CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT TO LOCAL CIVIL SOCIETY

Evidence and recommendations from Myanmar, Colombia, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo

CONDUCIVE SPACE FOR PEACE

INTRODUCTION

Peace and development initiatives aim to liberate people from conflict, inequities and poverty. In many cases, however, the way that this work is funded and implemented privileges international over local concerns. This remains a persistent challenge in international cooperation, often undermining its potential for effective peace and development outcomes. This report draws upon consultations in four countries to explore why efforts to expand opportunities for local leadership in peace and development practice have fallen short of needs. It also identifies innovations and recommendations that can move the equity agenda forward.

Closing the gap between practice and rhetoric of local leadership

This report aims to support a transition towards more enabling conditions for locally led peace and development practices in conflict-affected contexts. The suggestion is not to discard all engagement by international actors but to rethink the roles, relevance and comparative advantage of international actors, and to shift power to local actors where doing so is both relevant and feasible. Documenting the perspectives and experiences of local civil society organisations (CSOs) and their international counterparts in Myanmar, Colombia, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) over a three-year period, this report provides examples and recommendations for those who are part of the international aid system to advance the conditions conducive for locally led peacebuilding and development.

Given the sensitivities, risks and concerns of local actors in speaking up openly on the issue of inequities within the aid system, the report also includes broader ongoing analysis by CSP on the themes discussed during the consultations to highlight their importance. This analysis is drawn from the efforts of many actors who strive to advance more equitable partnerships in response to challenges and inequities of the global-north dominated system of international assistance, including analysis stemming from localisation and decolonisation efforts.[1] They include:

- Highly skewed distributions of financial resources and decision-making authority towards international rather than local actors
- Accountability mechanisms that favour international concerns rather than those of affected communities
- The relative privilege afforded to international technocratic knowledge vis-à-vis local contextual expertise, relationships and lived experience

- Funding and reporting dynamics that drive secrecy and competition, while undermining collaboration and cumulative impact between and among local and international organisations
- Inadequate flexibility, responsiveness and risk sharing in fund administration in relation to dynamic and conflict-affected local contexts
- Inequity in how international and local actors experience direct and structural violence, and the greater limitations that this violence imposes on the agency of local actors

What does 'local' mean?
The CSP understanding of the term 'local' refers to actors originating from the geographic locations where peace and development work is being done, whether they are operating within or across community, sub-national or national levels. These actors include people, CSOs, state institutions, non-government organisations and non-state armed groups. CSP work typically focuses on CSOs, including local non-government organisations (NGOs). The term 'local issues' is considered by CSP to be those that are of concern to the people who are from and live in these places. In contrast, the terms 'international' and 'global' are used to identify actors, structures and practices that span across multiple countries and across the world.

Power asymmetries and inequities have proven remarkbly resistant to the change efforts of many organisations, despite the evidence that they undermine the effectiveness of sustainable peacebuilding and development outcomes. Neither the quality or quantity of funds for local actors in peace and development have advanced towards the goals that have been set. Quantity is easiest to measure. In 2021, for example, approximately 2 percent of international humanitarian funding was allocated to local organisations, which is the lowest percentage in five years, and well short of the Grand Bargain target of 25 percent.[2] Various funding mechanisms, programming approaches and accountability mechanisms have been tested that are more responsive to local leadership but these are rarely institutionalised by mainstream donors and funding mechanisms. The consistent gap between rhetoric and practice suggests that robust and whole of system actions are needed to move this agenda forward.

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on a synthesis of consultations in local–international cooperation in Myanmar, Colombia, Kenya and the DRC. The consultations took place over a three-year period (2019–2021). The report also incorporates evidence produced by other actors, further consolidated by existing literature and the analysis and insights of Conducive Space for Peace (CSP) over the years to arrive at the findings and recommendations. These countries were selected because they represent diverse contexts and provide sufficient access to local and international actors who could provide meaningful responses to the research questions. At times, trusted relationships in each context and local consultants were instrumental in organising consultations and interviews. It was not always possible to canvas a wide selection of local actors or reach the most inaccessible communities.

Consultations began in Colombia in late 2019, and continued in Myanmar, Kenya and the DRC in 2020 and 2021. Data sources include key informant interviews and focus group discussions with representatives, including a minimum of 12 and up to 24 organisations in each of the four countries. This report is also based on an extensive literature review of publicly available data, which provides supplementary information on the topic in general and for each context. Supplementary data was also collected in Myanmar in anticipation of a country-specific report. This amounted to additional consultations with 25 local and international actors, totalling 40 conversations and an anonymous survey of 80 individuals. Consequently, findings from Myanmar constitute a higher proportion of citations in this report.

The consultations were framed using three general questions that were unpacked into specific prompts for the consultations, interviews and surveys. The three general questions are:

1. What are the challenges of international support to locally led initiatives?
2. What are promising practices that aim to address the challenges in international support for local initiatives?
3. Who and what can be done differently to better enable local leadership?

Implementation of this initiative was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which delayed consultations and required adjustments, including the online facilitation of some conversations. The 2021 military coup in Myanmar and the subsequent violent uprising created political and security conditions that also impacted on consultations in this context. This likewise led to the cancellation of the planned Myanmar-specific report due to conflict-sensitivity considerations.

Drawing upon consultations across Myanmar, Colombia, Kenya and the DRC, this report takes stock of the needs that are being felt most acutely by local organisations and their international supporters. It highlights positive progress and innovations, as well as provides recommendations for strengthening the ability of international support to better support and enable conditions for local leadership.

FINDINGS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR LOCAL LEADERSHIP

When asked what the main challenges to locally led peace and development initiatives are, the participants who were consulted for this study speak of various ways in which the global peacebuilding system constrains the agency available to local actors.[3]

Exclusive agenda setting

A cross-cutting concern from all four countries, most prominently in Myanmar and the DRC, is the limited agency local actors have to influence what, where, how, when and with whom programmes can operate. Experience in Myanmar demonstrates how power constellations of international actors and local elites routinely marginalise the participation, agency and contextual concerns of civil society and conflict-affected populations. Consultation participants note, for instance, that a decade of investment in the peace process in the country had failed to bring meaningful improvement in the lives of internally displaced persons (IDPs) or progress on other issues of public concern, such as the drug epidemic.[4]

The inclusion challenge is driven in part by domestic and international laws that problematise the inclusion of some civil society groups and non-state actors. In Colombia for instance, up until 2021, it was illegal to include current or former members of the Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC) in United States-funded peacebuilding programmes, despite the FARC signing national peace accords in 2016.[5] In Myanmar and elsewhere, registration laws are used by the state to limit the civic space available to challenge the interests of the state, security forces and/or cronies (or oligarchs, as such actors are typically known elsewhere across the globe).

International actors surveyed across the case studies speak about the challenges of being inclusive in the face of heavy due diligence demands from headquarters. They also note the risks of damaging relations with the host government. These constraints are a cause for concern in the context of the Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo (MONUSCO) drawdown in the DRC, for instance, where the limited inclusion of civil society in the transition plan has generated significant concerns regarding civilian protection.[6]

Funding inequities

The skewed distribution of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) towards international rather than local organisations remains a significant hurdle to locally led approaches. Of the approximately USD 300 million in ODA that Myanmar received in 2021, nearly half that amount was programmed through United Nations (UN) agencies, which can be seen as an intermediary when working with international NGOs and local NGOs. NGOs in general received approximately a quarter of the total amount, of which less than USD 11 million (or approximately 3 percent) went directly to local NGOs.[7] It remains a challenge to establish how much funding that goes through intermediaries reaches local CSOs as data is limited.

Skewed funding distributions partly reflect the constraints faced by local organisations in accessing pooled funding instruments, particularly those managed by the UN. In the DRC, Myanmar and Colombia, less than 5 percent of grants have been awarded to local NGOs through UN peacebuilding funding instruments, although some may receive support via pass- through funding.[8] While some pooled funds and multi-donor trust funds strive to be inclusive, such as in Colombia and Myanmar, representatives of local organisations in each of the countries surveyed remark on overall requirements that favour international NGOs or UN agencies. Combined with highly restrictive fund management requirements, this often makes it virtually impossible for local organisations to qualify for, never mind access, these funding instruments.

The incentive to concentrate funds through pooled mechanisms reflects the limited resources that bilateral donors have to manage grants, undertake risk management and guard against the misuse of funds. These and other legitimate concerns drive the restrictive legal and fiduciary standards that organisations must fulfil in order to receive funding, as well as the rigid compliance and reporting requirements that must be met once funding has been received. The question is whether these compliance standards can be achieved without marginalising local actors.

Disconnects and competition in the global to local peacebuilding system

> **Local peacebuilders know how to survive in their environment. They have honed their peacebuilding skills, including using traditional skills. They utilise local resources and what they do is sustainable because they are part of the community**
>
> **Synthesised reflection of a Kenyan NGO representative**

Participants consulted in this report critique the funding processes and partnerships in international cooperation that overvalue professional capacities for financial management, legal compliance, monitoring and evaluation and policy jargon. They also critique processes and partnerships that undervalue the contextual knowledge, nuanced peacebuilding experience and knowledge, local legitimacy and relational capacities that local organisations deem necessary for effective work. The bias towards professional competencies is seen as creating a veneer of quality and value for money, while simultaneously undermining the capacity to create meaningful change.

> **The root of the problem is we structure peacebuilding around these [international] people. Insato the people. For example, people in Kachin IDP camps have been there for the past eight years and it seems that they are not going anywhere.**
>
> **INGO representative in Myanmar**

Participants also suggest that funding processes are too competitive and promote rivalries that stifle collaboration between local, and local and international organisations. Multiple respondents in Myanmar, Kenya and the DRC speak of the need for further coordination among peacebuilding organisations on funding and programmatic issues, while noting that coordination itself does not produce meaningful collaboration on common objectives if organisations are still operating according to a logic of self-interest.

> **Civil society is not well coordinated. Many organisations take their direction and lead it and we are not able to see how they together contribute to peacebuilding. Each time there is a financing opportunity, each actor is diving in without collaborating with one another and this challenges complementarity between their initiatives.**
>
> **CSO representative in the DRC**

Competitive dynamics magnifying pre-existing disconnects and trust deficiencies in conflict settings. These exist between national level politics and sub-national peacebuilding actors, in rural and urban divides, and/or in political polarisation between identity groups. In Colombia and Myanmar, for instance, respondents report a tendency for international NGOs, government agencies and NGOs based in the capital to receive the majority of peacebuilding funds at the expense of organisations and issues in the conflict-affected territories. These disconnects and competitions are a disservice to the cumulative impact needed for organisations achieve societal transformation goals.[9]

Inequities in conditions for weathering external stresses

The participants who were consulted for this study call for an international system that better balances the inequities experienced by local people in contexts of direct and structural violence. Local people face intimidation, risks of imprisonment and various restrictions on freedoms that international representatives and organisations typically do not face or face less of. Burdensome partnership and donor compliance mechanisms compound these inequities. They also often lack flexibility for course correction when there are unanticipated challenges or opportunities in the conflict setting. This dynamic is heightened when donors approach NGOs (or private contractors) as intermediaries and delivery partners, who in turn work with local CSOs, which increases both compliance requirements and lag times for approvals for local CSOs.

The aftermath of the 2021 military coup in Myanmar demonstrates the challenges of an unresponsive system. Of the 80 local people surveyed, almost half report that their organisational funding was cancelled because of their inability to implement programmes following the coup. With very limited core funding, many have had to discontinue their work and most have had to draw upon personal finances.[10] The international NGOs surveyed for this report also had to weather significant funding cuts but these are sometimes buffered by core funds or public donations, so presented existential crises less often.

Participants in this report call for these inequities between locals and internationals to be better recognised and responded to in partnership approaches that include a duty of care, which ensures physical and digital security in the form of safe houses, and access to encrypted and cloud data storage, among other things. Several participants make appeals for financial and non-financial measures that would improve the safety of local actors and protect the space for civic action.

> There is a restlessness and trauma we experience from constantly feeling on edge. The recurrence of conflicts in the DRC has a heavy emotional weight on local peacebuilders, who see their communities repeatedly affected. Unlike international actors who have resources to deal with these challenges, like leaving the context, R&R, etc., the trauma of local peacebuilders is an unaddressed reality.
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> **CSO representative in the DRC**

TOWARDS A MORE EQUITABLE PEACE-BUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM

In recent years, there has been a sharp increase in innovations in the aid system by bilateral donors, international NGOs and private foundations, as well as local civil society actors and coalitions to support and promote local leadership.[11] Why, then, does such a persistent gap remain on shifting power in peace, development and humanitarian practice, despite the best efforts of so many?

Experience from the field of systems change provides some insights.[12] According to this view, attempts to change policies, practices and/or resource flows to better enable local leadership are unlikely to be sufficient if the underlying relationships and power dynamics are not addressed. This implies the need for more extensive changes in relationships and networking practices. It also entails creating greater opportunities for local organisations to influence national and international agendas and access resources with more autonomy. These shifts are unlikely to happen, however, while the system still largely functions according to counterproductive logics of centralised planning, subordination, compliance and the externalisation of risk. In short, deeper changes are needed that are yet to be realised.

Despite the challenges, various trends and practices of international and local organisations are supporting the promotion of local leadership in peace and development. There is potential for these developments and ways of working to be extended, added to and spread further within the four countries, which can also be adapted for use in other fragile conflict contexts.

Empowering and equitable approaches of international NGOs

International NGOs often play intermediary roles between donors and local CSOs and can be instrumental in realising a more locally led peace and development system. Most international NGOs strive to employ partnership approaches based on mutual respect that recognise and value the distinct roles and capacities of international and local actors of various types.

> The role of the INGO is being pushed beyond just absorbing the grant and distributing it. There are other technical aspects we can support, like youth, peace and security. We bring the content and the connections and other technical things like report writing. And sometimes we may be able to speak in ways that are not safe for locals. But we ourselves need to better define what these things are.
>
> **Synthesised reflection of an international NGO worker in Kenya**

The relative strengths of local organisations include their contextual knowledge for analysis and programme design, their relationship networks and access to actors and geographies, their understanding of implementation modalities that work well in the context, and a long-term presence in target geographies that maximises sustainability. Early and meaningful engagement of local organisations is critical to ensuring that the programming approaches are more effective and responsive to the local context, that funds are used sustainably, and that administrative requirements are practical. Local CSOs may not have bargaining power by themselves but working together with international NGOs in design processes, they can better integrate local concerns into donor requirements.

Unlike most local organisations that receive activity specific funding, international NGOs often have a relatively high proportion of discretionary funds from core grants, long-standing donor relationships or public donations, which can be used to sustain the organisation in times of hardship. An equitable approach recognises that international NGOs are relatively privileged in this way, and to use this privilege to expand the agency and financial sustainability of and flexibility available for local organisations.

As a few study participants indicate, some international NGOs use their privilege to increase the discretionary funding available to local partners to cover consultations, provide other forms of support such as organisational development and strategic planning that build their institutional capacity, enhance sustainability and reduce their reliance on intermediaries. Others commit to sharing risks through equitable sharing of overheads, collaborative risk identification and management, support to local partners on personal and digital security, flexible and emergency fund allocation and payment procedures, and a commitment to protection, psychosocial support, and creation of safe passage in times of crisis.

> **We now have pre-teaming agreements that specify the amount of overhead to partners. We take 10 percent of overhead costs as a management fee, and the rest is shared equally across partners.**
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> **International NGO representative in Kenya**

Other international NGOs shift power by freeing up the time that is available to local actors, by filtering the requests coming from donors or absorbing the administrative burden of funding. An intermediary role for international NGOs that is supportive of locally led peace and development is when they act as a kind of shock absorber between sometimes rigid donor demands and regularly volatile operating contexts.

Some international NGOs support their local partners to become less reliant on international assistance over time. This might include explicit exit strategies that plan for the eventual departure of the organisation from the context. This is not to suggest that international NGOs should readily abandon partners in times of crisis but rather that they should be intentional about strengthening local capacities in ways that render their continued presence unnecessary and rethink a more fit-for-purpose role in the future. This

can also take the form of international NGO transitions into local organisations, which took place in the examples of the CDA transition into RAFT in Myanmar[13] and the PACT reorganisation into Act! in Kenya.[14]

> **What we need from INGOs is continuous mentorship. If you are working with local organisations, link them, build a network, leave them better than you found them. Mentor the next generation in these organisations**
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> **CSO representative in the DRC**

Collaborating across the local

An alternative to channelling donor funds through international NGO intermediaries is to provide direct support to coalitions of local organisations and networks, which can increase the level of funding to local actors. While in the short term this is challenging to implement, supporting these networks and allowing for decentralised decision-making is a way of putting locals at the forefront of decisions about what, where and how to implement activities, in ways that support inclusion and invite collaboration. It also creates greater space for them to determine with whom they work and collaborate, especially across other local organisations, individuals and networks.

Several sub-national and national civil society networks have been active and successful in Myanmar prior to the 2021 military coup. They provide space to organise across geographic and ethnic divides, to provide legal and security protections or administrative support across members, and to advance common pro-public peace agendas. The Peace and Development Network Trust (PeaceNet) is a Kenyan example of a similar platform, which provides funding alternatives to donors and national networking and partnership building opportunities for CSOs and other peace actors to collaborate on national and regional peace and justice initiatives.[15]

> **PeaceNet—PN—is an umbrella organisation of 12 regional offices. We identify problems in those regions and fundraise at head office and implement with local actors. At national level, PN is a principal partner with the national government. It is a local organisation at different levels. First as a network of local peacebuilders, but at national level it comes together to galvanise those local efforts.**
>
> **Local NGO representative in Kenya**

Similarly, Colombia has a rich history of coalitions and networks. The Regional Space for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation of Montes de Maria is a sub-national approach to local networking for peace, in which leaders from all the communities meet every month to discuss and act upon local peace needs as they emerge.[16] Redprodepaz is a national Catholic church-based network of peacebuilding organisations that operates through civil society and government alliances to build peace across 24 regions of Colombia. The community foundations approach is yet another example. It demonstrates a more progressive decentralisation of decision-making and financial resourcing to sub-national levels, and provides a more radical alternative for donors with a genuine commitment to local leadership.[17]

Although these networks have different characteristics, they offer potential to address a range of barriers to local leadership, including by devolving decision-making authority and offering an alternative means of achieving scale and efficiency. By connecting geographical or issue-focused civil organisations with professional local NGOs and/or administrative support, these networks can possess the requisite legal and grant management capacities without sacrificing legitimacy for particular issues or constituencies. Some networks also enable relationships between urban and rural organisations, reducing the common disconnect between national politics and sub-national conflict processes.

Local needs: Responsive donor practices

International donor policies and practices are critically important for either enabling or disenabling local leadership. By virtue of the wealth of resources that they bring into the system, donors are able to set agendas with which downstream organisations requiring these resources are likely to comply. Donor approaches to localising peace and development support are not monolithic. There are a number of North American and European bilateral donors that more regularly appear willing and able to work directly with a diversity of local actors (including civil society) in empowering ways, while also working with international NGOs and UN agencies.

According to some participants, UN agencies and pooled funding mechanisms appear less able to work creatively and directly with local civil society actors. A decade of support to the Myanmar peace process is illustrative. As desk research for this study reveals, the Norwegian-led Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI) took an early innovative approach to localisation by learning from direct engagement in ceasefire implementation projects to advise incoming peace process donors.[18] As the peace process evolved, another pooled fund mechanism, the Joint Peace Fund (JPF), was established to coordinate donor contributions for top-level peace process initiatives. Many of those consulted for this study note that this development felt alienating to local civil society.

Against this backdrop, before the coup, the Paung Sie Facility (PSF), a pooled UK, Australian and Swedish mechanism, focused its support towards a more diverse set of local peacebuilding concerns and grantees. Together with donors, it opened grant-making mechanisms outside capitals in order to support a more diverse set of geographical and subaltern peace concerns and organisations.[19] The PSF approach has been seen as relatively empowering for local grantees. This includes participatory context analysis, the development of shared strategies and a MEL (Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning) approach that emphasises grantee own learning in real time.

PHOTO BY MANH TUAN NGUYEN ON UNSPLASH

We are working to develop a culture of shared learning and comfortability to realise when things are not working. The broader system does not seek to recognise failure, as it is focused on just showing results. The question here is how to be more responsive and adaptable.

Donor representative in Myanmar

Various other approaches by individual donors are highlighted across contexts as being best practices. In the DRC and Myanmar, grantees speak favourably of donors that allow local organisations to submit consolidated funding reports to multiple donors. In the DRC, the UK funded a peacebuilding coordinator position, which enabled local organisations to share information and network. Some bilateral donors, particularly European and international NGOs that have faith-based profiles, have been more likely to remain in solidarity with grantees in times of political, security and economic crisis, allowing them to re-programme without restrictions or be flexible with financial payment modalities and reporting requirements.

Participants who were consulted for this study in Kenya mention the potential of the USAID New Partnership Initiative (NPI) to support local leadership based on two funding requirements: 1) a specific percentage of financial aid must go to local partners; and 2) a capacity development plan that enables local partners to receive funds directly from USAID after five years.[20] Similarly, the Self-Reliance (J2SR) initiative, whereby programmes had to be proposed and led by Kenyan organisations, is seen by study participants as an initiative in the right direction. At the same time, it is perceived to be an example of localisation efforts that are not fully able to create the best conditions to overcome the challenges and complexities related to it.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADVANCE LOCAL LEADERSHIP

Towards solidarity

Empowerment requires that organisations in the international system are more intentional about using their privilege to expand the condition for local leadership.

Providing direct support to trans-local networks. International NGOs and donors in particular can fund and partner with networks or coalitions of local organisations. This approach implies some devolution of decision-making authority over the who, what, how, where, and when to the network itself. The success of such initiatives rests on the cumulative impact of sometimes diverse organisations working together, and should encourage and even measure the health of relationships between organisations. For donors, trans-local networks with sufficient governance and administrative capacity represent alternatives to pooled funding mechanisms that often distribute funds to mostly international actors.

Being in solidarity, always and in crisis. International NGOs and donors could do more to buffer the impact of natural and human-made disasters on the agency of local organisations.[21] Minimal standards might include ease and flexibility in administrative requirements, re-programming activities and/or re-allocating funds when implementation gets disrupted. A more maximalist approach might entail standing alongside with partners (and contexts) through thick and thin, even if they do not know how to re-programme or implement amidst a deteriorated or uncertain operating environment. For some international organisations, this might imply creating policies that provide a duty of care towards personnel of local partner organisations as well as their own staff.

Fostering transparency and equity in remuneration and transfer of funds. Organisations with a genuine commitment to rebalancing power in international–local relationships should strive to develop and institute principles for how much funds are channelled to local civil society partners, what roles and resources could be devolved to them and how remuneration is equitable for local and international staff and consultants. They should also be willing to address the impact that these inequities have on the choices available to those closest to the context.

Towards better conditions for self-organisation

Partnership modalities can be reimagined so that they seek less to control the behaviours of local organisations, and more to create the conditions in which they can self-organise, adapt and improve their impact. This does not imply doing away with international NGOs or with international assistance. Rather, it is about doing more to recognise the different strengths and roles of both local and international organisations.

Reforming donor policies to strengthen local leadership. More donors should transition from a minimum requirement of consulting local organisations in programme design to a maximalist interpretation in which local organisations are required by donors to determine the priorities, needs, locations and ways of working for funding proposals. When less devolved processes are not possible, donors should at least require a clear plan for how local organisations will be in the lead by the conclusion of the funding cycle. In pursuit of this commitment, donors should recognise the need and ensure local actors have

sufficient resources for non-programmatic organisational development activities such as consultations and networking, internal training, strategic planning and administrative overhead that can support sustainability beyond the immediate project.[22]

Reforming administrative mechanisms in order to liberate and drive innovation. To maximise the time available for peace and development activities, the administrative burden associated with compliance and other administrative requirements should be reduced, made more flexible and/or be absorbed by international NGOs when there is an intermediary relationship. Donors and international NGOs should transition towards accountability models that are better grounded in the lived experience of conflict-affected communities.[23] To unleash innovation, the emphasis on logframes should be reduced and to the extent possible entirely replaced by the adoption of flexible programming methodologies and enabling administrative conditions that allow grantees to learn and adjust during implementation. This includes the potential to scale up high performing strategies and vice versa.

Calibrating the international NGO intermediary role. International NGOs can play key roles in mediating the power inequities between those that provide, hold and receive international development assistance. An empowering role for international NGOs is one that provides accompaniment and technical assistance during all stages of the programme cycle, creates the space for local organisations to make more of their own decisions and acts as a convenor of collaborative locally led processes.[24] It commits to sharing risks and overhead costs, and has explicit and transparent policies for these that are included in partnership arrangements. Based on the challenges voiced by those who were consulted for this study, a transformed and empowering role for international NGOs would be one that absorbs the administrative, compliance and reporting requirements of the donor, executing these in ways that minimise the time and maximise the value for local organisations. It takes a deep and long-term approach to partnership based on mutual trust, equity and solidarity that is explicit about the transformation of the relationships and roles, focusing on sharing and learning, where international organisations are in service of the needs of local organisations.

Towards collaboration

Peacebuilding and meaningful contributions to development outcomes in conflict-affected contexts require collective efforts of organisations working across a range of divides to address complex challenges that are beyond the reach of single organisations, no matter how large. Resourcing and partnering approaches are needed that recognise this and drive more collaborative dynamics in the process.

Locally led coalition building and strategic advocacy. Local organisations themselves can rebalance the power relationship with international counterparts by forming or expanding local networks and coalitions with diverse geographic reach, perspectives and capacities. These networks might pool and strengthen the capacities for compliance, administration and financial management that are desired by donors, in order to qualify for direct support. Networks should use their combined strength to collectively bargain with donors for a higher proportion of funds under local management, according to priorities, modalities and requirements that are better aligned with local realities. Coalition building is empowerment in action. It can extend beyond organisations themselves to mobilise the general public, and target domestic and international power holders for policy change with respect to topics that might otherwise be marginalised from the peacebuilding agenda. Donors and funding facilities should also encourage collaborative proposals between local actors.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The localisation agenda has been gaining traction over the past decade but there is a long way to go before commitments are meaningfully translated into practices. The local and international actors consulted for this study in Myanmar, Colombia, Kenya and the DRC clearly convey that ways of working in the aid system are not conducive for the self-organising and leadership of local civil society actors.

Obstacles to change are ingrained at the very core of the international system. These include factors such as donor-driven priorities and accountability measures as well as the securitisation of aid (for elaboration, see Global System in Flux). The international system can be seen as a tight-knit structure, a Chain of Influence, where power and funds flow from the top and demand, implicitly or explicitly, particular ways of working from those receiving and managing the funds. The Chain of Influence Framework is a way of tracing the journey of funding and power across the aid system from bilateral donors and private foundations to multilateral organisations and international NGOs, and on to national and local civil society actors in conflict-affected contexts. It is also a way of identifying and addressing the obstacles at each level of the chain, and thus for pursuing a more equitable system that provides relevant support for local civil society actors.

Change must happen at multiple levels: From individual change agents to networks of change agents, to whole of organisations, to system-wide change. Change agents are actors who recognise the systems challenges, align with values of equity and are prepared to act in accordance with these values, despite the challenges they will face. They come up with innovative practices that address the dysfunctionalities of the conventional system and they try to leverage their power within their organisation. They may come together in networks of change agents beyond their own organisation such as the Innovators Hive, sharing and learning from one another, and spreading the seeds for change.

In the midst of the proliferation of change initiatives at international organisations and with the momentum for change increasing, it is more important than ever to listen to the voices of local civil society actors. These voices are plenty. Let them speak.

ENDNOTES

1. See Peace Direct (2022), Localisation and Decolonisation: the difference that makes the difference and Overseas Development Institute (20 October 2021), Are we there yet? Localisation as the journey towards locally led practice, among others.
2. See Share Trust (2022), Passing the Buck: the Economics of Localizing International Assistance.
3. These responses add to evidence and recommendations for local leadership that have been made through the publications and actions of Conducive Space for Peace, Radical Flexibility Fund and Peace Direct and others on this topic.
4. Also see Humanitarian Practice network (25 May 2021), Histories and Hierarchies of Localisation in Rakhine State, Myanmar for further evidence.
5. See The Department of State of the Government of the United States (2021)
6. See MONUSCO Mandate 2022: Streamlined But Missing Key Protection Language by Civilians in Conflict (2022).
7. See Myanmar data from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
8. See data from the United Nations Peace and Transition Funds, plus interview data
9. For example, see CDA (2018), Adding up to Peace: the Cumulative Impacts of Peace Initiatives.
10. See CSP (2020), Act Now on 'Localisation': COVID-19 Implications for Funding to Local Peacebuilding.See Peace Direct (2022), Localisation and Decolonisation: the difference that makes the difference and Overseas Development Institute (20 October 2021), Are we there yet? Localisation as the journey towards locally led practice, among others.
11. See CSP (2023), Learning Note: Innovative Practices – Changing the International System to Better Enable Local Leadership.
12. This framework is taken from Senge et al. (2018), The Water of Systems Change.
13. For more information, see RAFT website
14. For example, see Act! website.
15. See PeaceNet website.
16. See CSP (2020), Hope for Peace in Colombia.
17. See Territoria website.
18. The desk research indicates that many advocates of locally led peacebuilding have made this observation over the years.
19. See the Community Strengthening Program in Burma and the Durable Peace Programme.
20. See New Partnership Initiative (NPI) website.
21. This might be more realistic for NGOs rather than donors, as the latter must respond to the public of their country. Nonetheless, individuals in donor organisations have influence
22. For example, see GPPAC (2022), Effective Options for Financing Local Peacebuilding.
23. For example, see the Grounded Accountability Model or Everyday Peace Indicators.
24. See Peace Direct (January 2023), Nine Roles for Intermediaries for further discussion and recommendations.

About Conducive Space for Peace

Conducive Space for Peace is an NGO with its staff based in different countries. The organisational mission is to transform the global peacebuilding and development system to better enable local leadership and equitable partnerships. CSP works as a connector and accompanier, taking forward initiatives for change through analysis, network building, training and reimagining processes that catalyse systems change for local leadership.

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