

Advancing Peacebuilding from the Ground up

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Advancing Peacebuilding from the Ground up

Many international organisations (IOs) are grappling with problems of local ownership in their peacebuilding projects. Peace scholars emphasise that communities can achieve peace on their own. We recommend that IOs rethink their own priorities and be open for bottom-up project development by:

- ▮ Aiming to foster reflection rather than find quick fixes. Invest more time and energy before designing projects and involve regional expert teams to explore and understand local capacities for peace.
- ▮ Strengthening relationships and fostering trust in interactions with communities through dialogue in local languages and mutual collaborative learning.
- ▮ Respecting what the local population accepts as legitimate and effective conflict settlement and giving priority to peaceful local agency.

For many years, scholars and practitioners have been struggling with problems of local ownership in IO-led peacebuilding. Despite the discourse surrounding giving ownership to local communities, top-down approaches prevail in practice and often lead to counterproductive outcomes. Ethnographic fieldwork has proven that IOs could achieve a better understanding of local experiential perspectives on conflict and peace. Here, we point to key features of local peace and suggest how IOs could better incorporate peaceful local agency, cope with power imbalances and advance strategies for peacebuilding from the ground up.

Local communities are not peaceful per se. Yet people in many societies are able to cope with everyday tensions, even under difficult socioeconomic conditions. They do so by avoiding, appeasing, preventing and settling conflicts in accordance with cultural beliefs and practices unique to their communities. Despite increased globalisation, traditional understandings of community, authority, and gender norms continue to prevail in many societies around the world. For community members, these beliefs are taken as given – they evolve only over the course of generations and can hardly be changed from the outside. Downplaying them or attempting to eradicate them often only triggers local resistance. Cultural beliefs influence how societies deal with conflict and peace: some societies prefer open contestation; others contain conflicts through avoidance. While some expect police officers to intervene in disputes, others prefer informal conflict management by

kinship networks. Some societies prioritise individual rights and equality in their understandings of peace while others rely on top-down authority, hierarchies and social unity.

To reach the hearts and minds of the local population, those who intervene must not overlook cultural beliefs and established traditions. To develop peacebuilding projects from the ground up, IO headquarters and field offices need to make better use of locals' conventional wisdom on peace. Before designing projects, regional expert teams should take time to explore, translate and engage with different, and often traditional, collectivist and hierarchical contexts. The findings will allow IOs to recognise early on if international peacebuilding strategies can be accepted in particular places or if they are viewed as West-centric, patronising and disrespectful of local traditions. Such bottom-up project development also requires IOs to reflect on their own normative and operational frameworks and recognise that liberal values, which broadly inform their strategies, can hardly be imposed from the outside.

As in African or Middle Eastern contexts, our research in Central Asia suggests that engaging with local sociocultural meanings is important in order to grasp how people in given localities address the challenges of conflict settlement through everyday practices and local institutions. These practices involve commonplace transactions such as communicating or caring for others in one's neighbourhood. Through

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everyday decisions and actions, people attempt to appease pressures, to mitigate and creatively transform conflicts. Local institutions, in turn, are collectively recognised organisations which facilitate resource distribution through channels such as patrons and neighbourhood committees and provide normative orientation through, for example, social and religious leaders. Their informality notwithstanding, local institutions are rigid in character because they draw on local social hierarchies based on kinship, gender, age and wealth. Their importance can be observed in expressions of respect, modes of social control, the density of communication, and, finally, conflict settlement. An example of such everyday conflict prevention concerns local female leaders in rural Central Asian communities. While adhering to traditional gender roles and deferring to male authority, they informally discuss local problems — unruly youths, for example — with respected male elders and suggest solutions “from behind”. Their indirect mediation is thus a cornerstone of local peace.

Peacebuilding missions can build confidence and gain more legitimacy locally if they respect and incorporate established ways in which people settle conflicts. As these practices are not easy for outsiders to grasp, peacebuilding officers need much more time and fewer directives in order to engage in collaborative learning and build mutual trust with local communities. During our fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, we met many IO officers who admitted that they could do much better work if they had fewer administrative duties and more time to build relationships with local communities. This shows that IOs’ procedures, logical frameworks, and the services they offer may not necessarily provide a script for meaningful interactions on the ground.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that multiple issues of power cannot be escaped when

building collaboration and mutual understanding. At the communal level, actors and institutions are embedded in subtle, informal networks in which the roles of state administration, patrons, elders and other informal leaders are closely intertwined. In this way, a local patron can also be a city mayor and a school director can simultaneously be an elder or an informal women’s leader. IO employees need to be careful to not be co-opted into these structures as a new patron providing financial resources. Active negotiations on locally-led initiatives and their accountability may help mitigate issues of power and foster mutual respect and trust.

There is one more caveat. When trying to understand local conflicts, IO officers often realise that the root causes are related to a global neoliberal economy that (re-)produces underdevelopment and local fragmentation in many world regions. Local capacities for peace may be weakened when people have to navigate between places and across borders in their search for income and security. An increased exposure to different worldviews through migration and online communication may improve wellbeing

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in communities; however, it can also lead to conflicts between traditional and modern values. Here, IOs need to refrain from approaching local communities as sealed containers of tradition and take time to understand these complex dynamics.

Finally, international officers are confronted with dilemmas of their own. On the one hand, they may have the best intentions of engaging with local actors on equal footing. On the other hand, they cannot bypass the constraints of the organisations they represent, as these are embedded in international power structures. IOs rely on funding from donor

states and other third parties whose own interests are often incompatible with those of local communities.

In summary, advancing international peacebuilding from the ground up through better understanding, relationships and respect is not easy. First, it requires openness and commitment from both IOs and communities with regard to possible divides between their respective value systems. Second, peacebuilding needs to confront issues of power. Both local and international actors have to critically reflect on their own positions and negotiate with more willingness in order to reach new levels of collaboration.

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