



CONDUCTIVE SPACE FOR LOCAL AGENCY AND POWER IN PEACEBUILDING

REPORT FROM THE MEETING IN NEW YORK 24 – 25 APRIL 2019



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This report is written by Mie Roesdahl and Tess Thurøe with special thanks to Melanie Greenberg, Elise Ford and Alexandra Mairone from Humanity United for their input and support in documenting the discussions of meeting, and to Sweta Velpillay for facilitation and comments to this report.

Published by Conducive Space for Peace, June 2019.

Photos by Andrew James Benson.

Conducive Space for Peace (CSP) is a non-governmental organisation founded in 2016 by Mie Roesdahl, guided by a strong Danish board, and supported by a broad global network of like-minded change makers, and private foundations such as Humanity United. With its global scope and outreach and its focus on local actors in conflict affected contexts, it is set up to contribute to transformation of international support to peacebuilding and a paradigm shift in global collaboration around peace and development.

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INTRODUCTION

On April 24th and 25th 2019, Conducive Space for Peace, in collaboration with Humanity United, hosted a two-day meeting in New York. The meeting brought together 35 thought and practice leaders from local and international peacebuilding organisations, UN agencies, universities and think tanks to share experiences on how to transform the international system of support to peacebuilding, and especially how to strengthen the space for local agency and power in peacebuilding.

The need for us to come together to bring our different experiences and ideas into the same room and to search for complementary efforts to facilitate change is clear. While UN-SG Guterres is leading the agenda for a new way of working on peacebuilding, there is a long way to go in creating a conducive space for local actors to lead effective peacebuilding processes. And this is not because the capacity of local actors is not there, or funding for conflict/peacebuilding is not there. As a recent report on support to peacebuilding of the European think-tank ECDPM noted: “The issue is not about a chronic lack of funds or a significant reduction in available resources globally. It is rather about the quality of funds.” The problems identified by respondents in their study included lack of funding flexibility, lack of a long-term approach, restrictive geographic remit and narrowing sub-thematic focus as

well as power inequalities permeating collaboration and ways of working. And there are many more challenges related to current funding mechanisms, programming procedures, and processes of collaboration. This was discussed during the two days through intense listening, joint exploration, sharing of best practices for systems change, and insights from practice as well as research. The report provides an overview of some of the key discussions, insights and conclusions derived from the meeting.

This report is produced on the basis of reflections shared by the participants prior to the meeting, notes taken during sessions and group work, flipcharts and visual materials produced during the meeting as well as responses to the online evaluation conducted after the meeting. We have done our best to let the text reflect the insights and opinions expressed during the meeting as directly as possible.

The meeting was conducted under the Chatham House Rules.

THE PROCESS

DAY 1: 24 APRIL

Morning: Introduction to the change agenda and insights from researchers and practitioners on the challenges and how to address them

Afternoon: Space to share experiences and lessons learned on the nature of the challenges and how to address them and explore vision(s) for a future system and the change process to get there



The meeting was designed as an informal space for dialogue and exploration among people who in different ways work on or are interested in how to transform the international system of support to peacebuilding, and especially how to strengthen the space for local agency and power.

Over the two days, the meeting moved between presentations, plenary discussions, group work, panel debates, individual reflections and creative exercises. The content and process of the meeting was designed using input from participants on their priorities and interests shared prior to the meeting, and during the meeting

DAY 2: 25 APRIL

Morning: Explore systems thinking and practice and strategies for more effective change

Afternoon: Exploring ways forward, approaches to facilitating change, common agendas and complementarities of action



the facilitators adapted sessions according to emergent topics raised during the meeting.

This report provides a snapshot into the discussions and a reminder of the vast experiences and creative insights shared by the participants during the meeting. The report is structured in chapters according to the main topics covered during the meeting and presents a glimpse of what was shared by the participants.

GOALS OF THE MEETING - WHAT WE AIMED TO ACHIEVE

To share lessons learned among the participating organisations and actors on best practices and their potential to facilitate transformation of the international peacebuilding system to empower local peacebuilding.

To discuss what we currently know about the systemic challenges and how to address them – and the proposed strategic implications for pursuing systemic transformation, bringing in systems thinkers and thought leaders on the challenges we are trying to address.

To explore the relevance of establishing an informal or more formalized coalition – and the contours of such coalition - which can serve as a critical foundation for driving a systemic transformation process.

EXPECTATIONS OF PARTICIPANTS



An opportunity to network and meet others who work on similar issues

Learn more about what others are doing through concrete examples

Space to reflect on the “system in us”

What can I do?
What can we do?

Develop a better understanding of “the system” and the change agenda

Challenge those who do not know that this conversation exists

Identify entry points for engaging the system and agree on concrete steps towards more collective action

Develop strategies to address the challenges and explore different avenues for change

Push this conversation forward through new platforms which connect new actors



VISIONS FOR AN INTERNATIONAL PEACEBUILDING SYSTEM

An international peacebuilding system that takes a preventive approach, is inclusive, flexible, integrated, and timely. It prioritizes local peacebuilding needs and leadership, links multiple levels of action and shares governance, accountability and resources.

We completely reverse the power flow so local communities tell the global community what they need, and make the global community compete for the opportunity to work for them. No judgment for mistakes made. Equality through trade, not aid. Local communities define needs and tells what they are. Mutual learning.

A gig economy for peace. Inverting the current system by moving from bureaucracy to a platform, where local actors can draw on resources, they need to pre-empt conflict and sustain change over time.

A system where each level of the system work on challenges at their level and with appropriate inclusion of diverse voices at each level. A system which is locally resourced and where collective action is facilitated, learning, ideas, and opportunities are harvested and shared.

In 20 years, the international peacebuilding system will support and ensure dignity for all those involved, will support effective nonviolent conflict management capacities for all people globally, will be led by those closest to conflict, and will be guided by a more coherent set of standards and indicators.

A connective tissue made of diverse actors, which is integrated into a multilateral system that priorities efforts and resiliencies to build peace.

THE CHALLENGES IN SUPPORTING AND ENABLING LOCAL AGENCY AND POWER

The below points were expressed by participants in response to the questions:

- How does the 'way of working' of international institutions influence the space for local peacebuilding?
- What are the challenges to enabling local agency and power in peacebuilding at the country level?

Projectisation of peacebuilding

There is increasing projectisation of peacebuilding, including an emphasis on outputs and outcomes of these projects. Peacebuilding challenges are addressed in a fragmented and siloed manner. There is an emphasis on international standards and metrics (such as SDGs) with an inability to tailor these indicators to specific contexts. This results in peacebuilding efforts not reflecting the reality and complexity of the issues on the ground. And it undermines the agency and power of local peacebuilders, who know the reality and who know what works on the ground, but who are not being heard.

Donors compete to claim recognition for certain projects and outcomes. Funding is often short-term. This creates an imbalance in peacebuilding programming which largely prioritises fast results over relationships and impact.

Power inequalities

There is a rhetoric of trust but a clear absence of reciprocity within the relationships between donors/international organisations and local actors. Despite rhetoric on partnerships, donors often prefer "implementing partners" rather than actual/equal partners.

Funding is intimately connected to power dynamics. The success of local organisations is largely rated as the ability to mirror donor preferences rather than the ability to identify challenges and suggest how to address them

based on contextual knowledge. This is the result of a general prioritisation of thematic expertise over local knowledge and a 'professionalisation' of international peacebuilding, which asserts the superiority of international staff over local staff. The knowledge of a 24-year old international 'expert' is often valued over a highly experienced local expert.

By defining our work as problem solving, we risk defining ourselves as the solvers and others as the problem. The International system is telling people: you don't know how to do it, and we don't trust you to do it, so we will train you on how to do it. There is a tendency to see capacity building as a one-way process and a general lack of recognition of the capacity and learning moving from the local to the global. Interveners perpetuate modes of operation that are ineffective and even counterproductive. Many expatriates live in closed bubbles where they reproduce everyday practices, habits and narratives imbedded in a saviour complex and post-colonial attitudes.

Accountability, risk aversion and apathy

As long as institutions are set-up to be more accountable to the global and not sufficiently to the local, they are designed to fail at peacebuilding. Peacebuilding is often guided by foreign policy and trade agendas; this is difficult to reconcile with locally led processes and accountability towards the local.

There is a general priority of compliance and a predominant risk aversion imbedded throughout the system. This inhibits the space for creativity, while also creating a system with an inability to capture success and failure as part of peacebuilding processes – and an inability to learn from these failures.

International institutions may feel threatened by the power shifts necessary to change

the system. This creates inherent inertia, resistance and to some degree arrogance. It becomes more about securing jobs and institutional survival than real change and impact on the ground.

There is a tendency to “othering” the problem and this becomes a pervasive mindset. Even people who speak “this language (of change)”

and with some level of authority often do not believe they can do anything – there is an experience of disempowerment in the sector and a general lack of capacity to imagine that it can be different.



SYSTEMS THINKING AND PRACTICE

The below points were expressed by participants in response to the questions:

- Why it is useful to use systems thinking to understand the challenges and to understand ways to address them?
- How can we use a broader understanding of the system to inform strategies focused on genuine leverage points and more effective pathways to achieving change?

Why we should think about systems

Even when we are successful in doing incremental work, it does not lead to the big outcomes we want to achieve, the broad systemic change. We need to start thinking about systems and complexity in order to start thinking of the bigger picture and ask how we can align deep incremental work with broad systemic change. We hold concepts of systems in our heads whether we recognize that or not, and the concepts we hold determines what we do.

How we can understand systems

We can understand a system in two fundamentally different ways: (a) a physical tangible system with its policies and institutional actors, and (b) themes that define the system, with identification of physical, social cultural, economic forces that promote or undermine the goal. There are infinite numbers of systems there.

There is a need to understand a peace-building system more broadly in relation to other systems such as aid, development and humanitarian assistance. As such, the boundaries of the systems are artificial - subsystems artificially draw boundaries with other subsystems, creating incentives to maintain boundaries.

There is a lived system of people in communities in conflict, who are attempting on their own terms to build peace and social cohe-

sion. Then there is this artificial structure/system of professionalised peacebuilding, that tries to intervene in the lived organic systems. There is an incompatibility between the two. We don't have structures designed to function in the environments they're in. There is often too much talk about programs and results, and nobody talking about people, structures and culture.

We sometimes talk about the local only as the geography of the local – locals are those that are proximate to opportunities and challenges that people care about and want to do something about. As such, every system has multiple categories and sub-groups of locals.

We also need to understand the system(s) historically – through colonial systems that set up trade agreements, extractive systems with ideology of white supremacy, and strategies of pacification and disempowerment.

Leverage points for change

Change happens at the edges of the system because that is where no-one is looking. Change happens at the intersections and we need to find ways to aggregate it to bigger change. The cracks in the system are plenty and they are right at the core of the system – edges aren't just geographically, there are edges in all the bigger institutions and organisations.

Our conversations around systems change has mostly been inward facing – about who needs to do what within the system – we should also consider factors outside the system that may force it to change.

It takes a system to change a system. Complex problems require complex solutions – a transformational vision requires transformational leadership.

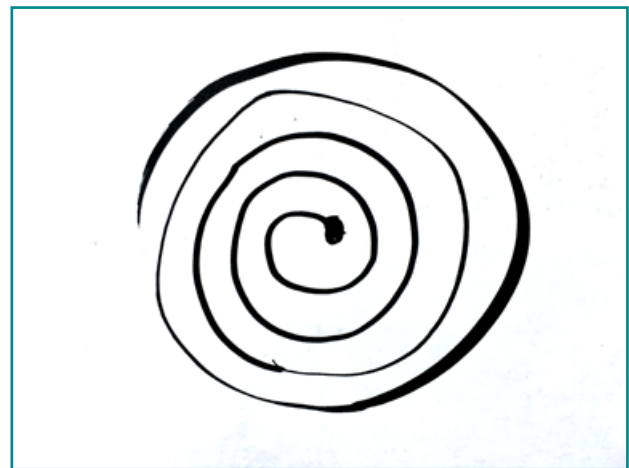
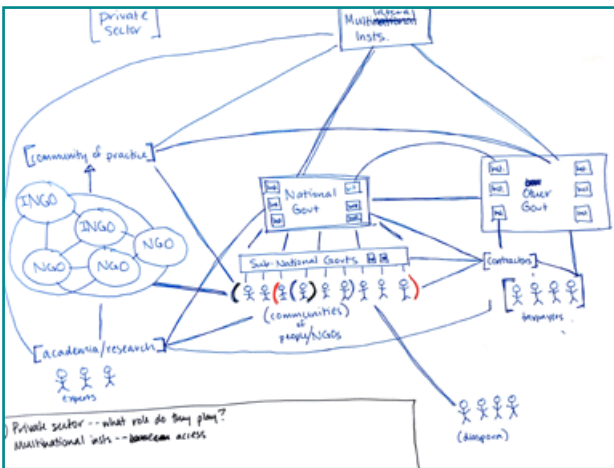
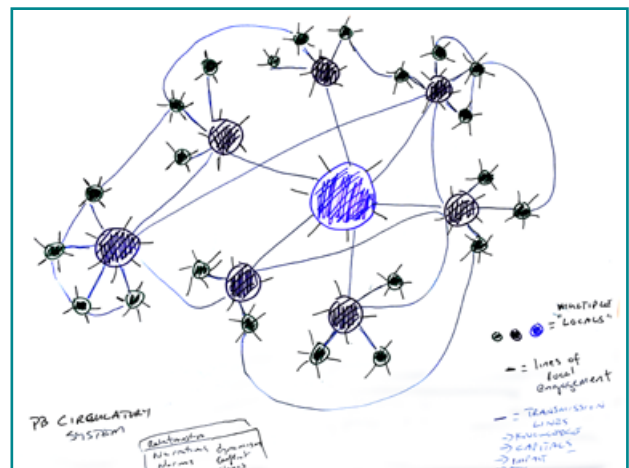
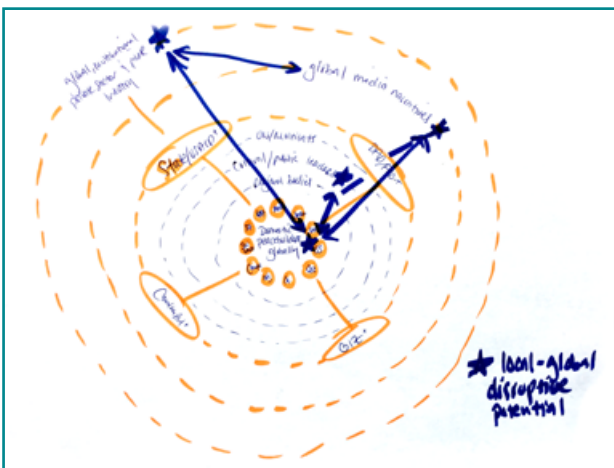
The effort has to be to break siloes and be open to interdisciplinary work, to focus on un-

conventional points of entry, and be pluralistic in ways of bridging the gap between local and international.

Relationships in most cases are corrupted by mistrust, suspicion, sometimes manipulation and complicity. The potential and opportunities to break the cycle is at the local level, with different actors and institutions sharing knowledge. Change can happen in a spiral—start with the center (citizens) and build relationships that spiral out, bringing in people with power into the movement to transform the system.

We need to associate agents of change so that they can be more effective.

Leadership matters for systemic change. It takes transformational leadership to change organizational culture and ways of working. Leaders need to find the energy in the system, to listen, to broker relationships, and create an enabling environment for translating incremental change to broader change processes.



Drawings by participants during day 2 visualising what the system(s) looks like.

BRIGHT SPOTS AND HOW TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGES

The below points were expressed by participants in response to the questions:

- What have we learned about doing peacebuilding differently?
- What are examples of bright spots and opportunities to address the challenges of support to local peacebuilding?
- What are ways forward?

Promote new ways of workin

We need to look towards a shift away from projectisation, change the programme focus to a people focus, change the language that we use, re-balance the role of local and thematic knowledge, change recruitment practices and flip accountability from capitals to countries to prioritising local accountability.

We need to shift the ownership of data to local actors and hold this at the core of change processes.

We need to reframe risk as something we hold together, and we need a new understanding and practice of reciprocity. Maybe it's about capacity recognition rather than capacity building! If we flip the framing to fulfilling potential – it may open up new ways of engaging. Sometimes it is about space, a safe space for engagement, that is what is missing, rather than capacity.

We have to alter the idea that the international community can build peace. We can help facilitate processes. We can inject resources into communities starved for resources. This is what the international community has to do differently – tone back its own expectations for itself. If it's about catalysing, supporting, and accompanying efforts then you can shift the focus.

Enabling space for change agents

There is a need to create space for the change agents, or the 'mavericks' who can institute new practices centred on local agency and power. There are opportunities in supporting people within institutions who understand these challenges and who are willing to bend or break some rules. We must scale up our work with change agents – connectors, risk-takers, rule-breakers – and help them operate in 'tight spaces'.

We need to be opportunistic and manipulative at times – to work around the system at the edges and sometimes influencing at the core of where the power lies. We must help migrate change at the edge to transformation at the core.

This is also about shaping and supporting the next generation of peacebuilders - one change agent will lead to another. And it is about supporting the change potential of social movements.

Working with the unusual suspects and the unexpected places – think differently

We need to help donors and international institutions create space for local ownership – this means suggesting alternatives, facilitating processes for change, exchanging experiences and sharing best practices. Important to ask people themselves how they think about local ownership; what does it imply?

Our entry-points to do peacebuilding may not only come from peacebuilding. We should remember to look beyond peacebuilding, towards other sectors and fields and learn from their experiences.

How can we, who sit between different levels, support donor institutions who do things differently. How to create evidence around working differently.

We must nurture our capacity for imagination. And with this imagination be able to disconnect peacebuilding and development from flow of funds and the power structures that goes with that.

Continue the momentum

The timing for change is good now because people recognize that things haven't worked, which makes them more open to explore other ways of building peace.

Because of the lack of political leadership globally, there is a vacuum to fill – this is an opportunity we need to take advantage of. The power lies with those ready to step into this new movement.

We must recognise the different roles that practitioners, scholars, and policymakers can play in creating change. Scholarship has an important role to play in building momentum and in shaping the next generation of peacebuilders.

We must enhance our capacity to learn how to facilitate systems transformation, and we must return the learnings to the system itself.

TAKE AWAYS AND INSPIRATIONAL ACTIONS BY MEETING PARTICIPANTS

Main take aways

“People in the broader system have not lost hope that systemic change is possible. But how will change happen? The pressure has to come from multiple level and levers - from the mavericks within the system, from funders who can demonstrate what alternative funding mechanisms looks like, from international INGOs who can model what devolution of power and meaningful partnership look like, and from a vocal demand by partners in the Global South that they will no longer accept anything less than having an agency and power over decisions that affect their communities / societies and their reputation.”

“The role of change-makers, disrupters and those finding “work arounds” for the systemic challenges for more local agency. The overall optimistic attitude of participants about whether change is possible and how many “cracks” people are seeing in the current system toward more local agency. Lastly, I came away with the reframing that we all have different levels of “local” - e.g. a community group is local in relation to a peacebuilding project in their community, but a member of a UN agency is “local” to the peacebuilding reform projects at the global level.”

“Affirmed in belief that we start by working on the system in us before/as part of the work on the system out there. The way we speak of these challenges sometimes reinforce the very things we are trying to call out and rectify. So how can our language and thinking be transformed such that we truly open ourselves up for a new way of doing work?”

“Entry points are going to come from surprising places. One of the best places is the generation of people in this room. People coming into the system have a totally different orientation. Things like this meeting are the starting point of where we will find change.”

Reactions

“I found the space appropriate to support peacebuilders including myself to reflect on key persisting issues threatening sustainable interventions. The quality of participants, the discussions as well as the facilitation were very empowering. I will be back home with optimism and more energy.”

“Thank you so much for creating this platform. It’s a pragmatic and practical space. I have no doubts the positive change we collectively seek to see in the peacebuilding industry shall materialize.”

“Thank you again for gathering us for a thoughtful and honest conversation and joint deliberation of potential next steps. It was a fantastic group - like-minded people but still offering different perspectives and angles on the issue. I did feel impatient at times about what the next steps might be and what exactly we can and should do. I am interested to see where we can join forces or engage in complementary activities and gather more support for what is an ambitious effort!”

Inspirational actions

“The meeting has impacted my perspectives on synergies building and collaborations especially between the grassroots actors, policy makers and International players. My organization and myself as an individual peacebuilder shall re-evaluate how to approach peace partners.”

Lisa Schirch has written a blog post inspired by the meeting about the “7 approaches to local ownership and the four problems with trickle-down peacebuilding.” [Click or scan the QR-code to read the blogpost.](#)

Isabella Jean has written a blog post inspired by the meeting on the organizational practices that require attention in order to strengthen inclusive and locally driven peacebuilding and development processes. [Click or scan the QR-code to read the blogpost.](#)

KEY TAKE AWAYS FOR CONDUCTIVE SPACE FOR PEACE

While we have done our best to be true to what was expressed by participants during the two-day meeting in this report, we will share a brief reflection on a couple of points that stood out for us.

The intention for this meeting was to bring together people with a shared agenda and ambition to strengthen local agency and power in peacebuilding and explore avenues for learning and joint/complementary action for change. Although CSP recognises the importance of working with the ‘unusual people’ in ‘unusual places’ as a core part of its strategic engagement, this particular meeting was intended to explore the ‘shared space’ for change among those we expected to be our allies. There were however important nuances in our thinking even within this group. We found a great deal of alignment on our vision for how to promote peacebuilding and what a future peacebuilding system should look like. In particular, we were highly aligned on our end-goal of ensuring that local agency and power is at the heart of peacebuilding. Also, there was a great deal of alignment on how we understand the current challenges in the way of working of the international peacebuilding institutions and how this impacts the space for local agency and power in peacebuilding. However, we clearly held different understandings of approaches to change, of how to understand ‘the system’, and how to achieve systems change. While some argue that change has to come from working directly with the existing international institutions to change their way of working (at the edge and/or at the core), others argue that change must come from providing the good examples of how to do things ‘right’ with no involvement of the existing international institutions. And again, others argue for facilitating change through the space for collaboration between local and international actors at country level and/or at the level of global governance. This diversity represents a great advantage for our ambition for change.

As one participant said: we need multiple, diverse, pluralistic, and complementary approaches to get there. We need to further explore the different change approaches and the potential for capitalising on their differences and complementarities. We can benefit from joint analysis, sharing, exploring, and sometimes collective action to seek out these complementarities.

Other meetings held before and after our joint endeavour in New York in April showed that we should not take it for granted that we can easily talk about the challenges of the current international system including its power imbalances without meeting resistance and barriers to change. This is not an easy discussion as one could think based on our exchange in New York. We have to think hard about how best to influence this change agenda and communicate to facilitate change – balancing between being co-opted by the current way of working and the language used, and standing in a place where no one will listen and no change of the current way of working will take place. For CSP it is not an option to choose to ignore the challenges of the existing way of working of international institutions which have major impact on the space for local agency and power and are sometimes violating the dignity of local actors.

As participants said: we must empower one another to change ourselves and our organisations, and empower one another to facilitate broader systems change. These two levels of change are connected. We need to be artists, visionaries and change makers wherever we are in the system. We must pursue this change process, considering what should happen today if we are to change the system tomorrow, and how can we each contribute to change.

WHAT'S NEXT

What we can do individually

- We all have to work within our system(s). We should be more vocal about what we are uncomfortable with and the challenges that we see, be more disruptive, but it is also within our own agency to amplify what is working and do our best to bring those cases forward.

What we can do collectively

- We should avoid having the same conversation time and time again, but keep developing the conversation and bring new people and perspectives in. We need to keep sharing insights and learnings on this agenda, mobilise people and engage in strategic communication to reach a critical mass that can facilitate change.
- Evidence is at the core of change and we need to win the argument with evidence at all levels. We should continue communicating good examples, share knowledge and return learning to the system.
- We should hold each other to account and support each other in following up on our commitments.

What CSP should do

- Continue building a momentum for change among those not present in the meeting and continue the conversation around the agenda with those who were. Contribute to broadening the network of those working for change.
- Enable sharing of experiences and knowledge from those involved in similar activities and continue exploring complimentary and/or joint action. Bring related conversations into the same room. Use evidence of the challenges and lessons learned in strategic communication.
- Work as a convener and continue to bring people together to unlock the potential for change. Create linkages between agents of change so that they can be supportive of one another and be more effective. Provide opportunities to engage in change processes for people inside international institutions, who do not often get the opportunity to participate and engage with like-minded people.
- Provide opportunities to test new ideas, models and alternative paths for systems change. Create safe spaces for engagement, spaces to make mistakes, spaces with the liberty to be creative and spaces for international institutions to do things differently and change their business as usual.



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