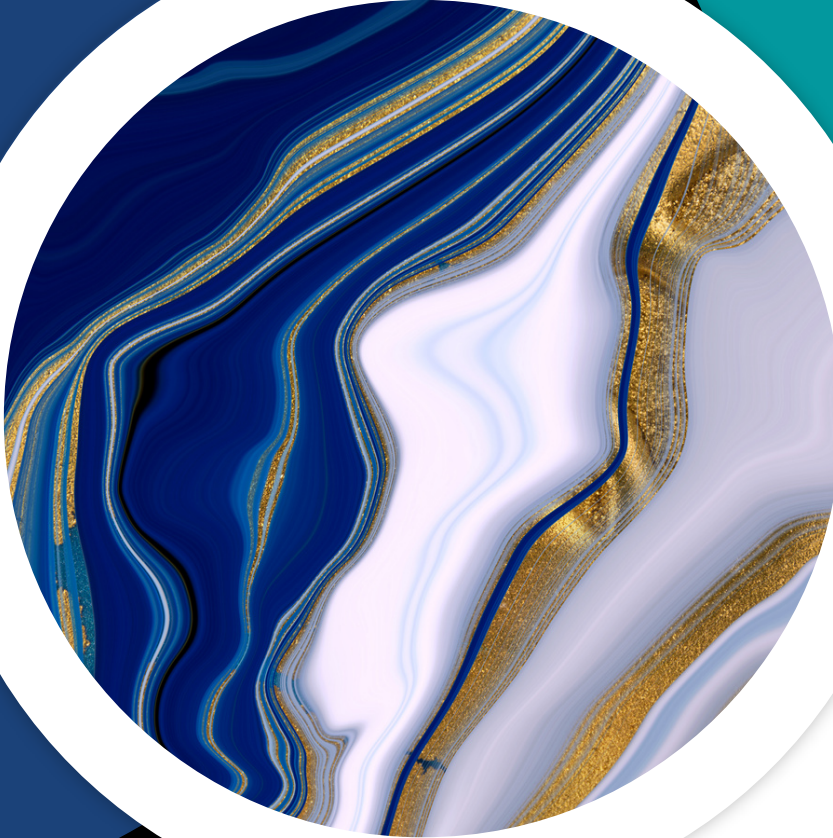# Confidence Building Mechanisms and Multilateral Forums

MEDRC

Stabilization Mechanism Project

For peace process practitioners transboundary environmental issues such as water, climate change and desertification present a broad array of potential peace initiatives, from international declarations to guiding principles to treaties to shared management and diplomatic contact.

The Stabilization Mechanism Research Brief Series contributes more widely to the overall field of knowledge for environmental cooperation in the service of peace.

Confidence Building Mechanisms and Multilateral Forums

Confidence building measures (CBMs) can effectively advance the conditions necessary for meaningful dialogue, prevent violence, promote mutual understanding, enhance the legitimacy of a peace process, and contribute to building sustainable peace. Current global challenges require stronger international cooperation. Multilateral architecture offers the foundational capacity to facilitate cooperation and strengthen trust in global institutions and international norms to adequately address global challenges. This brief looks at the role of CBMs in multilateral institutions and places emphasis on environmental entry-points toward confidence building.
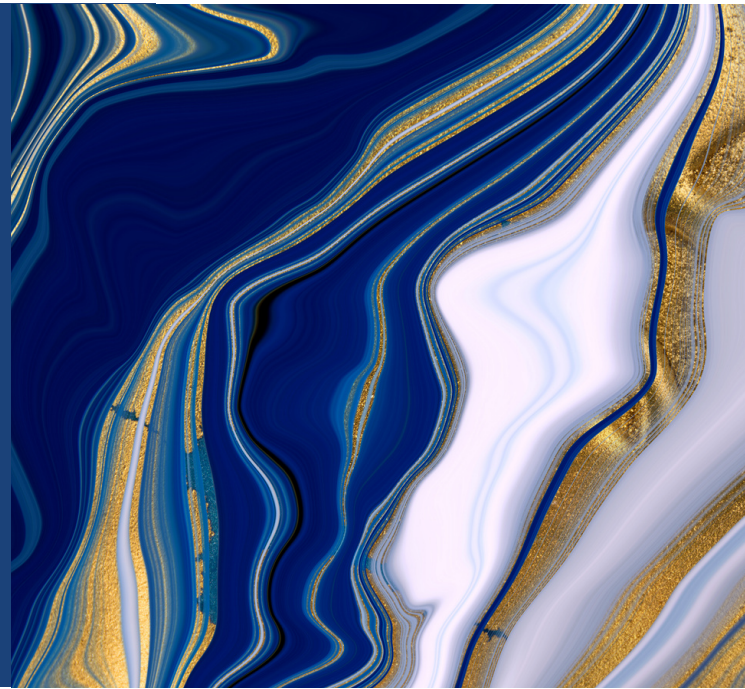
Confidence Building Measures

As specific actions or initiatives taken by parties involved in a conflict to build trust, reduce tensions, and create a conducive atmosphere for dialogue and negotiation, confidence building measures (CBMs) can vary in nature and scope. Without a certain level of trust, negotiations between conflict parties are not possible [1].

Examples of CBMs include

- Encouraging people-to-people contacts, cultural exchanges, and educational programs to foster mutual understanding and bridge divides.
- Establishing or enhancing **direct communication channels** between the conflicting parties, such as hotlines, diplomatic channels or regular meetings, to facilitate dialogue and exchange information.
- Agreeing to temporary **ceasefires or arms control** to demonstrate a commitment to peaceful resolution and reduce the risk of escalation.
- Releasing **captured personnel or detainees** as a gesture of goodwill and to build trust between the parties.
- Collaborating on **humanitarian projects** or allowing safe access for humanitarian aid to reach vulnerable populations affected by the conflict.

- Undertaking **joint economic initiatives** or trade agreements to promote interdependence and mutual benefits, reducing economic incentives for conflict.
- Establishing **verification mechanisms** to verify compliance with agreed-upon CBMs, providing transparency and assurance to all parties.
- Collaborating on **environmental protection** and management to address shared ecological challenges and promote sustainable development.
- Arranging **visits of representatives** from one party to the territory of the other to engage in dialogue and interact with the affected communities directly.
- Involving **civil society** organizations, religious leaders, and community representatives in peacebuilding efforts to foster inclusivity and broaden support for peace.

CBMs are not meant to address the underlying causes of the conflict or replace comprehensive peace agreements. CBMs can be helpful in building trust to negotiate the more substantive issues the conflict parties are facing. Ensuring core party consent, consensus and co-design is important in advancing effective CBMs. This includes drawing on local norms and integrating all relevant key actors, despite how diverse they may be.

Trust plays a crucial role in both international cooperation among states and within societies. However, trust between governments and their citizens is particularly significant for the smooth functioning of any society. There has been a noticeable decrease in trust towards public institutions worldwide over the past few decades [2]. This decline in trust not only signifies low social cohesion but also indicates the presence of high economic, political, and gender disparities within communities. Multilateralism remains a highly relevant institutional architecture through which to advance collective action effectively. In order to manage and address the heightened fractures that mark the geopolitical order today, it is crucial to strengthen and build confidence in multilateral approaches and institutions.

CBMs in Multilateral Frameworks

In a global landscape comprising independent nations, effective international collaboration relies on trust. Cooperation becomes feasible only when there is a shared belief that states will honor the obligations they have agreed to uphold. The multilateral system has become considerably constrained in its ability to resolve global problems and meet pressing global needs. In the setting of multilateral architecture, confidence-building mechanisms can be of great value in reinforcing trust.

Consider for instance the confidence-building measures that guide interstate behavior of member states to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). By becoming signatories to a number of legally binding agreements, including the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) and the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), shared principles and norms become upheld [3].

The numerous meetings the member states of ASEAN have held, have arguably facilitated confidence-building through ensuring active contact within agreed diplomatic precedent and norms. Despite the facilitation of confidence building in this way, ASEAN as a multilateral forum has demonstrated limited capacity in enforcing its collective preferences on its members. The lack of decisive regional action to help address and resolve the complex and long-drawn-out internal conflict in Myanmar is an apt example of this [4]. Instead of operating as a mechanism for sovereignty pooling, the multilateral architecture of ASEAN reinforces sovereignty protection and prevents further institutional integration between the member states. This limited institutional integration means that although participation in the multilateral structure is strongly facilitated, the performance of the processes become limited in their ability to implement shared activities toward outcomes on shared agendas.

This example highlights why CBMs that aim to advance trust in multilateral processes must become linked to more substantive processes that underpin the multilateral architecture. While multilateral coordination can occur in different ways and on different platforms, at the core of the modern multilateralism system are formal institutions that allow their members to express their interests, set shared goals, and take collective action according to agreed rules. If not linked to the substantive processes that underpin the multilateral architecture and processes, CBMs risk not being purposeful.

The initial design and goals of multilateralism institutions are important determinants of their effectiveness and impact. In order for these institutions to be successful, it may be necessary to establish compelling agreements and enforce them accordingly. It is crucial that member states adhere to their commitments and engage in collective action on global problems through reciprocal agreements and the implementation of enforcement mechanisms.

It is important to note that communities of engaged practitioners that come together in a multilateral framework are not confined to specific organizations.

When confidence-building efforts result in the establishment of a new framework of rules and practices governing cooperation and competition between participating states and non-state actors, such restructured relationships can decrease the chances of conflict. Categorizing CBMs ('economic,' 'political,' and 'military') may be helpful in understanding their potential relevance at different moments in a process from a mediation point of view. Nevertheless, it is important to avoid a sectoral outlook on CBMs. Instead, cross-sectoral understanding and links should be reinforced. To constructively facilitate and develop cross-sectoral CBMs takes focus away from relying on template solutions that risk undermining the ownership of core parties to the process. Equally, cross-sectoral approaches to CBMs must be clear, well-informed and adapted to the conflict context to not do any harm or to distract from peace process negotiations.

The Environment as an Entry-Point to Confidence Building in Multilateral Structures

CBMs shaped and directed through institutional frameworks can have a positive spill-over effect by advancing shared initiatives that depart first and foremost from political will. This practical manner of advancing CBMs may result in a stop-start structure of engagement, however, retains the centrality of co-equal partnership, parity of esteem and joint guarantorship. CBMs that are embedded in a wider institutional framework that uses transboundary environmental issues in the service of peace, enable for diplomatic norms to be sustained through the common framework.

The environment presents an amenable issue to build multilateral architecture and processes on. Shared environmental interests inherently overlap systems of governance and engagement. Traditional forms of confidence-building measures (CBMs) in this space risk becoming restricted by pigeon-holing them into 'economic,' 'political' or 'military' CBMs. The far-reaching consequences of environmental issues, such as water usage, which can significantly affect almost every sector make ECBMs particularly valuable in bridging sectors.

Trust relationships are more difficult to export than institutional frameworks that support mechanisms of effective confidence-building measures. CBMs that are resiliently embedded into an institutional mechanism enables for trust-building through processes that prioritize relationships but do not solely rely on them.

Multilateral structures hold the potential to be domain(s) of knowledge creation, active relational engagement toward trust building and policy alignment that can subsequently reinforce national policy agenda setting. Consider, for instance, the community of practice and institutional inertia that the informal OSCE Group of Friends of the Environment was able to advance. From its launch in 2019, the OSCE Group of Friends of the Environment was able to engage experts on environmental and climate issues and broaden the diplomatic discussions within the OSCE [5]. In December 2021, the OSCE sent a strong political signal with the release of a Ministerial Decision on adopting a new decision on climate change. Despite the disappointment raised by some OSCE member states on the lack of inclusivity in language used in the December 2021 Ministerial Decision, the decision was reached by consensus. Arguably, CBMs, such as the informal working group that informed the processes that informed the Ministerial Decision enabled political momentum to be gathered even in instances where not all member states were in consensus initially.

For a more detailed discussion on peace parks and integrated water resources management at a transboundary scale, refer here.

Even when shared environmental concerns are not central to a conflict, dealing with the present and future impacts of the shared environmental problem can serve as opportunities for technical collaboration, fostering trust, and potentially leading to meaningful conflict resolution. The gradual increase of peace parks speaks to these opportunities where cooperation has become initiated between states in conflict through shared environmental issues. Peace parks cross national borders, can become sufficiently de-securitized, allow for the realization of shared benefits, require long time horizons, often represent common and external threats, and attract pressure from a number of stakeholders [6]. Nevertheless, high environmental attention is not a sufficient condition on its own.

It needs to interact with political stability, which allows for stable environmental policies as well as continuous exchanges and trust building between relevant decision makers.

CBMs embedded in an institutional framework should not have their function limited by their form. Using CBMs in a multilateral architecture where lack of trust between members is not a core problem risks undermining the usefulness of CBMs in multilateral structures toward peacebuilding. There needs to be institutional flexibility to allow for opportunities to be swiftly identified and seized that directly address the interdependent but different dimensions that accompany lack of trust, lack of understanding and lack of political will respectively [7].

Examples of Environmental Entry-Points toward Confidence Building

Cooperation over shared natural resources presents an opportunity toward confidence building between conflict parties. Environmentally-related goals and objectives may present less of a threat than politically charged issues.

The establishment of the Cordilerra del Cóndor peace park shared between Peru and Ecuador encouraged the cessation of hostilities and withdrawal of armed troops from a contested region.

For more than a century, the mountain range has been at the center of a border conflict between the nations. In 1942, a 10-day war led to the Rio de Janeiro Protocol, supported by Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and the US, but tensions persisted, causing continued border disputes. In 1998, both countries started a mediation process to address the risk of renewed violence. The guarantors crafted a resolution plan accepted by the conflicting parties, later formalized in the Brasilia Agreement. The Peace Agreement officially established two protected ecological zones governed by the same treaty. Using environmental entry-points to cooperation created a space for cooperation that has led to bi-national initiatives [8].

Island-wide environmental protection matters were leaned into by the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) as a means of stimulating dialogue and confidence-building in a largely frozen conflict.

As part of a broader framework of confidence-building measures, water management and environmental protection were proposed in a 1993 report by the UN Secretary General. In 2020, UN Security Council Resolution 2506 and Resolution 2537 officially recognized the effective contact and communication advanced between conflict parties through engaging on several environmental confidence-building activities [9].

It is important that CBMs support technical and diplomatic pathways to reaching fair compromise that meets the primary requests of all the parties involved. Ensuring that the political and technical tracks are sustained in environmental peacebuilding initiatives allows for confidence to be built through cooperation on joint projects whilst maintaining an understanding of capacity disparities. This is important in avoiding joint projects that may contribute to power asymmetries between conflict parties, stall the peace process, or place more emphasis on trust rather than the key conflict issue.

As much as environmental confidence building measures can benefit peacebuilding by being able to mitigate unpredictability, contribute to trust building, strengthen inclusivity and attract support, how CBMs are advanced needs to be carefully and deliberately considered. Although environmental cooperation can facilitate reconciliation, it is by no means a key driver to reconciliation. Instead, as a potential confidence building measure, environmental cooperation strengthens or binds existing dynamics of reconciliation, rather than creating new ones. When and how CBMs are used in multilateral platforms to advance action can be as constructive to positive peacebuilding as they can be used to advance negative peace.

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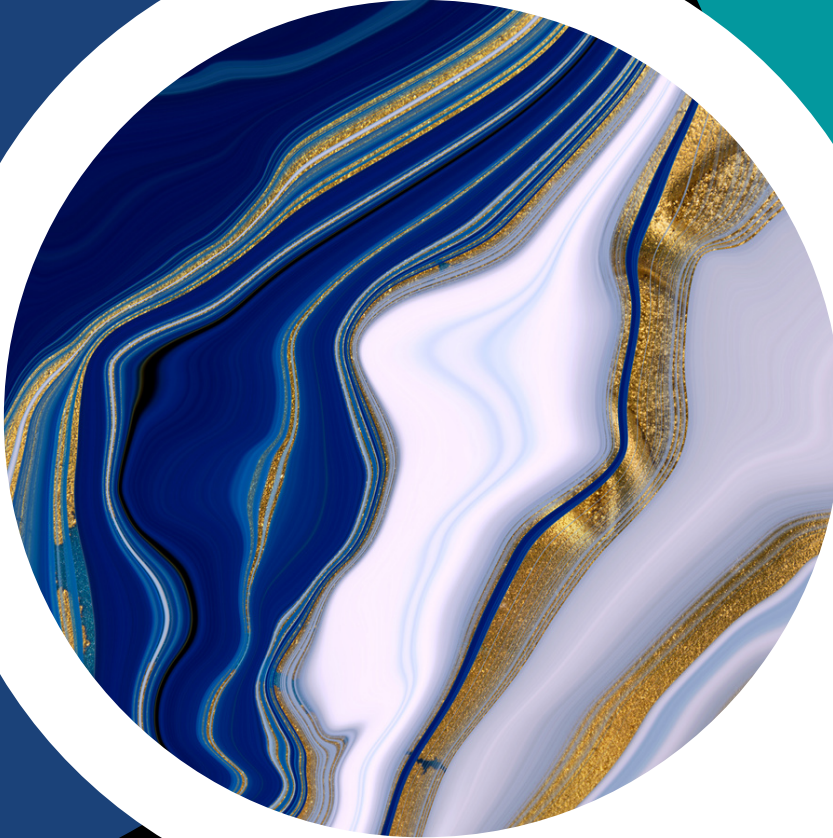
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