

Defining 'local'

This brief is part of a series called 'Towards locally-led peacebuilding' intended to highlight gaps in current policy and practice.

Importance of 'locally-led'

While global conflicts increase, the international peacebuilding community is increasingly recognising that locally-led activity is a key element to successful peacebuilding. INGOs, donors, governments and multilaterals are progressively adopting a narrative that supports 'locals' and 'locally-led' approaches in the humanitarian, development or peacebuilding sectors.

However, 'local' risks becoming a buzz word; frequently used by the international community but obscuring differences in understanding of what the term actually means in practice, and as a result, what change is needed within the peacebuilding sector.

Despite a change in the rhetoric around local peacebuilding, most donors have not translated this into concrete action and continue to fund INGOs, rather than local peacebuilders. And many INGOs continue to determine the strategic direction of programmes, with limited input from local actors.

A principled and pragmatic approach

Arguments for what Peace Direct calls 'locally-led approaches' are based both on principle and pragmatism. Support for local peacebuilding aligns with our principles of inclusion, local agency and challenging power structures.

In addition, local approaches are often more effective because of peacebuilders knowledge of the context, legitimacy and accountability. Supporting grassroots efforts also reinforces resilience and increases sustainability.¹

Supporting locally-led approaches means acknowledging that local communities are never homogenous, often espouse divergent views and are centrally involved in local politics. But while local approaches may have their limitations, they are often dismissed or side-lined in favour of international (and predominantly White) responses. This is often due to factors such as risk aversion, concerns about scale and capacity, along with power structures based on neo-colonialism, prejudice and racism.

What do we mean by 'local'

The concept of 'locally-led' cannot be reduced to nationality or geographical location. Local peacebuilders operate on a range of levels – community, sub-national and national.



A micro-finance meeting in Mavivi, DR Congo

Photo by Greg Funnell

For example, Peace Direct's partners Uru and AJCAD work at a national level in Central Africa Republic and Mali respectively. The Peace Initiative Network in Nigeria and Envision Zimbabwe Women's Trust work at a subnational level. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar and Pakistan, sub-grantees of both the 'Local Action Fund' and the 'Youth Action for Peace' project work at a community level.

The relationships, agency and power structures are what makes these examples and the organisations that Peace Direct supports, truly 'local'.

Locally-led peacebuilders:

- Have high levels of trust, accountability and legitimacy among their constituencies;
- Set their own strategic direction, priorities and programmatic focus; and
- Determine their own leadership and governance structures.

It may be useful to view the degree of local ownership on a spectrum from locally-implemented through to locally-led:

- 'Locally-led': local people, groups and civil society organisations design their own approaches and set priorities, whilst outsiders may assist with resources;
- 'Locally-managed': the approach and strategic direction comes from the outside but is 'transplanted' to local management; and
- 'Locally-implemented': primarily an outside approach, including external priorities that local people or organisations are supposed to implement.

INGOs increasingly highlight the hiring of 'national' staff to demonstrate their country offices are 'local'. Peace Direct welcomes the move to increasingly hiring local staff, but we do not consider this to be locally-led because it is the organisation's international identity that largely shapes the approach, focus and direction of in-country work. At best, this offers an example of locally-managed peacebuilding, but it is more likely to be an example of locally-implemented work.

Supporting locally-led approaches

Peace Direct believes that locally-led peacebuilding, where individuals, groups and civil society organisations have agency, relationships with their communities, and the power structures to set their own direction, is fundamental to establishing sustainable, just and, positive peace.

However, a radical shift is needed in the international peacebuilding sector to remove barriers to local leadership and create an environment where local peacebuilders are respected and supported.

An important first step towards this will involve making changes to partnership and funding approaches². This will require a fundamental re-shaping of power structures that involve a transition of power to local peacebuilders, with both donors and INGOs ceding leadership and resources to locally-led initiatives. More widely however, it requires challenging power imbalances, confronting prejudice and changing dominant narratives about the roles of outsiders and insiders.

Endnotes

- 1 Leonardsson, H. and Rudd, G (2015). 'The 'local turn' in peacebuilding: a literature review of effective and emancipatory local peacebuilding' in *Third World Quarterly*, 36:5,825-839,
- 2 Peace Direct has identified nine crucial principles for successful partnerships that maximise local ownership, impact and sustainability, available here: <https://www.peacedirect.org/publications/partnerships/>

