CRITICAL FRIEND

AN INNOVATION IN EVALUATION AND LEARNING FOR PEACEBUILDING

ALL CONFLICTS CAN BE RESOLVED

THE CRISIS MANAGEMENT INITIATIVE (CMI) is an independent Finnish organization that works to prevent and resolve violent conflicts through informal dialogue and mediation. Nobel Peace laureate and former President of Finland Martti Ahtisaari founded CMI in 2000. Since then, the organization has grown to become one of the leaders in its field.

CMI's programme for the 2018-2021 period contributes to the prevention and resolution of violent political conflicts by seeking positive change in the quality and effectiveness of peace processes, the long-term capacity of peacemaking actors, and the international practice of peacemaking. To better prevent and resolve violent conflicts, we place greater emphasis on strengthening women's roles in peacemaking. Our new focus area on Policy and Learning aims to ensure that lessons learned from the programme work strengthen the international practice of peacemaking. The programme is focused on implementation in three regions: the Middle East and North Africa, Eurasia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD

We all need feedback to grow. Conventionally, evaluations are not considered through the lens of professional growth, but they can offer us a lot when truly integrated into action and oriented towards learning for the improvement of our work. CMI's experience with a Critical Friend evaluator was such a ground-breaking enterprise.

DURING NOVEMBER 2016 - October 2017, CMI opened its programme and organization to the presence of a senior evaluator who accompanied us through our process of internal planning of the new CMI Programme and Strategy for 2018-2021.

In retrospect, it may have been brave, even risky, of the organization to open its doors to a stranger at such a critical time of strategic reflection and design.

In retrospect, it may have been brave, even risky, of the organization to open its doors to a stranger at such a critical time of strategic reflection and design. Yet, it paid off in abundance. The long process of nearly a year contributed to a stronger programme, more responsive strategy and some significant additions to organizational structure and staffing.

Finding the right match of skills, personalities and tasks is so important for the Critical Friend approach. We had the great privilege of working with Dr. Eleanor O'Gorman who is not only a senior evaluator, but crucially has also a long personal background in peacebuilding and organizational development. Knowing the field and quickly learning to know us, she was able to refresh our routines and prompt new ideas. As a result, we are more open and confident of welcoming outsiders to stir prevailing thinking.

CMI will definitely continue to develop the approach and employ Critical Friends in new roles in the coming years. This publication provides practical tips and food for thought for effectively doing so.

The paper at hand marks also a new juncture for CMI in stepping up its input to improving the practice of peacemaking. Through its Policy and Learning focus, CMI contributes to the development of the field of peace mediation in the international community to better meet the challenges of complex conflicts. There is a need for more established and commonly agreed practices and principles in peacemaking. For us, Policy and Learning is rooted in our programme in Africa, Middle East and Eurasia, aimed at prevention and resolution of violent political conflicts through informal dialogue and mediation, and placing emphasis throughout on strengthening women's roles in peacemaking. Over the nearly two decades of work in various contexts and themes, we have accumulated a body of experience that is worth sharing from, for the common good. A critical element of the Policy and Learning focus area is strengthening methodological innovation.

The focus area is a practical lab for developing further the seeds of innovation that have been identified in the daily problem-solving work of conflict resolution. We also have a lot to learn from others – and so we want to expand exchanges with peers, partners, donors, academia and businesses at all levels. Let us work together to improve peace mediation practice and policy!

Tuija Talvitie
Executive Director of CMI

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As a term, Critical Friend is intuitive – most people can imagine knowing someone in a personal or working context who is supportive and yet, able to question or challenge in ways that we can hear their views and reconsider our behaviour or actions. Yet, as a deliberate methodology to help us learn and evaluate our work, we need to map out the practice in concrete terms – the roles, the guiding questions, the accompaniment and research – to determine if, why and how it adds value to our field as a way of improving our work and its results.

This paper describes an initiative undertaken by CMI during 2016-2017 to develop and deploy the idea and role of **Critical Friend as an evaluation and learning methodology that can enhance organizational real-time learning for conflict resolution organizations.** It was designed to complement a recent external performance evaluation of CMI and other Finnish NGOs by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) Finland, and to feed into the internal planning of the new CMI Programme and Strategy for 2018-2021. The process was funded by MFA Finland and the Swiss-based foundation PeaceNexus.

The concept of Critical Friend comes originally from the field of education, where a critical friend has been defined as a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend. In practice, the process at CMI included an iterative development of tasks that ranged from specific research and analysis pieces on the context and work of conflict resolution by CMI, facilitation of meetings, conduct of interviews and focus groups, and centrally, a series of one-week visits that immersed the Critical Friend in CMI. The value added of this accompaniment and real-time learning process for CMI included (1) an acceleration of internal discussion and analysis, resulting in a stronger shared understanding of the needs and priorities of the new programme, (2) surfacing of gaps and needs in organizational development to underpin programme and strategy, and (3) more operational emphasis on CMI as a learning organization.

CMI's experimentation with the Critical Friend approach is relevant and valuable to peers in the conflict resolution field.

CMI's experimentation with the Critical Friend approach is relevant and valuable to peers in the conflict resolution field. Pressured resources and timeframes with an emphasis on results require us to learn on the go, adapt programmes in real time, and to nurture the organizational base to support complex peace and transition processes. In particular, this experience demonstrates positive and constructive application and implications for:

- » **programme implementation and adaptation through real-time analysis and feedback**
- » **organizational development of peacebuilding organizations in line with their values and approaches**
- » **for peer relationships (e.g. complementarity) where there is potential to work in trusted relationships and engage in reciprocal 'critical friend' discussions on each other's projects and initiatives.**

Reflecting on CMI's experience, this paper seeks to map out the main components of a Critical Friend evaluation, including: the recruitment of a person to fit the role and organization; joint development and iteration of a rolling terms of reference; devising a trust-building phase with staff; a series of intensive visits with CMI; key outputs such as the Programme Evaluation report, Peer & Trends Analysis, and individual notes on organizational issues. This paper seeks to share learning on the challenges, options and trade-offs that arise from issues generated by real-time learning, the multiple roles that a Critical Friend assumes, the pressures on internal communications in managing expectations that emerge from all sides, and the means of using the learning for adaptive management and planning purposes.[1]

The nature of results from the process is discussed pointing to the new CMI programme that benefited from accelerated and shared learning, supported prioritization

and decision-making, and greater awareness of the necessary links between organizational learning and front-line peace work.

The Critical Friend differs substantively from the classic evaluator – a detached outsider focused on assessing pre-set performance measurements. Conflict resolution organizations have been seeking to adapt and propose rigorous and alternative methods for learning and evaluation that can complement the results-based metrics derived from development evaluation trends. The Critical Friend offers us one such approach that serves to provide learning from implementation, and specific information and understanding of the relevance and application of evaluation criteria (effectiveness, sustainability, coherence and so forth) in relation to peace work.

I. DEFINING THE CRITICAL FRIEND

> **Critical Friend is an evaluation methodology that can enhance organizational real-time learning for conflict resolution organisations.**

Critical Friend is an evaluation methodology that can enhance organizational real-time learning for conflict resolution organizations. The methodology opens the focus of examination – e.g. organization, programme, process, theme – to external, independent experts who are well-versed on the topic and the challenges at hand.

It relies on a participatory, real-time approach enabling emerging issues to be addressed on-the-spot and supports adaptive management in organizations. The methodology combines learning and evaluation and as such is highly relevant for addressing complex environments of peacebuilding where there is a need for responsiveness and rapid feed-back loops between evaluation, learning and planning.

The concept of Critical Friend comes originally from the field of education, where a critical friend has been defined as a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend.[2] In applying the methodology to the field of conflict resolution and peacemaking, much of the definition still applies.

The Critical Friend as developed by CMI has a dimension of a **'trusted insider'**, who can in a safe space support the organization's own reflection by providing constructive challenge and criticism, raise questions and surface operational and organizational issues to be addressed, but also build trust within the team. However,

they also come with an **'independent outsider'** perspective, in terms of being sufficiently removed from the focus of enquiry, and having an independent position and expertise, to provide inputs to support reflection. The process is often iterative and builds from one stage to the next and is thus flexible in addressing the needs of the team or organization.

In essence, an ideal type for a Critical Friend is anticipated to provide an "enlightened outsider" view. In a guidebook for the education sector Helen Butler et al describe the Critical Friend as follows:

> *"A key understanding of the [Critical Friend] role is that it is a dynamic one, requiring a high level of skill and flexibility. … It is about developing a repertoire of strategies and skills and learning when and how to use them."* [3]

The experimentation of Critical Friend as a learning and evaluation methodology by CMI emerged as part of a wider drive to develop CMI's Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation system attuned to complexity.[4] Central to this has been the notion of expanding the spheres of reflection at different levels, from project, programme, to organization, and to strengthen learning and feedback loops by introducing alternative perspectives for quality assurance.

Another example of this is CMI's practice of **"internal reviews"** - focused stocktaking and planning exercises that discuss changes, results and lessons - that paved the way for the development of the Critical Friend approach. These reviews, led by a CMI colleague, are designed to enhance learning within project teams as well as more widely across the organization in a manner sensitive to complexity by way of renewed analysis, design and management. In developing this well-established practice, CMI has experimented inviting trusted external 'Critical Friends' to complement internal reviews.

CMI's interest in applying the Critical Friend methodology at a level of programme evaluation was further influenced by the peer experience of the Finnish NGDO Platform to the EU (Kehys) of which CMI is a member, who had in parallel initiated a similar approach. Overall, this desire to explore new ways to introduce alternative perspectives, coupled with a desire to avoid duplicating earlier evaluations, made the Critical Friend an attractive approach for the CMI programme evaluation.

II. THE CMI CASE

From November 2016 to October 2017, CMI commissioned a Critical Friend evaluation of its global Programme (2014-2017). The evaluation was intended to link up with the design of the new CMI Programme for 2018-2021 and preparing to apply for continued partnership funding from the MFA of Finland. In addition, the evaluation coincided with the related process of revising CMI's Strategy for 2018-2021, and ongoing organizational learning and development activities.

Earlier in 2016, CMI had been the subject of an extensive external Finnish MFA evaluation that focused on the performance of the MFA civil society funding instrument.[5] That evaluation provided some helpful insights and feedback to CMI as well, but was not targeted specifically on CMI's niche as a peace mediation organization in ways that could provide learning from the past programme cycle, and reflection on the challenges of global and local contexts now shaping the prospects for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. To complement the MFA evaluation, address this learning need, and inform CMI's on-going strategic planning and design processes, CMI framed a more learning-oriented evaluation using Critical Friend as the main methodology.

The Critical Friend evaluation was to focus primarily on CMI's Programme 2014-2017, but gradually expanded to include also issues pertinent for the organization's ability to implement the Programme successfully. Eventually, the Critical Friend process aimed to:

» **Build upon and complement the previous 2014-2016 MFA evaluation of CMI.**
» **Add to, and draw upon, internal reporting and analysis.**
» **Generate real-time learning to feed directly into CMI's on-going strategic planning and programme design work to set the road map for 2018-2021.**
» **Contribute to deliberation and discussion of CMI's niche and value added as a conflict resolution actor.**

Having identified several independent senior experts with evaluation experience in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, CMI reviewed CVs, and spoke with a shortlist of candidates who could potentially be a Critical Friend, before ultimately selecting Dr. Eleanor O'Gorman in November 2016 to perform the evaluation.

Dr. Eleanor O'Gorman is a Senior Associate of the University of Cambridge, Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS). She has over 20 years of experience in the fields of conflict, peacebuilding, humanitarian and development affairs including gender analysis and policy. Eleanor runs a private consulting practice, and her clients include: the United Nations; the European Union; governments of the UK, Ireland, and Germany; and NGOs including Conciliation Resources, Crisis Action and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. She regularly undertakes fieldwork to support analysis, design and evaluation of aid strategy and programmes in conflict-affected countries. Her field experience includes Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Zimbabwe, Somalia, Timor-Leste, Sri Lanka and Nepal. She has also led strategic reviews and facilitated strategic planning and organizational learning processes with clients. Eleanor previously served for 6 years as a senior adviser with the UN on conflict prevention and peacebuilding as well as EU-UN relations, based in New York and Brussels and travelling frequently to support country offices and teams working in crisis contexts. More recently, she was Director of Policy & Practice with Conciliation Resources in London. She is the author of The Frontline Runs Through Every Woman, and Conflict and Development with a forthcoming chapter on 'Women Peace and Security and the Agenda on Sexual Violence in Conflict' in the Oxford Handbook on Women, Peace and Security.

The main approach to the programme evaluation was 'portfolio review' drawing on desk-based analysis of existing documentation from all the projects in CMI's 2014-2016 programme (including previous independent evaluations), supplemented by a deeper case study on one project including interviews with CMI staff and stakeholders. The evaluation questions ranged across performance of the programme portfolio: strengths and weakness, project/programme design features, niche and value added of CMI, and learning and results. In addition to the Programme Evaluation report, other outputs of the Critical Friend process included an Inception Report, Peer & Trends Analysis, and individual notes on organizational issues as well as from the methodology and process itself.

The engagement of the Critical Friend was planned principally around one-week visits to CMI's Helsinki office. These visits were intensive and filled with a range of activities including focus groups, interviews, participation in staff and team meetings, facilitating meetings with leadership, team heads, and briefing and learning with those in CMI managing the Critical Friend process. At other points, the Critical Friend provided remote dedicated consultation (e.g. phone, Skype meetings), or draft written outputs to CMI – all of which had to be timely and turned around relatively quickly to be useful and used. Altogether, the process included some 50 working days on the part of the Critical Friend.

The Critical Friend process resulted in both tangible and intangible contributions to CMI's strategic and programmatic thinking and organizational ability to implement it:

» **More rounded and multifaceted evaluation of strengths and weaknesses of CMI's programme 2014-2016, which provided a deeper, and more critical look at the CMI Programme than would otherwise have occurred. External and research-based validation of CMI's work and approach with learning to inform adjustments for future programming.**
» **Acceleration of internal CMI discussion and analysis, resulting in a stronger shared understanding of the needs and priorities of the new programme, including jointly laid emphasis on the upgraded focus on Women in Peacemaking and Policy & Learning.**
» **Strengthened internal understanding and grounding of choices made in planning. This includes**

better shared understanding of key concepts, such as use of Theory of Change and complementarity, at different levels of CMI.
» **Better understanding of current state of the peacemaking field and future trends as well as CMI's niche and role within the field. This ensured that CMI's new strategy and programme were based on up-to-date analysis of the wider field.**
» **Surfacing of gaps and needs in organizational development to underpin programme and strategy, for example in staff roles, internal communications, and aligning of administrative procedures and programming needs.**
» **Increased emphasis on developing CMI as a learning organization, and how this helps and improves the work and performance of all teams and overall organizational development.**
» **Strategic engagement with CMI's lead donor, the Finnish MFA, through sharing of findings and regular consultations, the evaluation provided space for updating and deepening this partnership.**

The clearest result of the evaluation is a stronger CMI Programme 2018-2021 and improved institutional ability to implement it. Based on insights from other fields, it can be assumed that some changes may only become visible over a longer timeframe, and may not always be explicitly traced back to a catalytic role or contribution by the Critical Friend process. Even so, throughout the range of after-action interviews at CMI the verdict for the process has been strongly positive, and CMI intends to explore ways to apply the methodology again in the future.

Dr. Eleanor O'Gorman during CMI staff retreat 2017.

TIMELINE OF THE PROCESS

Phase 1: PREPARATION

June – October 2016: Building the idea of Critical Friend evaluation
- » Idea of Critical Friend evaluation introduced to FI MFA
- » Concept refined and Terms of Reference drafted

October 2016: Shortlisting of potential Critical Friends and inquiries made

November-December 2016: Contracting and inception (tasks, programme and organization)
- » 1st mission to Helsinki (November)
- » MFA informed of the process and selection of CF

Phase 2: TRUST BUILDING AND ENGAGEMENT

December 2016 – January 2017: Peer and Trends Analysis (incl. external interviews)
- » 1st meeting with the MFA as part of January mission to Helsinki (initial findings of Peer & Trends Analysis discussed)

January-March 2017: Engagement with CMI staff and support to CMI strategizing
- » 2nd/3rd/4th missions to Helsinki (January, February, March)
- » Staff interviews, focus groups, participation to team meetings, annual staff retreat and strategizing meetings
- » Meeting with CMI Board

Phase 3: PROGRAMME LEARNING AND DESIGN

April-May 2017: Programme evaluation
- » Desk review and interviews
- » 2nd meeting with the MFA as part of May mission to Helsinki (initial findings of Programme Evaluation discussed)

May-June 2017: Sparring to design of new programme
- » 5th mission to Helsinki (May)
- » Remote participation to workshops and comments to programme plans

Phase 4: DEBRIEFING, REFLECTION, AND EXIT

June-July 2017: Programme evaluation report finalised

September-October 2017: Closing
- » 6th mission to Helsinki (October)
- » Debriefings to CMI staff and management
- » 3rd meeting with the MFA (evaluation report and CMI's management response discussed)

III. CRITICAL FRIEND PROCESS:
REFLECTIONS FROM A STRATEGIC PARTNER

CMI invited counterparts from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland to briefings by the Critical Friend, after we had already been interviewed as sources.

The first briefing already set the tone for the joint learning process. The deep insider position of Dr. Eleanor O'Gorman in mediation circles as well as her excellent analytical skills brought most interesting findings on the context of CMI's work through the Peer & Trend Analysis. Was the space for mediation shrinking or expanding? How did peers rank CMI among them? How was thinking on competition and cooperation between actors evolving? The peer views triggered a lively substantive discussion that continued throughout the process.

Naturally a Critical Friend also has to be critical. I commend Dr. Eleanor Gorman for fulfilling this task by leading us into a joint process of critical thinking in the best sense of the word.

Looking back, the most interesting parts for us of the Critical Friend process were the analyses of CMI's external image and the current political context, as they were closest to the Ministry's strategic thinking as well.

Looking back, the most interesting parts for us of the Critical Friend process were the analyses of CMI's external image and the current political context, as they were closest to the Ministry's strategic thinking as well. These issues are intertwined with the external image of Finland as a small neutral country, and the international situation where we operate. Though in the beginning of the process we both might have given specified and limited answers, the discussions made us see more strategic need for co-operation between CMI and the Ministry.

Less interesting to the Ministry were internal and operational issues of CMI tackled towards the end of the process.

In Finland the relationship between the government and the civil society participating in development cooperation and peace mediation is overall very constructive, as civil society is seen as an important sphere for the citizens. Their initiatives receive considerable subsidy from the government. NGOs and the Ministry have a tradition of cooperation in major efforts, like in arranging major conferences, when we simply have to pull all our forces together to realize our plans. Therefore, structurally the confidence needed to embark on an avenue for mutual learning exists.

Yet, the government should be fair in its relations to different NGOs. Therefore, as the representatives of the Ministry we in this process had to guarantee our neutrality and not participate in the discussions, when the Critical Friend started contributing to CMI's strategy or analyzing its internal arrangements.

I sense that the joint learning and discussion process may have contributed to more strategic thinking than before on the partnership between CMI and the Ministry both in thematic multilateral discussions on mediation and in particular country contexts. Particularly, increased discussion on "complementarity" and the "ecosystem" of mediation actors was enriched in the exchanges of views in joint meetings with the Critical Friend.

Sirpa Mäenpää
Ambassador for Mediation, Africa and the Middle East
Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland,
Political Department

IV. LEARNING FROM THE PROCESS

CMI's experience with the Critical Friend methodology provides one example of how it could be more widely applied to advance good evaluation and learning practices in a mediation and peacebuilding context. Any Critical Friend application is best built around its strengths – real-time assessment and reflection – but CMI's experience also highlights that there is more than one way to apply the methodology. This section seeks to highlight the key issues to inform a successful Critical Friend process, as well as considering the design options and trade-offs involved.

Building Trust

The heart and soul of any Critical Friend process is the person selected to fill the position. It is a demanding role that has both personal and professional requirements. These can include thematic, organizational and operational experience of peacebuilding and conflict resolution, research and academic depth and abilities to critically review, strong communication and interpersonal skills, likeability, ability to work under pressure and with multiple interlocutors in dynamic process, credibility with senior management, board and peer organizations, as well as familiarity and track record of working with evaluation and learning methodologies.

As such, the Critical Friend mixes objective and subjective requirements, beyond the typical selection criteria of evaluators focused on evaluation experience and expertise in the given thematic and geographic areas. Emphasis on trust building as a decisive investment is less prevalent in classic evaluations – or even in other accompaniment models of evaluation, such as developmental evaluation.

The accompaniment inherent in a Critical Friend process hinges on building and maintaining trust. Listening, including and consulting are paramount modalities for creating the needed safe, respectful and appreciated atmosphere and a sense of collegiality. Being 'critical' is a central part of the approach, but this cannot be done without openness and trust.

Given the weight of personality and trust in the Critical Friend role and process, the management of com-munications, relationships and real-time dynamics is an essential challenge for the Critical Friend who needs to shift between disparate roles and keep overall perspective and focus of the exercise. One also has to accept both the positive and challenging attributes that any given senior professional will bring to the role and which will shape the evolution to some extent.

—— RECOMMENDATIONS ——

» **Invest in the inception and trust building:** it takes time for both organization and Critical Friend to get to know each other, to build both the access and trust that are critical to the success of the whole exercise. A better fit enables more tailored feedback, and more actionable recommendations.

» **Personality driven aspects can greatly affect the process.** Critical Friends need trust and space to perform their role, they should be approachable, open-minded, and aware of the trusted role they are asked to play.

» **Critical Friends need to "fit in:"** conflict resolution and peacebuilding is a values-driven field, and the person themselves must also be values-driven. Each organization is different; in practice this may require more time in "getting used to" the person.

Iteration & Decision-making

One of the benefits of a Critical Friend approach is an inherent flexibility and ability to adjust as the process evolves. Iteration enables the process to focus on the most relevant aspects – especially those new questions and sites of inquiry raised by earlier phases – and expand the terrain for learning and potential insights.

Critical Friends are catalysts: their involvement can encourage or speed-up change. The insider/outsider dynamic they bring carries the greatest value in combining

validation, constructive challenge and exchange. For organizations, this potential for catalytic learning must to be linked up to decision-making processes or 'parking lots' for the issues to be addressed later. It should not be assumed that this will happen automatically – especially as there is a trade-off in focusing on developing the Critical Friend as an ongoing and engaging process or through products it generates.

—— RECOMMENDATIONS ——

» **Identify link-ups to decision-making:** there needs to be a way to translate findings and learnings into action. Linking up to existing internal processes helps strengthen momentum and build opportunities for interaction, but it has to weighed against adding to already complex processes. There is always a risk that too many issues are surfaced at the same time and expectations need to be managed.

» **Refreshing the insider/outsider dynamic:** over time it will be difficult to maintain a fresh perspective, but this can from the outset be mitigated through a structure of accompaniment which provides balance between engagement, distance for reflection, and fixed outputs. This also applies to the assigning organization to conduct its own reflection of the process from a different and internal perspective.

» **Communication is key to good iteration:** as topics for inquiry expand and a process grows both limits and targets will evolve. Constant and open communication among core team including Critical Friend, as well as with leadership and relevant staff as needed is the best way to ensure the existence of a shared understanding of targets, deliverables and ways forward.

Multiple roles

The scope and role of a Critical Friend are multifaceted – expert, evaluator, facilitator, critic, colleague, sounding board. There is a need to balance these different roles, as being too fixed or fluid in roles can blur the mandate and expectations of the host organization for the Critical Friend role.

Some of the terms used to describe the role of the Critical Friend by CMI staff:

Sounding board	
Evaluator	Problem-solver
Confessional / Therapist	
Coach	Internal Resource
Vent to release pressure	
Catalyst	Confidante
Provocateur	Critic
Annoying presence	
Facilitator	Friend
Observer	
External Expert	Colleague

—— RECOMMENDATIONS ——

» **Role awareness (by the Critical Friend):** There will be multiple roles assumed and managed by the Critical Friend as part of the ongoing dynamic of the process. There can sometimes be little time to reflect on changing roles as one responds to situations and developments, meetings, information and expectations of others. A conscious laying out of possible roles with key interlocutors from the outset may be useful so that they are prepared and can support.

» **Role awareness (by the organization):** In practice, however the Critical Friend is like a conductor and has to decide which roles are best suited to given tasks, situations or relationships. The Critical Friend is a professional, who plays an important and trusted function in the evaluation; they need the space to perform different roles and ask provocative questions.

> » **Support the Critical Friend during the process:** for instance, could another external trusted person provide a 'meta-perspective' of how the Critical Friend process is unfolding and act as an avenue for identifying and dealing with challenges and drawing out learning – both positive and negative – from this added dimension. Alternatively, an option would be to have Critical Friends – a duo or small team of individuals, offering peer support, depersonalizing the process and taking off some pressure.

Purpose & Ownership

The purpose of both the sparring and the evaluative elements of the process must be clearly determined, owned and communicated by all of the organization – not only those commissioning it. This includes articulating the quality of 'critical' – what does it mean, amid evaluation and professional judgement but also in a context of collaborative trust and engagement. The objective should be to help identify and elaborate on potential for improvement and change; this includes both positive and negative learning, which may not always be the easiest to address.

—— **RECOMMENDATIONS** ——

> » **Determine how constructive challenge is understood and owned on a broad basis.** It is not realistic, or desirable to open all possible aspects for critical challenge. At the same time, this has to be commonly shared in order to enable organizational learning.
> » **Ownership and engagement of leadership** is vital to successfully set in motion and steer the process overall.
> » Simultaneously, **oversight and ownership** of the process must be located somewhere in the organization more precisely. It is a commissioned process, that needs steering and management.

Managing Change & Intensity

The iterations and multiplicity of a Critical Friend's roles set additional pressures for process management and internal communications. Process management becomes a challenging aspect, especially as iteration comes hard and fast. After a while it may not be as straight-forward to say what is in the focus of the Critical Friend process.

There can be a tidal feel to the process – an ebb and flow where some people (leadership and wider staff) are more engaged than others at different points in the process or are more interested in specific events and outputs than others. A sense of being overwhelmed can slowly develop as so many issues are raised simultaneously in various participatory fora. In managing the process, the challenge that rises above others is managing this sense of intensity, while ensuring that the learnings and insights surfaced are appropriately captured or lead to action.

—— **RECOMMENDATIONS** ——

> » **Steering mechanisms need to shape the shared understanding on targets and the way forward:** this includes both findings as such, but also a "meta" sense of how the process is doing, especially when expanding or restricting the scope. A part of this is also determining how the Critical Friend can "hand over" findings that have been identified, but cannot be currently addressed, or fall outside the primary focus.
> » **Changes in the scope and roles of the Critical Friend occur:** this expanded or shifting remit must be clearly communicated in timely manner so that expectations can be managed through sufficient discussion. As the remit tends to expand, attention must be paid to prioritization and sequencing of tasks, organization of information (to avoid overflow) and closing of loops opened.
> » The traditional approach of **leaning on the implementation of the Terms of Refence is not sufficient.** Active, continuously present/available, and clearly mandated management of the assignment must be integrated to the process.

An important aspect is risk assessment and management: understanding the risks of such an approach as well as understanding that the real-time nature of the process means that not all dynamics or factors can be controlled or communicated and that a certain appetite for risk or creativity is required.

Engagement & Interaction

Accompaniment approaches can have longer timespans, with greater frequency of presence than traditional evaluations. They are therefore well placed for wider participation and continued engagement, be it with the organization's personnel, board, partners, peers or other stakeholders. The Critical Friend interacted with a diverse cross-section of CMI staff, from various locations, functions and levels of the organization. The process served to enhance internal participation and equalize knowledge levels among different people involved.

n CMI's case, this engagement was particularly rich in terms of shared learning with the Finnish MFA as the lead donor and strategic partner. As part of the process, Finnish MFA counterparts from different departments (Political, Mediation, Aid and Conflict, Civil Society, and M&E) were involved and the discussions were mutually beneficial in terms of learning, reflection and ideas. The evaluation provided the space for updating and deepening this strategic partnership.

─── **RECOMMENDATIONS** ───

» **Being an independent expert, a Critical Friend's engagement makes the exercise more interesting and credible for the donor:** this is in part exactly due to the same attributes that make it attractive for the host organization: a direct pathway to less formalized, and (rare) insights into the context, and how the host is adapting its practices to fit it.

» **Interaction is rewarding but also demanding in terms of preparedness, intensity and time.** Time in particular is a significant investment from the organizational leadership. However, due to the nature of the accompaniment, the Critical Friend mostly is involved in processes that would take place internally anyway.

» As interactions tend to expand and create new expectations, the **entry and the exit of Critical Friend in engagements should be carefully planned and managed.** Particular attention should be paid to clearly communicating the rationale as well as roles involved.

Internal Learning

The Critical Friend plays a role of mirroring and validating but is in a position to gain a much more comprehensive understanding by dusting off existing internal learning or past monitoring and evaluation reports to aggregate and harvest valuable organizational and staff knowledge and understanding. That sparring can then feed that into deeper digging of assumptions of ways of working, priorities or goals. Unintended or even counterintuitive learning is a great bonus of intensive processes such as the Critical Friend; but translating this into effective learning requires systematic preparatory work: thinking of who will learn, where, when and how.

CMI's experience speaks to the fact that a Critical Friend process has significant potential for boosting a culture of organizational learning more broadly. For non-profit organizations in the broader development, humanitarian and crisis response fields, the interest in organizational learning is directly linked to improving operations for greater impact, but also improving local capacities and ownership.

- » Identify in advance and during the process potential **feedback loops** and how to act on them in a timely fashion: where and how does the Critical Friend provide inputs?
- » Establish a low-threshold **"clearing house"** function for accumulated questions that need to be sorted out. This may be between the Critical Friend and the managing team but could include also other stakeholders. It will also help in recording "temporary memory" of the process – ideas and observations that remain undocumented and can easily be lost.
- » From the point of the process, it is also important to achieve a sense of **closure**, as only once that has been achieved is there truly time for the organization to concentrate on applying what has been learned.

- » **Plan for methodological reflection and documentation of iterations and learning already before the process starts:** this eases management of the process, but also strengthens the account of the changes engendered by the process.
- » **Invest in time to digest and debrief** about emerging issues, jointly with the Critical Friend, managing unit and other key stakeholders.
- » **Produce a steady stream of interim outputs:** traditional inception, mid-term and final reports have their place, but small captured observations are needed to capture the real-time contributions, and thus observe change that takes place, as well as identify where gaps remain or to act as an additional clearing house for issues raised but that cannot be addressed during the remaining time of the review. Such "insta-reflections" could also be a boon in terms of synchronizing understanding of how the process is going, and update expectations.

Methodological Reflection & Documentation

A challenging aspect of more learning-driven approaches is that with real-time learning most insights are actively being applied. This makes it difficult to attribute and affirm change in any after-action report, or takes away from the recommendations of the evaluation - which may have already been applied. Changes in mental models, personal behaviour, or use of capacities are much more problematic to attribute – especially if the Critical Friend process mixed in with other parallel processes.

It may be burdensome to timetable sufficient reflection on the process and the methodology itself, as the pressure is on to gather information, analyse and move towards key meetings where discussion and decisions on future work take place. A well-prepared approach to meta-reflection however increases manageability, effectiveness and accountability of the process.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR EVALUATION AND LEARNING IN PEACEBUILDING

The Critical Friend differs substantively from the classic evaluator – a detached outsider focused on assessing pre-set performance measurements.

Critical Friend methodology is based on enquiry, collaborative learning and real-time feedback. As such, certain methods of traditional evaluation may apply and indeed do in this case e.g. programme evaluation; document review; semi-structured interviews and focus groups; facilitated workshops; presentation and sharing of findings for discussion and feedback. Critical Friend also contains elements of real-time learning, embedded evaluator, responding to conflict contexts, and in doing so adapting, expanding and supplementing performance-related questions and expectations.

The Critical Friend methodology itself is also open for iteration. It is influenced by and reflects the various developments and adaptations of M&E methods over the past decade, especially in how to better measure what success, impact, and failure look like in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Conflict resolution organizations have been seeking to adapt and propose rigorous and alternative methods for learning and evaluation that complement or ultimately replace the results-based metrics that have derived from development aid evaluation trends tied to value for money.

Conflict resolution organizations have been seeking to adapt and propose rigorous and alternative methods for learning and evaluation that complement or ultimately replace the results-based metrics that have derived from development aid evaluation trends tied to money. **Examples of good practice** include early work in 1998 by Kenneth Bush on Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment methods that distinguished between peace effectiveness and project effectiveness, the work of Search for Common Ground on Designing for Results: Integrating Monitoring and Evaluation in Conflict Transformation Programs in 2006, and the formative work of CDA through the Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP) Program that was launched in 1999 and combined, research, consulting and training to advance M&E for peacebuilding.

More recent experimentation by other actors includes the work on the peer review as quality control of professional judgement in mediation processes by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue as well as the work undertaken by Saferworld to adapt and use outcome harvesting in complex programme settings. Alongside that are various manuals, and guidance notes developed by NGOs and bilateral donors on measuring results for conflict prevention and peacebuilding that grow out of recognition of the need to adapt traditional measures of development effectiveness and to promote conflict-sensitive development.

For the past 30 plus years, the **OECD Development Assistance Committee** has been the repository for good evaluation practice and guidance for its government donor members. OECD DAC in effect is the norm setter for what constitutes official development assistance and serves a key role in the introduction of new codes for aid categories of peacebuilding and support to conflict resolution. In 2012, after a multi-year process the DAC issued a Guidance Note on Evaluation in Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding. At 74 pages including Annexes it has not fully broken through to influence M&E to the degree one would expect. The suggestions and approaches in the Guidance tend to require expert input to be applied in purposeful ways. Moving from Guidance to better practice is a gap where perhaps Critical Friend is helpful.

Core features of **Developmental Evaluation** from the work of Michael Quinn Patton et al. include bringing evaluation and learning functions firmly into the implementation set-up and process. Ongoing learning and feedback play a core role to track and respond to changes as they

happen, and to test assumptions and whether they are holding or working. It also assumes in its purest form, an ongoing and long-term process.[6] To fully engage and deploy Developmental Evaluation takes considerable financial, staff, and organizational commitment that can be too heavy for small to medium sized conflict resolution organizations. Also, the increasingly limiting constraints of funding modalities that can range from 6-18 months on average with strong expectations of results make this model difficult to embed. Nonetheless, there are core elements of the methodology that are portable and have no doubt influenced many of the accompaniment and support activities of M&E that are now being used by peacebuilders.

Real-Time Evaluation (RTE) in humanitarian assistance is another influential methodology that spread through the 2000s and 2010s and grew out of the urgent need to learn from complex humanitarian relief operations as they were happening. This was to identify potential gaps and harm that might be generated and to address operational challenges in real time.[7] Key features of RTE are that they are rapid, flexible, responsive, carried out in early stages and evaluate emerging or interim results, involve a wide range of stakeholders and are interactive. This focus on immediate operational learning to improve delivery, reach, and impact of humanitarian assistance has influenced M&E practices in crisis and conflict settings, where similar challenges are faced. Such real-time feedback loops have value for peacebuilding work where the context and dynamics for implementing projects can be fluid, volatile and at times disruptive.

Theories of Change (ToC), conflict analysis, conflict sensitivity, and the search for new indicators are all tools and methods that have emerged around the need to understand impact and capture change in complex settings. They try to make sense of the more linear demands and methodologies of development assistance programmes through results-based management. There are many existing examples of use of ToC among peacebuilding actors and learning from other fields. What is less evident is how far and how well donor evaluations and requirements for results frameworks are taking account of ToC and successfully tracing and validating changes and improvements to peace efforts and outcomes.

CMI, through it Programme Management Office (PMO) has been exploring the implications of taking a more systemic, iterative and 'artisan' view of its work on media-

tion and how it learns from and shapes it practice. This can be seen in approaches developed to planning, monitoring and evaluation in recent years including the development of 'internal reviews' – learning events with groups from inside CMI and drawing on Senior Advisers and occasionally an external expert, where a project is unpacked and scrutinised in terms of progress, working assumptions and adaptive management. It can also be found in the chapter by Oskari Eronen, head of the PMO at CMI, in the collection by Brusset, de Coning, and Hughes (2016) on Complexity Thinking for Peacebuilding Practice and Evaluation.

It is in this context that the Critical Friend methodology, as developed, applied and tested by CMI, seeks to make a contribution and add value. The Critical Friend methodology can complement traditional performance evaluations derived from the development model of OECD DAC guidance. It does not seek to replace results-based performance measures such as effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. Rather, what an adaptive and iterative approach such as Critical Friend can do, is counter some of the limitations of the results-based approach in providing learning from implementation, and more information and understanding of effectiveness and other evaluation criteria in relation to conflict resolution processes.

The Critical Friend has potential to take a holistic approach to tracking the non-linear nature of peace-related work by combining evaluation, learning and organizational development.

The experience of the Critical Friend process at CMI provides evidence for why and how Critical Friend can contribute to both evaluation and learning in conflict resolution. The Critical Friend has potential to take a holistic approach to tracking the non-linear nature of peace-related work by combining evaluation, learning and organizational development. Based on CMI's more expansive application of the Critical Friend, such a process can provide the rich detail of:

1.The working assumptions for specific regions, and processes engaged in; this helps to test and challenge underlying theory of change, make explicit how and why decisions were made at different points in the develop-

ment of a process or project, consideration of risks, and identification of needs for adaptation or focus, as well as documenting more specifically the implications of certain decisions and actions. This was evident in the Libya case study that was undertaken as part of the Programme Evaluation carried out by the Critical Friend where rich sub-national work could usefully connect to wider attempts to build a peace and transition   process. This kind of peace process learning is what performance evaluations often miss and need to surface to address the positive and negative impacts of support, as well as accountability for funding.

2. The nature of results and how they emerge: By unpacking and questioning in constructive and collaborative ways, the strategic and operational decision-making, logic of intervention and implementation, as well as evolution (sequencing, adapting) of actions and engagement in a particular geographic location (e.g. Libya, Ukraine) or theme (e.g. gender, capacity building, mediation support etc.) one can piece together the substance of results for peacebuilding. This helps better articulate and specify what progress means, but also to pick up on negative learning or where interventions have not been helpful or may even had resulted in a negative outcome.

> *The capturing and documentation of detail helps build the credibility and content of results in an area where they are often questioned, qualified or challenged.*

The capturing and documentation of detail helps build the credibility and content of results in an area where they are often questioned, qualified or challenged. Such detail can also help to construct and strengthen result chains that link actions of a peacebuilding organization and potentially link across the same context or thematic area with other actors for coherence and complementarity.

3. Organizational culture, decision making and operational support that make up the platform for implementing funding and delivering results. This can allow us to better inform, describe and account for the particular risks, flexibility, adaptation as well as challenges and blockages to shaping and delivering peace and transition

processes at global and local levels. It can address issues of conflict or gender sensitivity in terms of how organizations build operational support to better respond and adapt to the needs of peace processes on the ground.

There can be value for conflict resolution organizations to have someone come in and spend time reflecting with leadership and staff on how they work in term of organizational learning and development and not only focus on programmes and activities. This must be necessarily time-limited engagement as any organization can only take so much enquiring, analysis, and self-reflection for it to be useful in terms of leading to decisions, actions or change.

It is possible to envisage a narrower scope and use of a Critical Friend that takes in a specific project, theme, timeframe and focuses in on that to support learning, adaptation and impact in specific geographical contexts or implementing teams. Such potential focus includes organizational development of peacebuilding organizations in line with their values and approaches, supporting programme implementation and adaptation through real-time analysis and feedback, but also more broadly for peer relationships in our field. There is potential to work in trusted relationship with peers to engage in reciprocal 'Critical friend' discussions on each other's projects. This might be more possible in terms of projects and programmes than at level of organization which can be more sensitive in terms of identity, competitive positioning, and internal issues. However, at project or programme level, at head office or in specific country settings, it should be possible to use the critical friend modality as a way of building relationships and trust for greater complementarity and cooperation among peacebuilding organizations. For the field of conflict resolution at large, the Critical Friend has multiple positive and constructive application and implications.

Endnotes and References

1. Before publishing this paper, CMI has engaged feedback on this experience in the following forums: Alliance for Peacebuilding 2017 annual conference; Thursday Talk webinar organised by Design, Monitoring and Evaluation (DME) for Peace; brown bag lunch hosted by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO); as well as an evaluation seminar organised by CMI and Kehys in Finland.

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