

Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution:

Learning from and reflecting on mediation training skills and specialized content provided to mediators in Community and Special Mediation Boards

Summary Report

By Centre For Poverty Analysis for The Asia Foundation

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1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, The Asia Foundation (the Foundation) has worked closely with the Ministry of Justice and the Mediation Boards Commission to strengthen mediation as an accessible and effective form of dispute resolution in Sri Lanka. A key focus of this partnership has been enhancing the skills of Mediation Training Officers (MTOs or Trainers), with the expectation that improved training would be cascaded to community and special mediators through structured five-day programs.

This consultancy aimed to assess the effectiveness of MTO-led training, with the broader goal of improving mediation services nationwide. It examined how skills imparted to MTOs through a training in May 2023 were translated into the delivery of mediation training, covering both Community Mediation Boards (CMBs) and Special Mediation Boards (SMBs) in the Northern and Eastern provinces.

Between July 2023 and March 2024, the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) observed 12 training sessions (10 CMB and 2 SMB) across diverse locations including Anuradhapura, Trincomalee, Bentota, Jaffna, and others. All MTOs were observed either as lead or supporting trainers. Each session was documented using structured tools, enabling a detailed review of facilitation methods, participant engagement, and overall training quality.

Findings affirm that the training model is broadly effective and well-received, but highlighted areas for improvement—particularly in training logistics, content delivery, and thematic depth around gender and inclusion. While trainees expressed strong interest and engagement, time constraints and infrastructure gaps occasionally hindered deeper learning.

This report consolidates findings from the full review period and concludes with targeted recommendations to enhance training consistency, accessibility, and inclusivity. With continued collaboration and commitment to quality, Sri Lanka’s mediation system can be further strengthened to better meet the evolving needs of its communities.

2. Methodology and Scope

The review methodology was jointly developed by the Foundation and CEPA, with guidance from a technical committee that consisted of experts in the field. The design emphasized both analytical depth and operational relevance.

A mixed-methods approach combined qualitative tools—direct observations, interviews, and focus group discussions—with quantitative methods, including pre- and post-training surveys. This enabled triangulation and strengthened the reliability of findings.

Twelve training sessions were observed across eleven districts—Anuradhapura, Bentota, Matara, Badulla, Homagama, Rattota, Buttala, Marawila, Trincomalee, Wattala, and Jaffna—covering both Community Mediation Boards (10) and Special Mediation Boards (2 focused on land mediation). Sessions were conducted in Sinhala and Tamil, allowing assessment of bilingual delivery, cultural sensitivity, and localization of training content.

In addition to trainer observations, CEPA conducted pre- and post-session interviews with MTOs, and held focus group discussions (FGDs) with trainees. These FGDs provided insights into training relevance, gender dynamics, logistical issues, and the perceived value of mediation. Self-administered surveys assessed satisfaction, learning outcomes, and trainer effectiveness, and were tailored to varying literacy and language backgrounds through iterative testing.

Ethical protocols were followed throughout: participation was voluntary, consent was obtained, and all responses were kept confidential. This robust, context-sensitive methodology enabled a comprehensive understanding of mediation training practices and informed actionable recommendations for improvement.

3. Training Content and Thematic Coverage

The mediation training curriculum focused on core principles essential for community-level dispute resolution, including the five-step mediation process, ethical standards, neutrality, active listening, confidentiality, and record-keeping. These modules aimed to build both procedural knowledge and interpersonal skills. A key enhancement was the inclusion of recent amendments to the Mediation Boards Act, which clarified legal procedures and expanded the mandate of Special Mediation Boards. While this legal content was well-received, especially by experienced mediators, trainers struggled to balance the depth and breadth of delivery within limited timeframes. Sensitive themes—such as gender equality, disability inclusion, and caste—were often addressed only briefly or skipped altogether due to time constraints, despite being part of the updated training manual. These topics, while generating strong participant interest, frequently extended sessions and led trainers to reduce participatory components or rush through other modules. Discussions with MTO prior to the commencement of trainings revealed that they have considered including proposed changes to the training handbook.

However, many trainers defaulted to older, experience-based styles, sometimes avoiding new content they found unfamiliar or challenging. This points to a broader tension between structured curriculum delivery and adaptive facilitation, and highlights the need for targeted capacity-building, clearer guidance on time management, and stronger support to help trainers confidently address complex social issues while maintaining the participatory ethos of the program.

4. Training Methodology and Pedagogical Approach

The training program followed a five-day non-residential model. Trainers applied a mixed-method pedagogy including lectures, discussions, group activities, roleplays, storytelling, and question-and-answer segments. This diversity in approach catered well to the adult learner demographic, which included a wide age range—from young entrants to mediators over 80 years old.

Despite this diversity, certain challenges persisted. Trainers faced difficulties engaging very elderly trainees, especially when explaining abstract legal or procedural principles. To address this, trainers often used entertainment-based methods such as humor, metaphors, and dramatic storytelling. These strategies generally succeeded in maintaining attention and interest, though they sometimes detracted from the formal tone needed to convey and non-legal content.

Trainers also faced the challenge of uneven literacy and educational backgrounds among trainees. This required simplified explanations and repetition of key concepts, especially in the Tamil-speaking districts, where technical terms were often difficult to translate or understand.

Overall, trainers demonstrated adaptability and commitment. However, there were notable differences in how trainers structured sessions, sequenced content, and allocated time. The absence of a standardized training sequence meant that quality varied across locations.

5. Group Work, Roleplays, and Case Examples

Participatory components such as group work and roleplays emerged as critical learning tools. These were universally appreciated by trainees, who valued the opportunity to simulate real-life mediation scenarios, test their understanding, and receive peer feedback.

Group work was generally well-structured. Trainees were divided into small groups to discuss topics like neutrality, confidentiality, or record-keeping. Group presentations allowed for comparative reflection and created an open learning environment.

Roleplays were particularly effective when adapted to the local context. Trainers often devised scenarios that reflected regionally relevant issues—such as land inheritance disputes in Jaffna, loan repayment conflicts in Matara, or Gender Based Violence-related cases in Bentota. These localized scenarios resonated with trainees and encouraged deeper engagement.

However, the use of standardized roleplays and case examples from the manual was limited. Many trainers preferred spontaneous examples drawn from personal experience. While this added realism, it also created inconsistencies in how certain legal or ethical principles were illustrated.

Moreover, some MTOs needed greater support to manage roleplays effectively. Some lacked experience in debriefing or facilitating reflection, leading to missed learning opportunities.

6. Use of Videos, Icebreakers, and Multimedia

The training manual/s emphasized multimedia tools—especially instructional videos—to enhance adult learning by modeling best practices, demonstrating body language, and standardizing understanding. However, actual usage was limited and inconsistent due to infrastructural challenges. Many venues lacked projectors, speakers, or stable electricity, and internet access was often unreliable. Trainers resorted to personal devices, leading to visibility and sound issues that frustrated participants and reduced video effectiveness. Consequently, videos were shown in only a few sessions and often without adequate follow-up discussion. In contrast, live roleplays and dramatic readings became more common, offering real-time, culturally familiar demonstrations that encouraged interaction and were particularly effective with older or rural participants.

Similarly, the use of icebreakers and participatory warm-up techniques varied widely. In districts like Matara and Trincomalee, energizers such as storytelling circles and games helped build rapport and encouraged participation, especially among women and first-time attendees. However, many sessions skipped these activities due to time constraints, lack of confidence in facilitation, or perhaps assumptions that they were unnecessary. This inconsistency highlights broader gaps in trainer preparedness and ToT methods. While the manual promotes interactive approaches, effective implementation depends on infrastructure, time management, and trainer confidence. To address this, the program could benefit from providing pre-training checklists, offline-ready multimedia, and a curated guide to suitable icebreakers to support more consistent and confident use of participatory tools.

7. Gender Sensitivity and Social Inclusion

Although gender sensitivity and social inclusion are core principles in mediation and acknowledged in the revised training manual, their integration into training delivery was inconsistent and often superficial. Trainers generally affirmed their importance but lacked the time, confidence, or resources to address these topics meaningfully. Most gender references were limited to neutrality or fairness, without engaging deeper issues like gender-based violence, domestic abuse, dowry disputes, or gender identity. In sessions across Badulla, Jaffna, and Rattota, women and younger trainees expressed a strong desire for practical tools to handle such cases, often sharing personal experiences—but these discussions were frequently cut short due to time pressures or trainer discomfort.

MTOs widely agreed that themes like gender, caste, disability, and power asymmetries were too complex for general training formats and called for standalone sessions with deeper, case-based learning. Trainers admitted they were underprepared to handle these discussions and requested further support—such as regionally grounded case studies, discussion guides, and visual aids—to build their confidence and competence.

Language and regional dynamics further complicated delivery. In Tamil-speaking districts like Jaffna and Trincomalee, caste-related exclusion was acknowledged as a serious but underexplored issue, with no structured guidance for addressing its impact on mediation. Similarly, disability inclusion was only briefly mentioned, often generalized under “diversity,” without practical guidance on accessibility or communication support.

In sum, while the training recognizes gender and inclusion thematically, actual implementation remains weak. Trainers need dedicated time, culturally responsive materials, and targeted pedagogical tools to move beyond theory and ensure mediation challenges—rather than reinforces—existing social hierarchies.

8. Language and Accessibility

Language remained a significant challenge. While training was delivered in Sinhala and Tamil, there was no uniformity in the use of terminology, especially for legal or psychological concepts. In Tamil, trainers often struggled to find appropriate translations for key mediation principles, or theoretical concepts which may lead to confusion or misinterpretation.

Participants from both language groups requested better-structured handouts, glossaries, and translated case studies. Some trainees and trainers also raised concerns about the availability of a sufficient Tamil-speaking resource persons and trainers.

Accessibility for older and differently-abled participants was a recurring issue. Some training venues lacked proper facilities such as ramps, handrails, or accessible toilets. Trainers adapted by slowing down the pace or providing extra support but requested clearer guidelines on how to deliver inclusive training.

9. Trainee Feedback and Satisfaction

Trainees responded positively to the training experience overall. They appreciated the friendly and respectful attitude of trainers, the use of real-life examples, and the space for open discussion. Many commented on the usefulness of group work and the value of interacting with peers from other regions.

However, several areas for improvement were identified:

- A desire for more time, especially for Q&A sessions.
- Need for more regionally relevant examples and case studies.
- Lack of printed materials or handouts.

- Inadequate accommodation and poor logistical planning in some districts.
- Limited opportunities to observe real mediation sessions, followed by an opportunity or sessions to discuss the challenges stemming from the observed mediation sessions.

Trainees expressed strong interest in refresher courses, a theory based training coupled with exposure to ‘real-life mediation process’, and advanced training on specific topics such as land law, family mediation, and gender-based violence. They also wanted greater access to video resources and post-training mentorship.

10. Reflections on Trainer Capacity and Style

The quality of facilitation varied but was generally strong. Trainers demonstrated deep commitment and skill in managing complex groups. Many had decades of experience and were well-respected in their districts.

However, differences in trainer style and preparation affected the quality of learning. Some MTOs dominated sessions, reducing space for trainee participation or co-trainer input. Others lacked confidence in newer modules, particularly those dealing with legal reforms or social issues.

There was a strong consensus among trainers that refresher sessions, capacity-building workshops, and standardization efforts were needed. Trainers requested clearer guidelines on how to sequence content, manage time, and deliver sensitive topics effectively.

11. Recommendations

Based on the review, the following key recommendations were made:

- **Strengthen Visual and Printed Resources:** Provide videos, slideshows, and handouts in offline formats (e.g., USBs or CDs) to overcome infrastructure barriers.
- **Standardize Training Delivery:** Develop a uniform training plan and sequence to ensure consistent coverage of all modules.
- **Create Standalone Modules:** Develop separate sessions on gender sensitivity, disability inclusion, and caste awareness to allow focused discussions.
- **Build Trainer Capacity:** Conduct regular refresher programs, mentorship for new trainers, and workshops on sensitive issue facilitation.
- **Improve Accessibility and Infrastructure:** Ensure venues are accessible and provide necessary materials (books, pens, accommodation, meals).
- **Enhance Monitoring and Feedback:** Develop mechanisms to track how mediators apply skills post-training, including follow-up observations and coaching.

12. Conclusion

The 2024–2025 mediation training review confirmed that Sri Lanka’s mediation training system remains a valuable and largely effective platform for equipping community-level mediators. The model was generally well-received by both trainers and trainees, with strong appreciation expressed for the participatory methodologies, updated manuals, and commitment to multilingual delivery. However, the review also highlighted critical areas requiring attention to ensure the training remains relevant, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse and dynamic realities of communities across the country.

MTOs brought notable strengths to the process, including skilled facilitation, experience-based insights, and an ability to adapt to varied contexts. Yet, they also navigated a complex set of constraints—tight schedules, limited access to multimedia tools, varying degrees of familiarity with new training content, and discomfort with sensitive thematic areas. These limitations sometimes resulted in uneven training quality, particularly on issues such as gender-based violence, caste, and disability inclusion.

Trainees, for their part, showed deep commitment to learning and a strong willingness to engage with both foundational and complex concepts. Their feedback consistently emphasized the need for more regionally grounded examples, greater thematic depth, and space for open discussion—particularly on socially sensitive or high-stakes dispute areas like domestic violence, land rights, or generational conflict. The review also found that older participants, language minorities, and women benefitted from sessions where facilitation was inclusive, interactive, and contextually aware.

The way forward involves a set of strategic refinements. Extending training duration from five to eight days, as suggested by several trainers, would ease time pressure and allow for more interactive engagement without sacrificing content coverage. Standalone modules or supplementary sessions focused on gender, social inclusion, and caste-sensitive mediation would offer both depth and clarity, enabling mediators to work with greater empathy and awareness. Furthermore, ensuring access to consistent digital and print resources, regionally adapted training materials, and standard handouts will promote uniformity while allowing for necessary local adaptations.

Ultimately, the professionalization of trainers—through ongoing training, exposure to current mediation challenges, and pedagogical support—will be vital to elevating training quality. Continued collaboration between Ministry of Justice, Medication Boards Commission and development actors and ‘supporters of mediation such as the Foundation is required to ensure that Sri Lanka’s mediation model evolves into one that not only resolves conflict, but also actively promotes equity, dignity, and social cohesion.