

REPORT

SUMMARY REPORT AUGUST 2026

Negotiation Council Geneva x
Search for Common Ground

Search for Common Ground (Search), Negotiation Council Geneva (NCG), and Schraner Negotiation Institute Summary Report – August 2026

Following two days of intensive exchange and practical negotiation training with a selected group of peacebuilding practitioners from **Search**, this workshop offered valuable insights into how the **Schraner Concept®** can be applied and adapted to complex peacebuilding and conflict-affected contexts. The workshop explored the differences and connections between dialogue, mediation and negotiation, and how negotiation skills can be used more broadly in peacebuilding and humanitarian contexts.

Our discussion highlighted that mediation involves the intervention of a third party whose role is to help two or more parties manage or resolve a conflict. Negotiation, by contrast, generally takes place directly between the parties themselves, with the objective of reaching an agreement that advances their respective interests. Dialogue is somewhat different, as it creates a space in which people or communities facing similar challenges can come together to discuss their concerns, experiences and shared interests. Dialogue can be thematic and does not necessarily aim at reaching a concrete agreement. Nevertheless, the skills required for effective negotiation can also be highly relevant to dialogue and peacebuilding.

Key Takeaways

One of the central takeaways was that negotiation concepts and terminology cannot always be transferred from one context to another without careful reflection. For instance, the notion of **compromise** can carry very different meanings and connotations depending on the cultural, political, and regional context. What may be perceived as a constructive and pragmatic solution in one setting may be interpreted as weakness, an unacceptable concession, or even betrayal in another. Recognizing and understanding these contextual differences is therefore essential before applying particular negotiation strategies or advocating specific outcomes.

An important distinction was made between compromise and common ground. From the perspective of Schraner Concept®, compromise is not necessarily a successful outcome. If neither party's underlying interests are adequately addressed, a compromise may instead produce a **lose-lose outcome**. An agreement that merely requires both sides to give something up, without addressing the underlying drivers of the conflict, may provide only a temporary solution and leave the conflict likely to resurface. Search's approach, on the other hand, focuses on moving beyond stated positions and exploring the **underlying interests, needs, and demands** of the parties, with a view to identifying genuine common ground and developing outcomes that address the issues at the heart of the dispute.

This becomes particularly essential in humanitarian and peacebuilding negotiations, where negotiations often take place within highly sensitive political and operational environments. Humanitarian and development **programming** can, in some contexts, create space for negotiations that contribute to peacebuilding objectives, while ensuring that humanitarian principles, development priorities and other core values are not compromised and that additional risks are not created. In these contexts, it is important to find opportunities for **non-adversarial negotiations** that focus on jointly addressing humanitarian and development needs to advance peacebuilding objectives without compromising values and principles or creating additional risks.

Thus, the workshop generated interesting discussions about the question of **finding common ground**. In difficult conversations, it can be tempting to ask why a counterpart holds a particular position. From the perspective of the Schraner Concept®, however, repeatedly asking “why?” can trigger a cycle of arguments and counterarguments and shift the negotiation towards justifying positions rooted in the past. A more strategic approach is to **focus on the future**: What needs to happen next? What are the possible options? And what can be negotiated moving forward?

One central challenge of the workshop was that effective negotiation does not begin with trying to **“make the counterparty understand”** or convince them that we are right. It begins with understanding the other side. By clarifying our own priorities and establishing shared criteria, we can create the conditions for effective negotiations. Context and conflict analysis can help teams identify the interests of the other party to find common ground without falling into the cycle of arguments and counterarguments the Schraner Concept® aims to avoid.

An additional learning concerns the role of **ethical engagement**. In high-stakes negotiations, particularly in conflict-affected settings, strategic negotiation must be accompanied by a strong awareness of the consequences of decisions and agreements for individuals, communities, civil society, and long-term relationships. The way a negotiation is conducted has implications beyond the immediate outcome. Conflict sensitivity analysis can inform positions and asks to ensure ethical engagement without negative repercussions.

The workshop also highlighted the importance of **power dynamics**. In several contexts, existing political, economic and structural power asymmetries inevitably shape the negotiation. In difficult contexts, parties often frame their red lines negatively, focusing on what they cannot accept rather than explaining what they need. From a Schraner Concept® perspective, the workshop invited the participants to frame their “must-have” demands in a positive and future looking way. This can effectively be coupled with Search’s non-adversarial advocacy approach that focuses on how to influence power holders using collaborative approaches to incorporate decision-makers’ interests.

Another key insight concerned **stakeholder mapping**. Formal institutions and legal frameworks are only one part of the negotiation landscape. Depending on the context, tribal structures, customary systems, community leaders and elders can play an equally essential role in shaping decisions and legitimacy. Effective stakeholder mapping therefore requires an understanding of both formal and informal systems of influence and how they interact.

Furthermore, various practical elements of the Schraner Concept® proved particularly relevant. Participants highlighted the importance and difficulty of developing a thorough **demand catalogue**. Investing sufficient time in identifying a large list of demands and balancing must-haves, should-haves and nice-to-haves or creative demands is challenging, but can significantly expand the room for maneuvering during negotiation. Practitioners framed these asks with neutral or constructive statements, without any accusatory or confrontational language. While this can be challenging in conflict-affected contexts, it is necessary for effective negotiations in complex contexts.

The workshop underlined the importance of **clear internal coordination within negotiation teams**. Decision-makers should not sit at the negotiation table, while the negotiation team requires clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and communication channels. This requires strong trust-building within the wider negotiation team so that those at the negotiating table are confident in their ability to make agreements within their approved scope set by decision-makers.

In many of the contexts discussed, **mechanisms to foster respect and long-term relationships** emerged as particularly important. Negotiators are likely to meet their counterparts again, sometimes repeatedly. These counterparts may also have a wide sphere of influence and impact on other power holders or areas of negotiation. Decisions to walk away, delay, escalate or accept a non-agreement should therefore always be considered their longer-term consequences. Winning a particular moment in a negotiation may come at the expense of a relationship that will remain strategically influential in the future. Therefore, these potential consequences must be identified in advance and integrated into negotiation strategies.

Finally, the discussions demonstrated that even seemingly straightforward negotiation tools require careful contextual consideration. For example, proposing that parties continuously **sign written summaries** of negotiated outcomes may help build clarity, accountability, and trust in one situation. In another, particularly where trust is already low, the same proposal may be perceived as pressure or suspicion and cause one side to disengage.

Overall, the workshop reinforced that **the principles of strategic negotiation are highly relevant across peacebuilding contexts, but their application must always be informed by local realities, relationships, systems of authority and the long-term consequences of the negotiation process.** The exchange with Search participants provided a valuable opportunity to test these ideas against real-world experience and to reflect on how negotiation methodology can remain strategically robust while being responsive to context.