Trust, legitimacy, capacity and power:
Practical approaches to localisation in peacebuilding

SUMMARY

The Practical Approaches to Localisation project documents local realities and voices on localisation and incorporates them into the international conversation around the topic.

The paper synthesises the findings from research conducted between November 2023 and July 2024 in Kenya, Lebanon, Rwanda and Syria. The Syria research was conducted by Alert's partner Mobaderoon. The research seeks to provide guidance to donors, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs, including International Alert), local NGOs and civil society organisations (CSOs) on how to provide effective support for the localisation in peacebuilding work.

The research design in each location varied to respond to local realities. Qualitative methods included dialogues, focus groups and in-depth interviews with 426 local and international stakeholders (205 women and 221 men). Individual country practice papers focus on what localisation in peacebuilding can and should look like in each country.

Key findings

- Local organisations are often sidelined from decision-making on peacebuilding processes, funding and genuine engagement in peacebuilding mechanisms.
- Perspectives of localisation vary. For some, localisation is an approach driven by ideology and principles; for others, it is part of a push for greater efficiency and better value for money. In conflict affected contexts, localisation processes can be contested.
- Localisation should strengthen inclusive, participatory, gender-sensitive peacebuilding initiatives that respond to diverse local needs and address local conflict dynamics.
- Key elements for successful localisation and locally-led peacebuilding are legitimacy and trust building, transforming power relations, and local capacities for peace.
- Conflict and context sensitivity must permeate localisation in peacebuilding efforts. Each context has its own unique challenges.
- In conflict settings, local peacebuilders face increased security risks and localisation efforts may be more contested and risk being derailed by spoilers or used to serve the narrow interests of specific groups.
- Effective peacebuilding and localisation require that power imbalances are recognised and addressed at all levels prioritising local communities and actors.

- Local peacebuilders need long-term, flexible funding without demanding compliance requirements and without bearing all the risk.
- Gender inclusivity in locally-led peacebuilding needs to be context specific, based on an understanding of the diverse roles different men and women play in peacebuilding and conflict prevention.
- Localisation of peacebuilding means localisation of approaches (and local ownership of them), not just resources and actors.
- Contextualised and tailored capacity-building support is needed to develop local capacities for peace.
- Local and multi-level networks are important to support learning and collaboration among local actors.
- International peacebuilding organisations can support local peacebuilding efforts through developing genuinely locally-led partnerships that increase local partners' decision-making power and that leverage local and international partners' expertise.

What is localisation in peacebuilding?

- Localisation in peacebuilding refers to the redress of power imbalances within the international peacebuilding sector and the transfer of power from international peacebuilding agencies (donors, multilateral agencies and INGOs) to local actors. This is distinct from ongoing locally led peacebuilding work.
- The research did not arrive at a specific definition of 'local' for all the countries. In Kenya, participants framed localisation as both spatial and ideological; this framing could be useful across contexts. The spatial element means planning and locating peacebuilding interventions where conflict occurs and among the communities directly affected. The ideological element refers to a bottom-up approach where grassroots voices define the conflict and the interventions needed, and their implementation, rather than international donors and partners. The latter element can allow for expanding the term of 'local' in contexts of displacement and including diaspora communities (such as in Syria, where diaspora civil society groups play a role in peacebuilding).

The contexts

- Conflict dynamics, state legitimacy and capacity, experiences of colonialism, and the impact of geopolitics vary greatly between the four contexts. All, however, have a relatively strong and developed civil society (although in the Syrian case a significant proportion of civil society is based in the diaspora).
- Debate and initiatives on localisation are live and ongoing in all these countries, but these discussions are continuously influenced by changes in the local and national contexts. The dynamic nature and large-scale humanitarian impact of the wars in Gaza and Lebanon have influenced perspectives and prioritisation of localisation and peacebuilding drastically.
- Across the research there was broad support for localisation in peacebuilding, although aims, framing, perspectives and approaches varied.

Elements for successful localisation in peacebuilding

- Despite the diversity of the four country contexts, the research identified some common elements for successful localisation and enabling locally led peacebuilding: legitimacy and trust building, transforming power relations, and local capacity for peace. Underpinning these is the need for conflict and context sensitivity.

Legitimacy and trust building

- Successful localisation in peacebuilding needs the local actors behind it to have legitimacy, be accepted by communities and working in communities' wider interests, which can be challenging in divided contexts.
- Trust is central to localisation – between local and international actors, among local actors (state and non-state), and in the processes and mechanisms of localisation. Trust building is critical. Inclusive, locally led peacebuilding efforts working across these divides, can help rebuild trust. In conflict settings, it is even more critical for international actors to (re)build trust with local actors.
- Top-down legitimacy, where international organisations make assumptions about local organisations being 'legitimate', can play into local divisions if not paired with 'bottom-up legitimacy' grounded in local realities and an understanding of context and conflict dynamics. International organisations need to look beyond urban areas to work with remote, rural organisations.
- The role and legitimacy of the government in localisation of peacebuilding vary widely. In some contexts, traditional, community-based approaches have been integrated into formal processes with state oversight; in others, government involvement is seen to have moved the agenda away from local peacebuilders.
- Whilst overall local NGOs were seen to play a central role in the process of localisation, perceptions of local actors varied across and within contexts. Different experiences of conflict and attitudes towards the role of national and local authorities influenced varying perceptions. In Syria, for example, participants in government-controlled areas were more likely to trust doctors and teachers than those outside these areas (Northeast and Northwest of Syria, Turkey and Lebanon) who value the work of NGOs. In Rwanda and Kenya, the private sector and local business associations were also identified amongst local peacebuilding actors.
- Successful localisation requires local actors to work together across conflict divides, across sectors leveraging their different roles and experiences, geographic areas and build a shared understanding of civic values and localisation.
- Localisation in peacebuilding needs inclusive, participatory and gender sensitive approaches. Peacebuilding approaches provide the tools to work with diverse and even conflicting voices to build relationships and identify shared interests.

Transforming power relations

- Relationships within the existing international aid system are asymmetrical and hierarchical, with power lying largely with donor states in the Global North.
- Effective peacebuilding and localisation require that power imbalances are recognised and addressed so that local NGOs are have equal status, are included in planning how funds are used and lead in designing interventions and setting benchmarks for success.

- This means changing the power relationships between local, national and international organisations, between the state and local civil society and communities, and even within communities, to address marginalisation and discrimination.
- Localisation should go beyond simply channelling more funding to local organisations. It requires restructuring mechanisms to enable flexible funding that can respond to evolving local needs and context and provide sufficient coverage of core costs (such as overheads relating to staff, systems etc.) as well as capacity development to support sustainability. This can include support for institutional strengthening, core funding and mechanisms which facilitate collaboration in consortia.
- Research participants reported that donor requirements were becoming more demanding in the context of reduced funding and the need for donor agencies to justify their spending to a domestic audience. Some participants said that alternative sources should be explored.
- Gender inclusivity in locally led peacebuilding needs to be context specific and recognise the diverse roles, interests, experiences and perspectives of different men and women in conflict and in peacebuilding. Shifting gender norms, including the concept of 'gender mainstreaming', can encounter opposition in some contexts – for example, backlash from local male elites or being misunderstood as advocacy for LGBTQIA+ rights.

Local capacities for peace

- In all the contexts there was recognition that localisation of peacebuilding means genuine local ownership and contextually relevant approaches, not just resources and actors.
- Valuing and prioritising local knowledge and experience is a key aspect of shifting power towards local peacebuilders.
- Fragmentation and polarisation of civil society were identified as major problems in some contexts; some participants suggested the development of common principles across civil society that could unite organisations from different backgrounds. Building connections among diverse local actors, including across conflict lines, is also important.
- Some respondents emphasised the need for contextualised and tailored capacity-building support to develop local capacities for peace in a sustainable, context-specific way. Other participants denied that capacity was an issue.
- Building local and multi-level networks that support learning and collaboration emerged clearly as a recommendation in several countries.

Context sensitivity

- Peacebuilding and localisation processes are deeply contextual, complex and multi-faceted, and non-linear. As conflict evolves, various factors may be accelerated, and the roles of actors may change.
- Each context has its own unique barriers to, and entry points for, localisation. Challenges are particularly acute in Syria and Lebanon, which are experiencing active conflict, acute socio-economic crises and deep political polarisation.
- Understanding the roles and influence actors who incite violence and those involved in violence (including local armed groups) is critical to understanding local power dynamics. Applying this understanding to decision-making around engagement is crucial to reduce the risks of them derailing local peacebuilding efforts or co-opting localisation processes.

Recommendations

Donors and policy-makers

- Restructure grant-making facilities to develop organisational sustainability and establish financial mechanisms with local actors based on local priorities and a thorough understanding of context dynamics and actors. Funding should be flexible, mainly long term, and cover core costs.
- Design country programmes that are inclusive of, and actively shaped by, local voices, priorities, demands and actions.
- Simplify demands and reduce compliance burdens within grant-management processes and foster mutual trust and collaboration.
- Incentivise networking and peer learning between local partners. Encourage partnerships between local and international organisations with local organisations in central decision-making roles.
- Plan for adequate staffing models within donor agencies with relevant context expertise and commitment to locally led peacebuilding
- Use diplomatic and political leverage to safeguard and expand space for local peace actors.

INGOs and international agencies

- Understand what local organisations want from INGOs and listen to what local partners know as experts in their context.
- Develop genuinely locally led partnerships that increase local partners' decision-making power and that leverage local and international partners' expertise.
- Provide tailored technical assistance to local peacebuilders, based on a joint assessment of their unique opportunities, challenges and capacity needs.
- Work with local peacebuilding actors to support innovative pilots, scale activities and build links with other local actors, especially across divides.
- Facilitate and fund meaningful participation and influence by local actors in national peace processes.
- Ensure that local NGO and CSO partners have direct communication lines with donors.

Local civil society organisations

- Build networks and alliances between those working in different geographic areas, and diverse peacebuilding themes, across conflict lines. Build connections with actors at different levels (national, international) and explore partnerships with the private sector.
- Build a shared understanding of civil society values and of localisation through dialogue and network engagement.
- Develop shared analysis of the context and of strategies for peacebuilding and social stability through knowledge sharing.
- Engage with policy-makers (national and international) in advocating for policies that support peacebuilding at both national and subnational levels.
- Support and sustain locally led decision-making mechanisms engaging diverse voices.

Recommendations on conflict-sensitive and participatory approaches

- Conduct regular conflict analyses, ensuring they inform programme design and foster flexibility, adaptation and learning.
- Consider and plan for the risks of operating in a conflict context, including the roles of actors with an interest in co-opting or derailing localisation and locally led peacebuilding efforts.
- Conduct conflict-sensitivity and gender-sensitivity reviews of localisation processes.

Read the full learning paper **here**.
Find out more about the project: **https://bit.ly/localisation-IA**

Funded by:

SVENSKA POSTKODLOTTERIETS

STIFTELSE