



Still Engaging, But Differently: Shifting the Power to Locally Led Peace Initiatives

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Key takeaways

- Community activists are the first responders and the last to leave. The international community's main task should be to strengthen their initiatives and follow their adaptive leadership in times of crisis.
 - o This instead of limiting them with conservative, risk-averse systems and engaging with the dominant "deficit mindset" by donors and INGOs towards local partners.
 - o The added value of INGOs can still be to amplify voices and facilitate connections, share capacities and risks, and speak up where that is unsafe for local partners.
- A focus on donor priorities over local priorities is unsustainable and does not benefit peace nor security. Donors and INGOs should take trust as the starting point in 'approach-based partnerships', focusing on the 'how' of supporting sustainable processes instead of the 'what' of donor's desired short-term priorities.
- Be critical of the term 'local': also at (sub)national level there are many different views and interests. Engaging with any context requires humility, curiosity and conflict sensitivity.

Session summary

Introduction session

The international cooperation sector needs to undergo profound, systemic change towards local leadership and priority setting. This is key to better support sustainable change in complex situations of (post)conflict. Many donors and INGOs have committed to more locally led development (LLD).

Meanwhile, the space for local organizations to speak out and take that leadership is shrinking in times of growing authoritarian trends and many donors shy away from taking risks to support them – support that is also diminished or further aligned with donor's priorities through 'America and EU first' policies.

Taking those challenges into account, this session at the Stockholm Forum for Peace & Development focused on highlighting examples of how to realize LLD. The session was organized by Peace Direct and the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law (KPSRL).

Added value and legitimacy of 'local' leadership

In (post)conflict areas, something as straightforward as building a school can already cause tensions between communities: who has access, what resources does it require? Local actors are best placed to lead development initiatives: **local actors know the needs, sensitivities, can build trust with key stakeholders and know what true impact means in practice** (and therefore also how it is best measured). Moreover, community activists are first responders and last to leave (in stark contrast to the often critiqued '4x4' international aid). So **'exit plans' or sustainable follow up are intuitively more integral to any activity for local actors**, whereas they are often an afterthought with INGOs and UN missions.



This should not be new to peacebuilding professionals, but local peacebuilders expressed frustration about the need to repeat again and again why and how to better support local peacebuilders - such things have already been discussed extensively in various fora.

Facilitating local initiatives is not only important for reasons of effectiveness: **if donors and INGOs are too dominant in their relationships, local organizations risk being associated with ‘foreign agents’ or ‘sellouts’, jeopardizing their safety.** This does not mean that international actors should cut ties or disengage from such dangerous contexts: it requires engaging differently. For instance by keeping lines of communication open with those unaligned with a donors’ goals or values, as they are a reality local partners deal with. Moreover, different local CSOs have different roles, which require different forms of donor engagement. Some CSOs play a public watchdog role, whereas others need constructive ties with the government to do their work more under the radar.

We should be critical of the word ‘local’: **“How local is local?”**. Starting local offices with local staff is often not enough, as the organization is still governed by Western headquarters, procedures and norms. Furthermore, someone living in the capital is probably unfamiliar with the habits, norms and languages of communities in border areas. **Engagement with every context requires humility and curiosity, also for those engaging communities within their own country.**

An unsustainable focus on donor priorities

The example of Syria was mentioned to demonstrate the regular mismatch between local needs and international support. Syria is currently roughly divided into four different sectors with difficulties for local organizations to coordinate between them and a large number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). In this complex context, pre-designed international interventions have made the cracks between communities even worse.

The EU’s focus for example is mostly on hosting migrants in the region, whereas Turkey’s priorities are to establish a buffer zone and expand its influence. The refugee-heavy support resulted in many facilities for IDPs, but also causes plenty of local tensions and does not answer key priorities of the population.

Education is one of those key priorities. However donors only want to support informal education , which means it doesn’t result in formal certificates, which in turn does not lay the groundwork for the future. It is such **disconnections with local needs that result in support that does not benefit peace nor security – a long-term goal which donors do pursue.**

The future role of INGOs

A significant part of the discussion revolved around the future role of INGOs. Some advocated that the goal should be to make INGOs as intermediaries obsolete, or at least as small as possible. The current reality is often still one of merely consulting local partners with the INGOs continuing to implement the work, but as one participant exhorted INGOs: **“Don’t consult, facilitate”**. A challenge the sector has to acknowledge is that systemic changes in roles are also hard to realize due to a heritage of colonialism and racism in the system.



Most participants did still see a valuable role for INGOs – albeit in a different form, away from an implementing role. For example:

- INGOs can amplify local voices in global arenas, but it should go further than that: local partners need to understand donor realities better themselves as well. That means supporting local partners to enter international arenas, but vice versa also get donors out of HQs and capitals.
- Some INGOs are progressive in their bottom-up approaches, but donors still prefer to fund UN institutions that can cover risks. We need to rethink how we see risks. Local organizations have been facing the risks for their work in the most personal ways: whose risk taking are we really talking about?
- Donors and INGOs should more often **follow the leadership of local organizations in times of crisis**, supporting their innovations with (small) grants. The example of Ukraine was given: a relatively new context for many donors and INGOs with many security barriers, where local NGOs didn't have track record – especially as they switched mandates in times of crisis (e.g. from watchdog to humanitarian).
 - o Focusing on local priorities therefore inevitably means working across different 'silos', and in many fragile and conflict-affected contexts (FCAS) also implies having eye for 'different' themes like livelihoods and food security while working on themes like justice and security.
- **Capacity building should be a two way street** that donors should also engage in to for example know more about the context and how to better engage with local peacebuilders.
 - o Moreover, such capacity exchanges with local partners costs extra, also for very concrete aspects like language. This needs to be budgeted for.

The **Shift the Power** movement was highlighted to rethink this role. It started in 2016 and proposes a **move away from the current 'deficit mindset' among donors and INGOs** and the top-heavy international development, towards more equitable and people-based partnerships. Its main thrust was a Global Fund focused on supporting community philanthropy under the feminist 'Power With' (instead of 'Power Over') philosophy. An important lesson learnt here is **"to put money behind energy, instead of trying to create energy with money"**.

Flexible and trusting donors

The sector has been talking about LLD for decades, but still there are systemic issues that hinder donors realizing it. This mostly seems to be a matter of (a lack of) institutional trust and the need to mitigate political risks.

Often, donors lack trust that local organizations have the capacity for the work that, in fact, these local organizations have already been doing for years. Participants emphasized **taking trust as a starting point for partnerships on peacebuilding**. In concrete terms, that can mean:

- Long-term contracts with less self-imposed accountability mechanisms
- An approach-based partnership, trusting local partners' expertise on the (constantly changing) 'what' and focusing on the 'how' of working adaptatively, sustainable design, joint learning and upward/downward accountability



- A clearer role for the donor in the partnership (e.g. influencing policies, convening power)
- Including learning/overhead budget for local partners' learning and M&E.

In times of swift political changes, such as the various unconstitutional changes of power in the Sahel, donors were urged to not abruptly stop support, but to keep lines of communication with all stakeholders open while investigating what is still possible – potentially with different partners.