

# THE NINE ROLES THAT INTERMEDIARIES CAN PLAY IN INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

JANUARY 2023



# INTRODUCTION

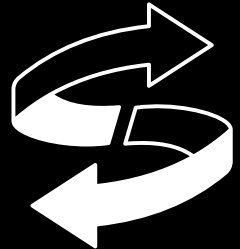
In recent years, there has been growing scrutiny of the largely unchanged role that INGOs have played in humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts. This scrutiny includes the push towards greater 'localisation', systems change processes that aim to 'shift power' towards more locally led development and global discussions around how to 'decolonise' the sector.


**THE DOMINANT ROLE OF THE INGO AS IMPLEMENTER IS NOW GIVING WAY TO ALTERNATIVE MODELS OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION. ONE WELL ESTABLISHED BUT LESS COMMON ROLE FOR INGOS IS THAT OF INTERMEDIARY, THOUGH THIS HAS OFTEN FOCUSED ON INGOS AS CONDUITS FOR FUNDING TO ORGANISATIONS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH. HOWEVER, THE ROLE OF INTERMEDIARY IS FAR RICHER THAN JUST A MECHANISM FOR MANAGING DONOR FUNDS.**

Peace Direct has identified at least nine additional roles for intermediaries, which reflect our experience working with local partners for over 20 years.

# THE NINE ROLES THAT INTERMEDIARIES CAN PLAY IN INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Peace Direct has identified at least nine additional roles for intermediaries, which reflect our experience working with local partners for over 20 years.

**1**  
INTERPRETER  
  
INTERPRETER

**2**  
KNOWLEDGE  
BROKER  
  
AND PRODUCER

**3**  
TRAINER,  
COACH  
  
AND CO-  
LEARNER

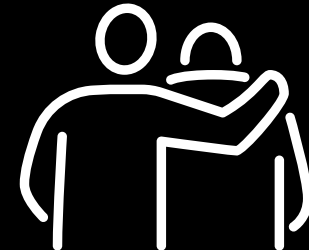
**4**  
CONVENOR  
  
CONVENOR

**5**  
CONNECTOR  
  
AND ECO-  
SYSTEM BUILDER

**6**  
ADVOCATE  
  
AND AMPLIFIER

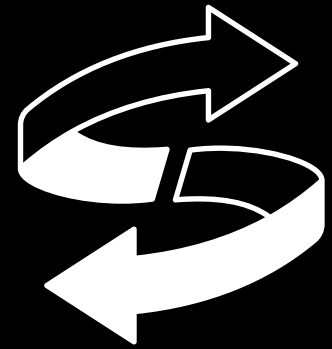
**7**  
WATCHDOG  
  
WATCHDOG

**8**  
CRITICAL  
  
FRIEND

**9**  
SIDEKICK  
  
SIDEKICK

1

INTERPRETER



INTERPRETER

---

# INTERPRETER

Donors and policymakers often publish statements and policies that are inaccessible and couched in jargon. This makes it difficult for local actors to interpret what they mean. Intermediaries can play a useful role in translating these policies to be more accessible. This can help to ensure that local groups can engage in wider geopolitical and thematic discussions, enabling them to share their perspectives and expertise.

# 2

KNOWLEDGE  
BROKER



AND PRODUCER

## KNOWLEDGE BROKER AND PRODUCER

While the expertise needed to tackle complex humanitarian challenges is often found locally, there is also a wealth of knowledge and expertise elsewhere. It is found in the practice, research and insights generated by activists, communities and organisations all over the world. Yet local actors rarely have the time or resources to locate this knowledge and use it effectively. Intermediaries can play a useful role in bridging this gap. This can be between local actors in the Global South and actors in the Global North as well as facilitating knowledge exchange across different countries or continents in the Global South.

Intermediaries can also play a useful role in producing and sharing knowledge about the work that they support. This should be done with great care, since the production and consumption of knowledge is dominated by Global North actors. The need to decolonise research is widely acknowledged and any role for the intermediary as a knowledge producer should therefore be handled very sensitively.

TRAINER,  
COACH



AND CO-  
LEARNER

---

# TRAINER, COACH AND CO-LEARNER

Peace Direct's ['Time to Decolonise Aid'](#) report outlined how some INGOs and donors argue that local groups and communities 'lack capacity'. Local actors argue that INGO's use the 'low capacity' argument to justify their own plans, which results in them directly implementing activities, not working with local partners and maintaining a distorted view of countries and communities in the Global South. When local partners are included as partners, INGOs often justify their role as 'technical experts' even when this is not necessary.

While local organisations are rightly very critical of the problematic framing of 'capacity building' they also acknowledge that there are skills that they are keen to develop and strengthen and that they are keen to learn from others.

Intermediaries can plug this gap by providing training and coaching where necessary, for example training in donor reporting, advocacy and campaigning, or strategic planning. Intermediaries can also play a useful role in co-learning. This could mean developing a joint learning agenda with local partners and not assuming that their role is in facilitating the learning of their partners.

As with knowledge production, the role of trainer and coach should be handled with great care since 'capacity building' often masks deeply entrenched and often racist views of the superiority of 'Global North' approaches and expertise.

4

CONVENOR



CONVENOR

---

# CONVENOR

Opportunities for collective reflection and learning among civil society actors are extremely limited. Shrinking civic space, increasing competition and suspicion among local actors means there are few opportunities to bring local groups together. In addition, the current system of funding for funding CSOs often pits local organisations against each other, which reinforces competition rather than collaboration. As a result, local groups rarely have the opportunity to strategise together and learn from one another. This leads to a weakening of local civil society.

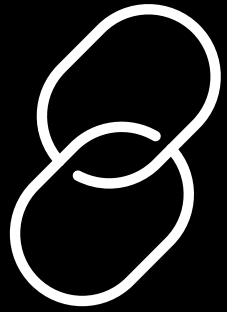
Intermediaries can play a useful role in providing spaces for local groups to reflect, plan and learn together, either in-country or outside. Peace Direct's experience in providing such spaces is that they can be transformational for local actors. However they are rarely offered by most donors or INGOs.

Perhaps the most important consideration is how to enable local groups to set their own agenda for these meetings, and not to let INGO priorities and interests dictate the content and flow of the meeting.

While in-person convenings are almost always the most rewarding, online convenings can be powerful spaces too, if online access can be provided.

5

CONNECTOR



AND ECO-  
SYSTEM BUILDER

---

# CONNECTOR AND ECO-SYSTEM BUILDER

Civil society in most Global South countries can be characterised as suffering from horizontal and vertical fragmentation. Horizontal fragmentation happens when local groups cannot connect with one another to learn and work together. There are a range of reasons for this: funding constraints, competition/suspicion, and logistical constraints such as poor roads, communications infrastructure, equipment, and lack of transportation.

Vertical fragmentation happens when local groups cannot connect to national and international organisations and processes. Horizontal and vertical fragmentation share many of the same causes. However vertical fragmentation often happens when 'elites' including INGOs and decision makers deliberately exclude local actors. A parallel problem takes place between local actors in the Global South and decision makers in the Global North. This leads to gaps in knowledge, appreciation and understanding between actors working at different levels in the system (local, national, international) even if they are all focused on the same issue.

Intermediaries can help bridge these divides, by connecting local actors both horizontally and vertically. This can happen by playing a convening role (see point 4 above) but also through facilitating and funding exchanges and visits. In this way, the intermediary acts as connective tissue, linking different actors across the system together.

Strengthening any ecosystem leads to multiple benefits for its inhabitants. These include greater resilience, enhanced problem solving capacity and improved likelihood of collective impact – all essential in tackling the most pressing issues of our times.



6

ADVOCATE



AND AMPLIFIER

---

# ADVOCATE AND AMPLIFIER

One of the most impactful roles an intermediary can play is to use its power to advocate to policymakers on behalf of local actors, create space for local actors to advocate directly and ensure that local organisations receive a profile, credit and a platform for their work and achievements. The protection, power and influence, proximity to geopolitical power and visibility enjoyed by many intermediaries can be utilised to amplify the voices of those who aren't afforded these opportunities or who can't speak out due to security concerns.

Intermediaries can also use their networks and resources to promote and amplify the expertise of local partners. This can ensure that local organisations receive the profile, platform and credit they deserve. Intermediaries can and should link this with their efforts to educate the general public in their own countries and shine a spotlight on the importance of international assistance and solidarity with the Global South.

7

WATCHDOG



WATCHDOG

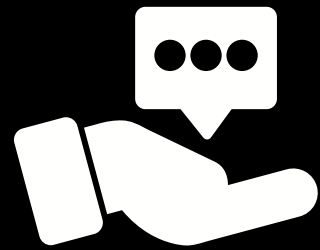
---

# WATCHDOG

In countries around the world, space for civil society to operate freely is declining. Civil society organisations, campaigners and leaders are facing increasingly repressive policies and actions by their own governments, leading to risks of impunity, violence and an erosion of human rights.

Intermediaries can play an important role as watchdogs, monitoring trends in the policies and practices of repressive and democratic states. By doing so, they can raise this in the international arena, and work with others to counter these practices. This is not only a way of utilising the power of the intermediary to uphold the rights of others; but is a powerful demonstration of solidarity which is highly valued by local partners.

CRITICAL



FRIEND

---

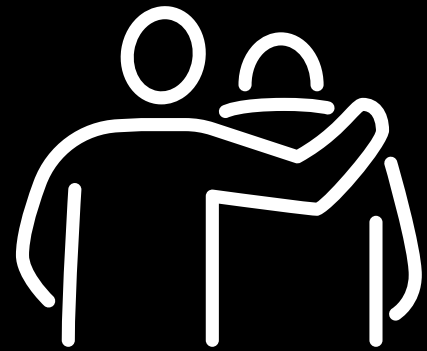
# CRITICAL FRIEND

Many INGOs consider local actors as ‘implementing partners’ and treat them like subcontractors with commercial-style agreements to deliver specific outputs. Very few local actors want to be treated this way, but they feel that they have no choice but to enter into these agreements. What local actors want are long term partnerships based on mutual respect, trust and flexibility.

Peace Direct has grown to understand that the role of the intermediary as a critical friend is highly valued. A critical friend does not use their power to dictate the terms of the relationship. Instead, they provide advice and guidance when asked and offer themselves as a sounding board for ideas, challenges and opportunities faced by the local partner. The ‘friend’ part of the equation is to be in solidarity with the aims and mission of their partner, to offer support when they make mistakes, and to see their partners as people we care about at a deeply human level.

9

SIDEKICK



SIDEKICK

---

# SIDEKICK

The least known role for intermediaries is being the sidekick for local partners. By 'sidekick' we mean a subordinate role, one that supports the local organisation in whatever it needs, but doesn't overstep the support role.

At Peace Direct, we have long considered ourselves the 'support team' for our local partners. We recognise that they are leading efforts to build peace in their communities with our job being to support them in whatever way we can. While the role of the sidekick may mean performing many of the roles outlined in points 1-8 above, it is also a state of mind or philosophy which aims to reverse the status quo. This means that Global South actors are acknowledged as being in the driving seat, while Global North actors are passengers. The sidekick manifesto is a good example of how INGOs can conceptualise this commitment.

# INTERMEDIARIES

## THE FUTURE:

Presently the role of the intermediary INGO is dominated by the need for Global North donors to support international projects, with minimal transaction costs. Intermediaries reduce the burden for Global North donors and often play this role effectively when viewed through this narrow 'transaction cost' lens. However, in the medium to long term, Global South actors hope that Global North donors will begin to fund them directly. If so, what becomes of the intermediary INGO if they are no longer needed a funding and donor compliance conduit?

While the nine roles we outline begin to provide possible answers, it should be noted that many of the roles are temporary. They are designed to plug holes in a system that does not work. For example: the interpreter, knowledge broker, convenor and trainer roles should not be necessary if the system orients towards supporting local efforts more thoughtfully.

This does not mean that there will be no role for the intermediary. There will always be donors who will prefer to fund Global North organisations as the conduit for funding to the Global South. More importantly, there may always be a need for the intermediary as advocate, critical friend and sidekick. If they play these roles well, humbly and lightly, they can act as force multipliers of local efforts and of the wider drive to improve the lives and livelihoods of people around the world.



[peacedirect.org](http://peacedirect.org)