

Reflection Note

SYSTEMS CHANGE IS DRIVEN BY PEOPLE

The importance of individuals and networks in transforming international peacebuilding and development



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Conductive Space for Peace's (CSP) reflection pieces on systems change are intended to develop new ideas for shifting power to local actors and add depth to existing conversations on systems change. The ponderings have evolved through conversations with others working to change the international system of support to local actors. Although these reflections are emergent thinking, they show our broad direction of thought and what we hope to contribute to the discussion. It is hoped that the pieces catalyse further conversation, inspire others, and build confidence among those people who want to take part in creating the international peacebuilding and development system of the future.

This reflection piece is the first in a series exploring the capacity of individual change agents, and the networks to which they belong, to advance transformative change in the international peacebuilding and development system toward local agency and leadership. In particular, it explores the broad potential of change agents within existing institutions to advance change.

Background

An old proverb says if an egg breaks from within, a new life is born, but if it breaks from the outside, life ceases to exist. Change from the inside creates possibilities to bring about positive and sustainable shifts, while change from the outside can break and dissolve a system altogether. This lesson is useful for imagining how to create change in the global peacebuilding and development system that can genuinely support locally led action.¹

In particular, this proverb highlights the need for international institutional actors – such as international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), bilateral donors and multilateral agencies – to play key roles in changing how their institutions work. These institutions must be fundamentally transformed to be better equipped to support local actors in facilitating sustainable peace on their own timelines and in their own ways. This proverb also reveals the challenges of external change agents – such as INGO staff that work outside a given conflict environment – who engage in local spaces, bringing with them pressure to operate in a particular way and perhaps at a specific time.

Who are the change agents with the potential to transform the global peacebuilding and development system, in particular to shift power to local actors? Who were change agents in previous change processes (such as people in social movements) that struggled to address power inequalities? What can be learned from these actors? Systems are made up of individuals, and it is through their actions that shifts in those systems take place. People are therefore key to facilitating systemic transformation. That is, systems are constituted and sustained by people, and systems change often focuses on altering structures, practices and

¹ The term 'international peacebuilding and development system' is used in these reflection pieces to refer to multiple types of actors, including local and national actors, INGOs, bilateral donors, multilateral organisations, philanthropic foundations, think tanks and academics, as well as the coalitions, networks, consortia and working groups that link them together. The term further includes those engaged in policymaking and decision-making on peace and development issues, those who act as intermediaries, grant managers, trainers and supporters, and those who directly implement programming.

norms, both in the intra- and inter-organisational dimensions of systems, with people in the driving seat of these processes.

A focus on individuals may allow an understanding of the complexities of a given system, including the leverage points for change and the chain reactions that might occur through engagement at particular pivot points in that system. For systems to change, it is important that people take comprehensive and multi-layered action to innovate through emergent processes that contribute to transformation. As Kate Raworth (author of *Doughnut Economics*) asserts, “Go find the changemakers. They are everywhere, and they know their context better than you.”² This is reinforced in a recent statement by UNDP administrator Achim Steiner, who says, “Systems don’t change systems. People do.”³

Change from the inside versus change from the outside

Institutional actors at major bilateral donors, multilateral organisations and INGOs are knowledgeable about how those international institutions work, and how they can change. While some may not be attentive to the dysfunctions in these institutions, many are aware of the flaws and inequities in the global peacebuilding and development system. When these people reach out to explore avenues for change and work for collective action to shift power, they can be seen as playing an internal co-conspirator role within the system. These individuals are often rule-breakers, creating innovative approaches to change structures, practices and attitudes that challenge existing institutional power inequalities.⁴ Although many international actors change positions at international institutions or relocate to other types of institutions, they often remain within the global peace and development system for many years. In working effectively with these change agents, understanding their positions and decision-making capacities is helpful, as is building willingness to invest political capital and identifying those with an ability to manoeuvre within the system. Creativity and imagination are also critical.

Individuals at powerful institutions who shape the direction of the global peacebuilding and development system are able to understand and navigate the conventions and norms of those organisations. They are also aware of the underlying incentives of the decision-makers at their institutions. For instance, when a major donor is not currently prioritising locally led approaches to peacebuilding and development or is perhaps moving in the opposite direction,⁵ insiders can help change agents outside those institutions better understand how to appeal to them. This may assist external actors in two key ways. First, it can enable them to direct their engagement based on an assessment of the existing incentive structures and culture of a given institution. Second, it may allow them to develop approaches to shifting established institutional norms and ways of working – appealing to the current incentives of change agents within these institutions, whilst also seeking to move them toward a more transformative motivation for change.

More could be explored on the capacity of specific change agents who may be well placed to identify promising entry points for shifting the practices of large complex international institutions. For instance, financial controllers, administrators, and human resources specialists: These technical roles may be effective

² See: <https://www.undp.org/blogs/science-delivery-art-transformation-and-everything-between>.

³ See: <https://www.innovationdays.co/systems-dont-change-systems-people-do/>.

⁴ See, for instance, ongoing research by Susanna Campbell under the auspices of the Research on International Policy Implementation Lab (RIPIL): ‘Rule-Breakers or Innovators? Bureaucratic Effectiveness in Global Governance’; <https://bridgingthegapproject.org/ripil/>.

⁵ Examples of moving in the opposite direction include: shifting toward explicit national donor interests in policy and financing decisions; operating with less flexibility and/or accessibility of resources; or reducing financing for peacebuilding and development.

entry points for change, in particular as they are often filled by experts on the operational intricacies of these institutions. As such, these individuals are frequently able to initiate and manage change based on a detailed understanding of the procedures and protocols according to which these institutions function. Acquiring such knowledge from the outside is comparatively much more difficult and perhaps even impossible.

When seeking to change the global peacebuilding and development system from within, it should be recognised that the system exists within and through the actors who constitute it. Efforts to change the system, when they start from within, are likely to reflect assumptions and models of thinking drawn from within the system that they seek to shift – about who exercises power, what power looks like and how it is built or eroded. The ingredients proposed for change processes, in this case, are also drawn from and shaped by the system that needs to change. There is a risk, then, that the changes that take place are reflective of the flaws of the system, with alterations emerging from within being merely technical or procedural fixes – tinkering at the margins – rather than overhauling or transforming the system. These are traps and paradoxes that must be navigated as systems change is sought, in order to avoid inadvertently reproducing system dynamics through efforts to alter them. For example, even when actors inside the system seek outsider change agents and innovations, and different models of thinking that those external to the system have simply because of their position outside it (and exclusion from it), those on the inside still define what constitutes marginality, and designate who is inside and who is outside the system.

Accordingly, change agents also include those who have been historically marginalised from decision-making and typically excluded from spaces of power in the global peacebuilding and development system. Such actors have the potential to bring new perspectives on systems change that emerge from this very exclusion and lack of exposure to established or traditional ways of working. These change agents may be able to provide a new perspective or approach to an old and/or difficult problem. In this way, local actors can have a role in releasing change processes from the boundaries of the system itself. While it should not be assumed that local actors should take on the burden of shifting the system that has historically blocked their entry into it, their needs must nonetheless determine the change.

The following reflection piece in this series will focus on the motivations of change agents, examining different driving factors behind the decision to pursue systems change, as well as considering the impact of change agents' institutional environment on the sorts of action they take to advance systems change for locally led peacebuilding and development.

