

Local ownership – an imperative for inclusive peacebuilding

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Introduction

Peacebuilding needs to come full circle back to its origins. In the early 1990s, when the developed world was becoming overwhelmed with a backlog of failed peace negotiations in the wake of the end of the Cold War, it was clear that without the consolidation of peace within a country, externally-driven, negotiated peace agreements could not deliver conflicted societies from the grip of violence and destruction. The concept of peacebuilding arose out of a recognition that from within a society, structures needed to be identified and supported that would strengthen and solidify peace, thus removing violent internal conflict as a consequence of social and/or political differences confronting a state. Unfortunately, what ensued was a flood of externally driven initiatives and institutions pledging to support internal peacebuilding processes without a clear sense of who to support, how to support them, or over what length of time the support should come. Confusion around and competition for peacebuilding initiatives has led to the adoption of ‘peacebuilding’ as a catch-all phrase suggesting one’s commitment to peace regardless of how one intervenes. If one of the fundamental tenets of peacebuilding is its need to come from within the society, external actors must reconsider how their support can be more effectively integrated into locally owned efforts towards building peace.



Local ownership by whose design?

Proclamations of local ownership run rampant in just about every externally funded peacebuilding initiative. From the ownership of the marginalised at the grassroots level, to the ownership of the state at the national level, organisations claiming to have designs for building peace consider it routine to identify those that they target as owners of the initiative. The unfortunate reality of ‘peacebuilding’ as a professional practice is that provided the intervention suggests local ownership, and provided the target groups are of interest to the donors, one can sustain oneself as a peacebuilder without significantly affecting peace. Regrettably, the mere suggestion of local ownership by peacebuilding actors is sometimes enough to generate external funding support, even if actualising that ownership is not even remotely possible.

Many efforts to develop peacebuilding interventions fail to demonstrate the concepts they pursue. Phrases such as ‘locally-driven, locally-owned’, ‘building local capacities’, and ‘strengthening social cohesion’ abound in peacebuilding designs but are much less evident in practice. Because fragile societies seldom have institutional capacities that elicit strong levels of confidence from the donor world, most peacebuilding initiatives in failed or fragile states rely on external actors to bring legitimacy and integrity into the design and implementation of such initiatives. While donors typically insist on broad-based local ownership as a key component of project design, there is little effort made to understand or assess how much local ownership resides within the design itself. Local institutions, whose roles are key to actual peacebuilding impact, rarely embrace externally prepared project designs without reservations. Such designs may be tolerated and promoted by the stakeholders because of the financial opportunities promised or the external leverage exerted, but that does nothing to engender ownership. In cases where local institutions do have ownership in the development of the project intervention, it is far from a given that the institutions characterise the entirety of the local representation needed for the project to be a success (in terms of both the breadth and the depth of the inclusion). The reality is that for initiatives that count on broad-based local ownership to succeed, multi-layered, broad-based participation in designing the intervention is essential.

Process versus project

At the heart of the local ownership dilemma are the competing factors of external demands fixated on projects versus the internal needs required to build peace. These internal needs are not easily exposed, nor are they readily accessible at the design stage of interventions, let alone during implementation. To understand the needs of the population, as the population understands them, one should consider the process necessary to gain that understanding. Only with that understanding, rather than through an externally analysed and developed set of specific project objectives, can locally-owned change initiatives emerge. There are several important reasons a process rather than project orientation is critical in peacebuilding interventions: (i) in order to truly understand both the capacities and limitations of target groups, sufficient

time and resources must be dedicated; (ii) ownership requires trust, trust requires relationship, and relationships need time and cooperation to develop; and (iii) flexibility is essential, so as to adjust the course of action through the unpredictable tangle of challenges that emerge as change begins to take place. How each of these issues is handled has consequences for the quality of the peacebuilding intervention and the sustained results it will generate. Thus, the international community should reconsider its approach to peacebuilding within these three areas, as highlighted below.

Understanding context: Too often it is assumed that as long as local actors are built into peacebuilding designs, fundamental understanding of the context, culture, logic and motivations of the target groups will follow and inform the intervention. This is an assumption that does not always hold true. Local actors who are accessible to external groups tend to be attractive due to their language and education levels, skills usually gained in conjunction with elite status in society or long absences from the country. These characteristics can distance the practitioners from the local contexts they claim to represent, limiting their access to – and rootedness in – the target groups, and reduce the likelihood of achieving local ownership. Another factor that can limit contextual understanding is the often small number of local actors shaping the understanding. Such limited perspectives foster perceptions of gatekeeping or provoke power imbalances that end up discouraging local ownership. For instance, rather than a few local researchers being tasked to provide a contextual basis for the design of a peacebuilding intervention, broad-based consultative processes reaching out beyond the familiar territory of researchers are needed. Through this kind of preparatory process a much deeper understanding of the context can be achieved, leading to much more relevant and effective peacebuilding programme designs. Without a process that engages the broadest base of stakeholders and thereby facilitates a collective understanding of the context, peacebuilding objectives can be difficult if not impossible to achieve.

Trust-building: Given the multiple layers of controls and accountability¹, the very nature of today's peacebuilding projects adds to the trust deficit between external actors and internal practitioners. While it is unrealistic to suggest that these controls and accountability demands be eliminated or even relaxed, it is important to understand that the controls imposed on the external implementing agency by the donors is typically amplified when passed on to the local institutions, often resulting in a significant strain on relationships. In order to ensure that trust is not sacrificed at the expense of accountability, longer-term relationships that allow institutional understanding and compatibility between external and internal partners can be advantageous. This applies not only to those carrying out the work but also to those within the context that are targeted. Because of the competitive nature of donor funding, and hesitance on the part of the international community to sustain longer-term relationships with local practitioners for fear of being accused of favouritism, the odds are stacked against relationship-building processes that deepen trust. This is unfortunate

because it is only with trust that externally initiated projects can lead to broad-based, locally-owned impacts on peace. If donors are not ready to trust local institutions with their grants, and international grant recipients are not ready to trust their local partners with the overall management of the project (e.g. decision-making, including financial management decisions), the likelihood of significant local ownership is nil.

Adaptability: Effective peacebuilding leads to changes in society that ensure internal conflicts can be managed without violence. Because change is the goal (as the status quo in fragile and failed states represents greater potential for violence than peace) there is an implicit uncertainty from the outset of any intervention; it is impossible to predict the precise route a society will take on its way to becoming more peaceful. Rather than trying to make accurate predictions, what leads to greater levels of peacebuilding impact is the ability to respond to the unexpected signs that inevitably emerge from ongoing peacebuilding interventions. Projects require specific objectives with measurable outputs leading to predictable outcomes, while peacebuilding needs processes of deep understanding, coupled with the development of deeper levels of trust in order to create the greatest adaptability in contexts seeking change. Often the local actors will recognise and be able to act on changing dynamics to keep peacebuilding interventions relevant. If they are not given the ability to redirect or adjust activities to respond to those changes, both their ownership of the process, and the impact of the intervention will suffer.



The peace horizon

The question of whom to support and how to support them is one of the most difficult challenges for peacebuilding practitioners. And while there are typically no arguments between policy-makers and practitioners on the need for broad-based, inclusive local ownership, the time horizon allowed to identify, engage and support strategies that lead to impact is too often impossibly limited. Herein lies the paradox: after centuries of historical evidence on the nature of peace and decades of focused attention on what is needed to build peace, the international community's demands for short-term impact ignores the much longer-term timelines needed. There are clear correlations between the time, resources and attention given to peacebuilding in conflict and post-conflict contexts and the levels of success they have achieved. Whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Liberia or Honduras, to name a few, many peacebuilding practitioners believe that the limited time and resources invested in efforts to build peace directly correlate to the low levels of peace in those countries decades after the efforts began. This is largely because, historically, few interventions supporting peacebuilding focused on decades-long time horizons but rather invested in a series of non-incremental shorter-term initiatives, each having limited success.



The path to inclusive local ownership

Interpeace, a Swiss-based peacebuilding institution established over 20 years ago with experience in over 30 countries around the world, has focused on local ownership since its inception. As an international organisation committed to inclusive, locally-driven, locally-owned peacebuilding interventions, Interpeace strives to overcome the historically reinforced hierarchical nature of external support to meet internal needs by following a set of norms in its peacebuilding interventions that it has developed through years of experience. These norms, as summarised below, provide greater guarantees not only that local ownership can be attained, but also that the peacebuilding interventions demonstrate the concepts they pursue.

Invitation to engage: Where local institutions or key stakeholders have sought out international organisations to engage in their countries, they are more likely to support and nurture the presence of the outsiders. Establishing support through relationships with national stakeholders and local institutions who recognise the value of the external actor's work and the orientation of its approach establishes local ownership from the outset. Ensuring that local stakeholders can hold external actors accountable for actions inside their own country, and have confidence that the outsiders are there to support rather than to drive processes of change, is an essential entry point into local ownership dynamics.

Local partnerships: While the practice of collaborating with 'local partners' has become the norm for external actors, the vague use of the term 'partner' may indicate how easy it is to pay lip-service to locally owned processes through suggestions of local partnerships. External organisations tend to be uncomfortable with truly equitable partnerships with local institutions. This can lead to suggestions of partnership, while key programmatic, financial and administrative decision-making remains in the hands of the international 'partners'. While there are many tactical ways these decisions can responsibly be put into the hands of local actors and stakeholders without abandoning accountability, few international organisations with thin operating margins and a sense of vulnerability to the obligatory rules of accounting are comfortable with giving greater decision-making responsibility (i.e. ownership) to local partners. This risk aversion is often interpreted by local partners as lack of trust or confidence and can fuel a sense of inequity and significantly affect their sense of ownership, consequently reducing their level of commitment to the initiative.

Inclusive process: One of the noticeable weaknesses in external efforts to promote inclusive processes and ownership from within is the means by which that inclusion is established. Paradoxically, too often the criteria for inclusion are established through non-inclusive processes, by external actors applying their own cultural norms, and by internal actors who may be seeking ways to promote their own interests. This can be further weakened by the way those criteria are subjectively applied. If not properly designed and practised, selection processes can reinforce nepotism, tokenism, patronage and other forms of exclusivity. These negative forms of 'ownership' are precisely why ownership and inclusion must be considered hand in hand.



Superficially, weak inclusion processes may appear to be inclusive, but in fact can fall dangerously short. Because representation almost always comes with privilege, some processes can even start off as inclusive, only to become exclusive because of the disconnections and privileges that are created through the processes.

A case in point is the dilemma the international community finds itself in with the New Deal process². The most prominent voices demanding local ownership, and those that ultimately became the ‘local’ owners of the New Deal process, were the governments of New Deal countries. This led to significant and consequential exclusion of civil society, the private sector and other key stakeholder groups. Today, there are very few cases of multi-layered, broad-based ownership of the Fragility Assessments that formed the basis of New Deal funding compacts between the international community and target countries.

Another example of exclusivity resulting from efforts to seek local ownership comes in the promotion of local institutions (NGOs, CSOs, CBOs, etc.) by the international community. In almost every fragile state, there are rarely more than a handful of local institutions with the capacity and the commitment to carry out complex, politically charged peacebuilding processes. If they begin to demonstrate peacebuilding impact through their inclusive interventions, they can become a magnet for externally funded initiatives, some only tangentially related to their core strengths. The dominant role that some of these local institutions can begin to play makes them as susceptible to exclusionary practices as the governments they are challenging to become more inclusive. Interpeace has been working through this challenge for over a decade with some of its longstanding local partners³. We have found that unless each intervention has very specifically developed and measurable mechanisms of inclusion, there is no guarantee that inclusion will automatically result. Equally important is that the inclusive nature of the local partner’s own make-up remain balanced over time.

Locally developed, action-oriented solutions: Peacebuilding represents changes to society that reinforce greater commitments and capacities to manage conflicts that arise in society peacefully. Ultimately, interventions need to go beyond analysis and dialogue and lead to actions that spark a population’s confidence that locally owned, inclusive processes can lead to changes between themselves and the state. These changes need to emerge from processes where solutions are driven by both those responsible for the changes and those affected by the changes. Solutions that are based on knowledge emerging from within society but then generated from analysis and designs centred outside of society (or within society by those considered outsiders) will rarely ensure the same level of local ownership as those solutions emerging from processes wholly within society. Equally, the level of inclusive ownership of the end result correlates to the extent of the inclusion throughout all parts of the process – the discovery, development and implementation of solutions – rather than during any one phase. Many peacebuilding processes tend to focus on ensuring solutions come from within, but do not extend that consideration into the development and implementation of those solutions.

In order to put the concept of locally-developed, action-oriented solutions into practice, Interpeace has had to look closely at the way it determines the nature of its interventions. Even if we work very closely with our local partners on peacebuilding interventions, we run the risk of considering the local partner the owner of the process, rather than ensuring it is the beneficiaries and not the implementers that take ownership. To offset this risk, Interpeace designs its interventions to allow for solutions to emerge in one phase of the process, so that they can be pursued in a subsequent phase of the same process. This requires the intervention to be open to the direction of the stakeholders in the process, rather than the analysts designing the intervention. In Mali, this led to the stakeholders prioritising strengthening the relationship between the security forces and the communities. While anyone who has studied the dynamics of Mali would not be surprised that this is an issue, few may have considered it to be a priority of both the people in the communities and the members of the security sector.

Trust-enabled processes of collaboration: The concept of trust is typically woven into the language of all actors participating in peacebuilding processes – and with good reason. Trust at some level is necessary for any group of people to collaborate, but it is especially needed when it has been eroded from society during times of violent conflict. Unfortunately, the proposed levels of trust are rarely achieved. While assessing trust objectively is neither easy nor viable, those participating in a process are usually keenly aware of the level of trust between themselves. Ultimately, levels of trust must be palpable at each interface of the peacebuilding value chain, from beneficiary to donor. One way to measure levels of trust is to measure levels of ownership transfer happening as a natural progression of growth and not because it is forced or required. The transfer of ownership or decision-making authority from donors to international partners, to local partners, to stakeholders and target beneficiaries is essential to peaceful change, and the trust ingredient has to exist between each of those links. Paying attention to where trust is evident and where it is limited is important in determining the extent of impact that is possible.

Interpeace recognises that in context where levels of distrust are high, interventions that include trust-building can be seen as naïve or disingenuous. At the same time, we believe that peacebuilding cannot occur without trust-building. Before there can be trust there must be dialogue, and once trust has been activated, even if it is a guarded, limited trust, there must be evidence of the trust to suggest it has begun. These two aspects (dialogue as a demonstration that trust is even possible, and evidenced changes demonstrating it has been established) are important components of Interpeace's interventions. While we are not always successful in getting opposing groups to trust one another, there is always evidence in our work of the intention to bridge the trust gaps. This starts by having a local team that is committed to overcoming that distrust⁵ and ensuring that authentic intentions to pursue trust are central to our interventions.

Peacebuilding cannot occur without trust-building and dialogue.



Considerations for the international community

The distance between policy and practice is always a difficult chasm to span. This is further complicated in peacebuilding, given the importance of allowing the process to define direction and solutions. As we in the international community continue to recognise our shortcomings in enabling and promoting authentic processes of change driven by inclusive local ownership, we need to address the numerous systemic impediments we put in the way. Based on the path to local ownership laid out above, the following are some considerations that the international community should take into account when seeking to enable inclusive, locally owned peacebuilding solutions.

Welcomed international partners: When engaging with international implementing agencies, consider those with an established presence in the context who are able to demonstrate that they are welcomed by a broad range of stakeholders. In cases where this is not possible, consider phasing the intervention to ensure there is an opportunity for partners to demonstrate they can establish and sustain necessary levels of acceptance and trust.



Authentic, equitable partnerships between international and local institutions:

In cases where the international community is relying on partnerships between international organisations and local institutions, the capacities of the local institutions to drive the programmatic, financial and administrative aspects of the process forward can be limited. It is important to note that even in these cases the international community can take important strides towards local ownership. Ensuring that incremental development of the local institutions is built into the interventions will not only strengthen local ownership but also provide foundations on which local institutions can become more capable of direct implementation. Over time, external grants (often insisting on local partnerships) can be replaced by direct support to local institutions. Ideally, local institutions can then seek external expertise to strengthen their capacity to deliver strong peacebuilding processes rather than being co-opted by international organisations.

Realistic timelines with sustained support: While practitioners need to develop better peacebuilding processes that provide important time-bound deliverables throughout, thus responding to donor demands of value for money, donors need to allow for much longer intervention timelines with sustained support. Strong, committed organisations, both international and local, will have much greater impact if they are allowed to pursue their processes over considerably longer periods of time than the typical one to two years currently being supported.

Flexible programming: Peacebuilding interventions should be able to adapt to the shifting dynamics of fragile contexts. Programming that clearly defines process, but allows for flexibility to both navigate around unforeseen challenges and to pursue emerging opportunities, will resonate much more with stakeholders committed to peace than programming that forces activities and outputs regardless of relevance. It is when stakeholders committed to peace sense that the interventions are not responsive to their needs that true local ownership risks being lost.

Multi-layered, inclusive processes: Inclusion must work in two directions to achieve the greatest levels of engagement and consequently the greatest ownership of the process. In the vertical direction, peacebuilding processes that do not respond to influences at levels above and below the target groups can end up having an impact that is limited to a single layer within society. This stratification means that those within that layer can be vulnerable to pressures from those situated above or below. In the horizontal direction, the breadth of engagement is significant in determining the level of ownership and inclusion. In both cases, the tendency to focus on those most accessible (predominantly urban dwellers and those nearest to the paved roads) limits the opportunities for changes at the societal level. Too often the limitations of time and resources or, worse, the lack of an earnest commitment to get out beyond the easily accessible, can result in processes with little ownership.



Tolerance for incremental change: External pressure to pursue change faster than internal aptitudes, understanding and/or appreciation for change is likely to seriously stymie the impacts sought. Focusing on what is wrong in society and analysing how it can be fixed, rather than capitalising on strengths within society, further exacerbates this problem. Orienting solutions in line with what the population is willing to do and capable of doing must then be coupled with a readiness to tolerate the slower, more incremental pace of change. Acceleration is possible but only if it is catalysed through attention focused on internal commitments to change.

More effective assessment of return on investment: One of the deterrents to many of the considerations above is cost. While it is difficult to challenge concerns over the need for additional costs when available funding resources are shrinking, the greater concerns should be how little impact the peacebuilding field is having. Many of the measures that have been adopted to assess value for money reduce the financial analysis to how resources are used on activities that are prescribed to bring intended outcomes and impacts. The problem with this approach is that it relies on actual costs being measured against possible outcomes since the timelines are often too short for the full evidence of intervention outcomes and impacts to be seen. This can negatively distort the cost effectiveness of projects that put greater emphasis on local-ownership, as their impacts tend to take longer to become evident. Donors need to consider more effective ways to measure the value of achieving local ownership, something they typically insist upon but less often achieve. Likewise, donors need to reassess the limitations their funding models can put on sustaining local ownership. Ultimately, if donors want to reduce dependencies rather than perpetuate them, they must accept the fundamental role that local ownership plays in sustainable peace and ensure they are able to effectively invest in its pursuit.

What has baffled the international community since the concept of peacebuilding emerged over 20 years ago is how to systematically connect to and stimulate local ownership. Perhaps the most significant realisations will come when as external actors we accept that our greatest contribution to others' pursuit of peace is to enable and support authentic locally driven, locally owned processes rather than to simply give lip-service to them. This will require each of us to recognise the ways in which we act as a deterrent to local ownership, and to change our own practice accordingly.

- ¹ As concerns over corruption and mismanagement of external funding grow within the donor community, there have been significant efforts to strengthen the controls and accountability measures required to access and utilise donor funds. Whether it is the demand for sophisticated accounting practices, the prescribed internal systems of checks and balances on each and every expenditure, or the compulsory complex procurement procedures, the requirements for funding are often beyond local institutional capacity. In many cases, this creates layers of complex controls/accountability: first from the donor to the international NGO, then from the international NGO to the partnering institution(s) at the national level, then down to the interventions at the local level.
- ² The New Deal is a key agreement between fragile and conflict-affected states, development partners and civil society to improve the current development policy and practice in fragile and conflict-affected states. It was developed through the forum of the International Dialogue and signed by more than 40 countries and organisations at the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness on 30 November 2011 at Busan, Korea. (www.pbsdialogue.org/en/new-deal/about-new-deal/)
- ³ On a side note, a typical reaction Interpeace gets in some circles is a question over the healthiness of partnerships with local institutions over longer periods of time (many years/decades). While Interpeace recognises the risks, including dependency, complacency and fatigue, the question of trust and what the span of time can mean for the deepest forms of trust cannot be under-estimated. The idea that trust can simply span the length of a single intervention suggests that trust is not as important as it is touted to be. That said, if the risks mentioned above are not constantly monitored and kept from creeping in, they will overrun the long-term trust that is being sought.
- ⁴ This intervention is described in detail in the following Interpeace publication (www.interpeace.org/resource/?type=publication&programmes=mali&language=english&theme=0#), and provides both a clear expression of the process, and the results (priorities for peace) that emerged.
- ⁵ All of Interpeace's local peacebuilding partners must demonstrate they believe in overcoming ethnic, religious and other tensions that led to and perpetuate the violent conflict in their countries, by ensuring each group is represented and has a voice in the implementation process.

Notes

Jerry McCann, Deputy Director-General for Operations at Interpeace, has spent 20 years in Africa. Jerry's experience spans a career of engineering at home and abroad, which gave way in 2004 to a unique opportunity to work in the peacebuilding field. Jerry began his peacebuilding career working as the operations manager for Interpeace's Somali programme. In 2006, he established Interpeace's decentralised regional office, overseeing operations in Somalia, Rwanda and Burundi. In 2011, his role was expanded to manage Interpeace's operations around the world and support to its complex processes of peacebuilding in over 20 countries in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. He has been at the forefront of operationalising the peacebuilding work of Interpeace with a focus on locally driven, action-oriented and sustained processes of change.

