Localisation, local leadership and locally-led peacebuilding

POSITION PAPER

Localisation has long been a fundamental issue in international development; it is all the more important now, and especially so in peacebuilding. This position paper sets out International Alert's approach to localisation, drawing on our practice, experience and relationships with local partners.

Our detailed 2024 research on localisation in peacebuilding can be found here.

Localisation in international development

The idea of "localisation" in international development is driven by a number of factors, including:

- a desire for greater **equity**, with power shifted from those who have traditionally held it (donors and international NGOs) to local actors rooted in or close to the context in question;
- concerns around the **effectiveness** of the development action in question: people are the best qualified to make decisions about their own lives, so external actors (such as donors or NGOs) must be accountable to those they seek to serve and work in ways which are driven by them;
- a drive towards **sustainability**, with countries receiving aid being better placed to transition away from it in future if they have strong domestic capacities as international actors phase out;
- a desire among donors to maximise **value for money**, with support reaching those who need it without unnecessary intermediary costs.

Opinions differ on how the power imbalances between international agencies and local actors should be redressed. The word "localisation" can take a range of meanings and angles, depending on who is using it and in what context. In practical terms, financial localisation refers to the proportion of a donor's aid that goes directly to local actors. Programmatic localisation asks how involved local actors are in programme design, whether or not they are in receipt of direct donor grants. Organisational localisation can include how international organisations approach recruitment and governance.

The definition of "local" is itself complex and used in different ways by different actors. For example, some might describe all nationally-established organisations as "local", in contrast to INGOs or UN agencies, while for others, "local" might mean an organisation at the county or district level or representing a particular community.

Additionally, terms such as decolonisation can take on different dimensions when working in some contexts (e.g. former colonial territories of the UK, in which Alert is headquartered) than in others (e.g. former Soviet Union territories).

Localisation in peacebuilding

Peacebuilding shares with development and humanitarian work many common factors around localisation, such as those noted above. There are also, however, a set of issues specific to peacebuilding.

The tensions within localisation can be more fraught in conflict contexts, where the legitimacy of the actors involved (and those who may have been excluded), and visions for localisation, are more contested. In many conflict contexts, organisations rooted at the very local level may reflect one dimension of a complex conflict dynamic, for example representing a particular community or group. They may therefore recognise the need for an actor more distant from that dynamic to play a convening or mediating role. At the same time, such more "distant" actors, whether nationally- or locally-rooted, bring their own conflict sensitivity dynamics to any peacebuilding process.

Alert's and our partners' analysis of conflict dynamics and power relations must therefore take the role and perceived local legitimacy of each actor into account. We note also that there can be conflict sensitivity implications to funding incentives that encourage groups or organisations to present themselves as "the most local" or the most authentic representative of a community, potentially at the expense of others.

For a more in-depth discussion of localisation in peacebuilding and international development, see Alert's 2024 research paper.

Alert's approach

At Alert we take "localisation" to be about centring the agency and power of people directly affected by the issues in question. This fits with our core purpose: to work with people directly affected by violence to support lasting solutions.

We frame our work as an organisation around **locally-led peacebuilding**. We seek to be truly driven by what local communities and partners ask of us. We seek to answer the question of why we are needed, and therefore the role we play or don't play alongside others, through open dialogue with locally-rooted partners and with conflict-affected communities. We seek to reflect these principles through the full project and partnering cycle, starting with participative conflict analysis and programme design, and in our organisational strategy-making, decision-making and governance.

Alert's peacebuilding teams are deeply rooted in the countries that they work in, with only a small handful of international-contract staff. Our Country Directors pay strong attention to diversity and conflict sensitivity within the make-up of their teams. Roles in our global (headquarters) teams are recruited globally, rather than just in Europe.

Where the international NGO role is not needed, we do not seek to play it. For example, in 2023 we worked with our then team in the Philippines to close Alert's registration and operations and support them in founding a new local organisation to take peacebuilding forward.

But we do believe in global solidarity, and that international organisations such as Alert can be expressions of and partners for such solidarity. We seek to be clear both on our own role and on the thoughtfulness, humility and lived commitment to equity that we must practise in playing it. We have already changed significantly to meet that ambition, and we know that further change is needed to meet it more fully.

In creating our 2024-30 strategy, therefore, we challenged ourselves to think afresh about Alert's role, structures and practices, confronting embedded power relations and assumptions. At the heart of this was a sustained process of consultation with local partners and Alert's own staff.

Our strategy makes a series of commitments, which we are now implementing, including on:

- how we develop, participate in or deliver peacebuilding activities in ways which are led by local partners and communities of people affected by conflict;
- how we contribute to strengthening the resources for dealing with conflict within conflict-affected societies;
- how we change our organisational processes (such as planning, resource allocation or our operating model) so they are driven by what communities and partners in our peacebuilding contexts need of us;
- our organisational structure, such as global recruitment by default for global team roles (which were previously by default based in the UK).

Based on deep consultations with our partners and among our country teams, our strategy seeks to bring out what people and organisations working for peace most want from us as an international organisation.

This can be summarized as:

Connecting peacebuilders

Peacebuilding actors everywhere want to connect with others to share learning, gain insights and solidarity. As an international network we both do this internally (between our local peacebuilding teams in our different contexts) and offer these connections to our partners. This can be both conflict-specific (many conflicts are now regional in nature) or thematic (e.g. generating and sharing learning by bringing together different approaches on gender or climate peacebuilding). This helps build stronger and better-networked local capacities for peacebuilding within societies, as well as providing learning and insight to inform advocacy for wider policy changes that support peace.

Advocacy in global policy spaces

One of the top responses from our partners in our strategy consultations was that they wanted their voices to be more represented in international policy forums, and looked to organisations such as Alert (which often have more access to such forums) to support and enable this. They also helped us select the themes on which we focus our global advocacy: gender, climate and peace economies (business for peace). So when we are, for example, influencing the EU directive on responsible investment in conflict contexts, or working through the WPS working group at the UN on Security Council resolutions, or at COP working for more conflict-sensitive climate action, we are trying to change global systems and frameworks in ways that make peace more possible. We are doing this alongside, and in ways which amplify the voices of, people directly affected by conflict.

Working with others towards peace

One of the most effective ways that we can advance peace-positive outcomes is by influencing development, humanitarian, climate and investment actors to centre peace-positive approaches in their work in fragile settings. With development and humanitarian need increasingly concentrated in conflict-affected contexts, there is a need for global development to change how it does business, so as to reach these places in ways which work in those contexts and leave no-one behind. Global-level partnerships, for example with large development NGOs or policy actors such as development funding agencies, help us influence this systemic change that is needed.

Providing a convening space

International (i.e. "outsider") organisations can provide convening spaces for sensitive issues to be discussed by local groups. The "neutrality" of a space convened by an organisation like Alert can prove valuable in bringing people together across divides. For some of our partners, their association with us is seen by them as important for protecting their space to operate when civil society is under pressure in their context, because they assess that hostile governments are less likely to be willing to close down associations with this kind of profile. (In some contexts, the reverse is true, and we agree with our partners how any risks around their association with an international NGO can best be managed.)

Acting as an intermediary

For some of our partners, our ability to act as an intermediary between donor requirements and their action is important. Of course many local partners aspire to work directly with international donors, and we support this (including acting as their subcontractor in some projects). But some local organisations don't seek to build the administrative infrastructure to deal with (say) a donor's audit and compliance requirements, preferring to focus on their core mission of action on the ground. In such cases, Alert can act as the donor intermediary. This is not the same as Alert being "in charge"; our partnerships involve open and participative discussions, from the start, about who best plays what role in the consortium, and how risk and responsibilities are managed.

These roles emerge from consultation with local partners, rather than any pre-determined model; but they reflect similar conclusions from broader consultations held by others around the future role for international NGOs, such as those conducted by PeaceDirect.

How we will continue to advance this agenda

Embedding these points as the foundation of our organisational strategy ensures that progress on them is measured at the highest level, across our organisation, as we implement the strategy as a whole.

Among our priorities on this agenda are:

- continuing to transform our peacebuilding partnerships so they are genuinely locally-led, in line with the commitments set out in our strategy. During 2025, based on lessons learned in the two years since it was last reworked on the basis of our Partnership Position, we are further revising and refreshing our guidance and procedures around partnering, and developing a framework for monitoring and evaluating our progress more rigorously. We will report annually on progress against our partnership commitments.
- piloting ways of including local partners in our organisational planning and resource allocation decisions. Having developed country strategies in deep consultation with local partners, we are committed to including similar consultations at a global level.
- continuing to shape the wider agenda around locally-led peacebuilding, with donors, peers and wider stakeholders. Our localisation in peacebuilding research looked deeply at these issues in a number of contexts, and led to an ongoing advocacy campaign across the sector to champion their findings and recommendations. At the request of a funders' group including the Dutch government and a number of private foundations, we led consultations among peacebuilding INGOs on a new locally-led peacebuilding assessment tool designed to drive further change within the sector overall.

We know also that we must, and will, keep challenging ourselves on these issues. Our strategy makes clear that "we seek to be clear both on our own role and on the humility, thoughtfulness and lived commitment to equity that we must practise in playing it".

We continue to reflect on our role in the existing aid system, at a time of significant turbulence and change in that system. This includes thinking about how what we do, in terms of our organisational practice as well as our advocacy, either drives change or sustains existing structures. We continue to learn from our many local partners on how we and they can best work together as intermediaries (in our different ways) between funders and communities affected by conflict.

These issues interact with our governance and values as an organisation. A staff-led charter on gender, diversity, equity and inclusion (GDEI), supported by senior management and by GDEI focal points in each Alert office, seeks to connect our focus on locally-led inclusive peacebuilding with our organisational decision-making and values, and champion diversity and inclusion in each of our teams.

Questions of localisation, local leadership and locally-led peacebuilding continue to evolve both within Alert and across the sector as a whole. Our aim is to be driven by what conflict-affected communities and our local partners need from us. Our role is informed by continuous dialogue and context-specific analysis. As we seek to enact these principles throughout our organisation, we will continue to reflect on how our own practices can best confront the power imbalance, social exclusion and injustice that drive so much conflict worldwide.

About International Alert

International Alert works with people directly affected by conflict to build lasting peace. We focus on solving the root causes of conflict with people from across divides. From the grassroots to policy level, we bring people together to build sustainable peace.

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