



Race, Power, and Peacebuilding

Insights and lessons from a global consultation

Executive Summary

Introduction

In recent years, the ‘Decolonising’ agenda has moved from the margins into the mainstream discourse in the international humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors. While humanitarian and development actors have been grappling with this issue in increasing numbers, the peacebuilding sector in the Global North has been slow to engage, giving the impression to many Global South activists that peacebuilding is somehow different and immune from these critiques.

In May 2021, Peace Direct published ‘Time to Decolonise Aid’ a report based on a global consultation with practitioners, activists and researchers from around the world that explored structural racism in the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors. While it was not the first report to examine this issue, it was one of the first reports to highlight how structural racism shows up in the sector from the perspective of a wide variety of Global South practitioners. Given how extensive and deep rooted the problem was, Peace Direct, in collaboration with the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN), and United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY) held a global, online consultation in late 2021 aimed at understanding the ways in which racism manifests itself in the peacebuilding sector, and this report is a summary of that consultation.

Abbreviations

CSO

Civil Society Organisation

ICAN

[International Civil Society Action Network](#)

IO

International Organisation (UN, World Bank etc)

INGO

International non-governmental Organisation

GPPAC

[Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict](#)

NGO

Non-governmental Organisation

P4D

[Platform4Dialogue](#)

UN

[United Nations](#)

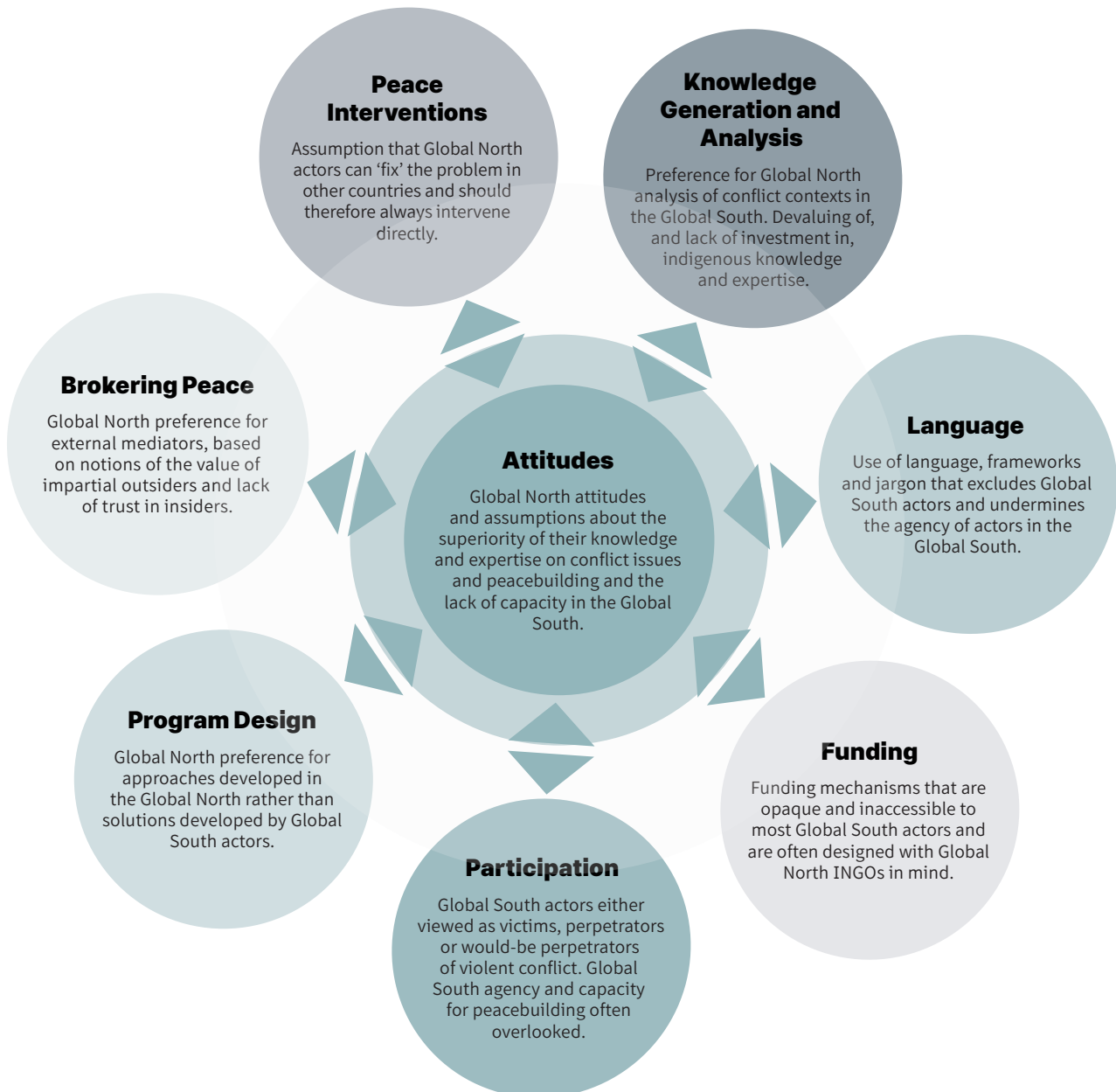
UNOY

[United Network of Young Peacebuilders](#)

Key findings

- Global North peacebuilding practices, norms, and attitudes share with the international humanitarian and development sector the same deep-rooted problems of structural racism and neo-colonial worldviews, which are barely acknowledged by peacebuilding practitioners in the Global North.
- Key peacebuilding frameworks are rooted in Global North knowledge systems and values, which do not always resonate with Global South actors. The valuing of Global North knowledge and language over knowledge from other contexts, reinforces the unequal power dynamic between the Global North and Global South, often alienating Global South peacebuilders.
- Some attempts to incorporate local perspectives into peacebuilding frameworks have had limited success and continue to prioritise 'cut and paste' approaches, resulting in many local peacebuilders feeling disconnected from peace efforts in their own countries.
- Research processes are primarily developed, owned and legitimised by Global North power holders and decision-makers. This monopoly on knowledge production enables them to determine the peacebuilding sector's focus.
- Local peacebuilders believe that international peace interventions are primarily motivated by the interests of Global North actors and external geopolitics, leading many to be distrustful of Global North actors leading peace efforts.
- Peacebuilding funding is opaque, inaccessible to most peacebuilding groups/organisations in the Global South and often wholly inadequate in terms of flexibility and duration.
- The unequal power dynamics between Global North and Global South actors reinforces the continued prioritisation of the interests of those removed from the conflict, reducing the effectiveness of peace efforts and their sustainability.

How structural racism shows up in peacebuilding





Recommendations

Summary Table

Key

- ◇ Global North actors, including International Organisations (UN, World Bank, OECD etc), governments, INGOs and think tanks
- Global South actors
- All actors

Recommendations

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Worldviews, norms and values | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge that structural racism exists ◇ • Reframe what is considered as expertise ◇ • Consider that Global North knowledge may not be the most relevant ◇ • Interrogate the notion of “professionalism” ◇ |
| Knowledge and attitudes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge, value and learn from indigenous experiences and knowledge systems ◇ • Mind your language ◇ • Avoid romanticising the local ◇ • Reflect on your identity □ • Remain humble, open, and imaginative □ • Re-imagine the peacebuilding sector □ |
| Practice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decentre Global North decision making ◇ • Recruit differently ◇ • Stop and look closely before acting ◇ • Invest in local capacities for peace ◇ • Establish meaningful partnerships for peace ◇ • Develop safe and inclusive spaces for conversations about power ◇ • Create space for change ◇ • Fund courageously and trust generously ◇ • Support the work of marginalised local communities ◇ • Expect and insist on the partnership behaviours that matter to you ○ • Recognise the power of local solidarity ○ |

Full Recommendations

The following recommendations are arranged into three different groups.

The first group of recommendations focuses on changes to existing worldviews, norms and values. Without a change to our worldviews and values, other changes are almost impossible to achieve.

The second group of recommendations focuses on knowledge and attitudes.

The third group of recommendations focuses on practice.

Taken together, we hope that they offer one possible way to decolonise peacebuilding.

Worldviews, Norms and Values

➤ Acknowledge that structural racism exists.

Acknowledgement of the problem is an essential first step, as it underpins all subsequent efforts to re-shape the peacebuilding sector. Without acknowledgement, both internally and externally, all subsequent change efforts are likely to fail.

For funders and INGOs, acknowledging the reality of structural racism in peacebuilding in existing and/or past efforts could involve examining what ingrained racist, discriminatory and/or other biased assumptions underpin the organisation's preferred Theory of Change models and peacebuilding approaches. It could also involve reflecting on how unexamined biases manifested in how the donor or INGO establishes relationships with local actors, especially if local actors hold or represent communities with multiple intersecting marginalised identities.

Acknowledging structural racism within peacebuilding does not imply personal guilt. However, it does imply a collective responsibility to build new norms and retire or reshape existing approaches that have perpetuated the global dominance of Global North thinking and leadership in peace efforts.

➤ Reframe what is considered as expertise

For local leadership to be truly rooted in the experiences and priorities of an affected community - donors, IOs, INGOs, and policymakers need to expand the definition of what makes an individual an expert on a given issue. This will involve valuing contextual expertise as highly as technical or thematic expertise, as well as acknowledging the value and perspectives of partial insiders to a conflict and not just impartial outsiders.

Donors, IOs, INGOs, and policymakers should also reflect on whether their own claim to expertise in a particular area obscures and undermines the role and agency of peacebuilding actors in the Global South and whether their desire to promote this expertise to certain stakeholders limits the opportunity for a re-evaluation of roles between Global North and Global South Actors.

➤ Consider whether Global North knowledge is relevant for each context

Global South based, indigenous knowledge systems and beliefs may differ greatly from the prevailing knowledge held by Global North about how peace should be built. Be open to the possibility that Global North knowledge actors may not be as important as you think it is.

➤ Interrogate the notion of “professionalism”

Donors, IOs and INGOs should reflect on why and how the sector has evolved into one that is committed to sterile efficiency and professionalism at the expense of genuine transformative peacebuilding.

As the peacebuilding sector works to decolonise, donors and INGOs should consider who they are excluding through their work culture and to consider what requirements in the name of professionalism are in fact serving to exclude marginalised populations, including non-White practitioners, women, and youth.

Knowledge and Attitudes

➤ Acknowledge, value, invest in and learn from indigenous experiences and knowledge.

The peacebuilding sector is not unique in its struggle to include indigenous approaches to research and knowledge. These knowledge systems and methodologies tend to not fit within existing Global South approaches and frameworks. However, this can no longer be used as an excuse to maintain knowledge production and consumption that is dominated by Global North actors.

The inclusion of indigenous knowledge systems provides the peacebuilding sector with a unique opportunity to develop approaches that are culturally resonant to the conflict-affected area, and which will ideally continue to be relevant long past the end of any donor funded peacebuilding programme. When donors, IOs and INGOs fund and support the inclusion of indigenous approaches, they are removing the dependence on researchers and practitioners from the Global North, serving to redress some of the unequal power dynamics between the Global North and the Global South.

➤ Mind your language

Be careful not to use language that diminishes the agency of people and communities in the Global South. Be mindful of the exclusive terms and jargon that you use, and how such terms may exclude others. Consider auditing the language and terms your organisation uses through a ‘decolonising’ lens to determine how it should change.

➤ Avoid romanticising the local

It is important to note that just as there are problems with knowledge systems rooted in Global North thinking, so too are some indigenous knowledge systems and peace approaches rooted in beliefs that could be discriminatory to certain marginalised communities, often women, youth, and the LGBTQIA individuals.

Adopting local approaches with little consideration may not shift power within the local population. Indigenous knowledge systems are valuable not because they are without critique, but because they are how many people may conceptualise peace in their contexts and without that understanding, any peacebuilding effort is likely to overlook certain key considerations. Avoiding romanticising the local will enable a more honest, clear headed appreciation of what local groups can bring, as well as their limitations.

➤ Reflect on your identity

Every practitioner – both those who are locally based and those who work internationally – must reflect on their motivation for being involved in this work. Questions to be asked include: What privileges do your identities afford you? In what ways have you reinforced the ‘White gaze’ of the sector?

Beyond those initial questions, practitioners should also be engaging with the issue of decolonising peacebuilding through educating themselves. There are many discriminatory and/or racist beliefs and biases that we each hold. It is important that no one considers themselves immune from blind spots or at ‘the top of their career’ and therefore unlikely to learn anything new. Instead, we should all be ever more aware of ourselves and in solidarity with our colleagues and with those affected by conflict.

➤ Remain humble, open, and imaginative

Decolonising peacebuilding requires international practitioners to approach their work with greater humility. It is vital that they remain open to criticism and feedback from actors in the Global South, and that they reflect on those comments.

For practitioners from the Global South, it is important that they remain open to the idea that the sector can change. It is important that across the sector, everyone from funders to practitioners are committed to decolonising but also that they are all equally committed to the fact that there is not one path. What the peacebuilding sector is attempting is something that has not been done before. There is no guidebook, no way of knowing what the perfect next steps are.

➤ Reimagine the peacebuilding sector

The decolonising process is a process of collective dismantling of the old and construction of the new. There are many norms and beliefs that are integral to the sector that when performed, though unintentionally, do reinforce notions of the superiority of the Global North over the Global South. These need to be dismantled.

Part of the process needs to be in reimagining new ways of engaging between the Global North and Global South in situations of violent conflict. Imagining a future peacebuilding sector when conflicts rage across the planet is difficult, and where established ways of doing things are so entrenched. But reimagining what peacebuilding based on mutuality, respect and trust between Global North and Global South actors is essential.

Practice

➤ Decentre the Global North in decision making

Decision making should be decentred from current power holders in the Global North. The first step in this process should be to devolve power from Global North capitals to Embassies and offices in the host country. In many cases, this is already happening among bilateral donors as part of a push for greater subsidiarity and deconcentration. However, it needs to go further. Embassies and donor country offices should consider establishing mechanisms which involve shared or devolved decision making on issues of funding and prioritisation. A practical example of this are the Advisory Boards set up by philanthropic organisations that are either thematically or geographically focused, comprised of local experts. Such an approach can also work at a country level, and can involve local community representatives, thereby providing greater diversity of perspectives into critical decisions.

➤ Recruit differently

Diversifying the staff, management and Board of Global North organisations is an essential step in Decolonising Global North structures and attitudes. Diversifying Boards and other governance structures is arguably the most difficult but most important step an organisation can take, as this sends an important message throughout the organisation of the value placed on hiring people from diverse backgrounds and lived experiences at the highest level of the organisation. This entails rethinking what type of people are considered 'worthy' of sitting on Boards – moving away from the traditional and very narrow set of predominantly White high profile thought leaders and towards a Board more representative of the communities and constituents served by the organisation.

Recruitment policies for staff positions needs to be reviewed through a 'Diversity, Equity and Inclusion' lens to ensure that under-represented groups are encouraged to apply. This includes a re-evaluation of what constitutes expertise (see earlier recommendation).

➤ Stop and look closely before acting

Crises such as the outbreak of conflicts tend to provoke in donors and the wider international community the impulse to respond as quickly as possible. This is often based on the humanitarian desire to alleviate suffering. Yet, intervening quickly in a conflict situation can do more harm than good, especially if donors seek external partners with no prior experience of the conflict context. Rather than intervening as quickly as possible and then practicing 'Do No Harm' or conflict sensitivity, donors, IOs and INGOs are asked to stop and consider carefully whether they should intervene directly, particularly if they don't have the relevant contextual knowledge.

➤ Invest in local capacities for peace

Local peacebuilding capacity exists in every conflict context. Donors, IOs, INGOs, and policymakers should commit to investing in that capacity first, before considering the role and utility of external actors such as INGOs. In addition, donors and INGOs should refrain from identifying ‘implementing partners’ for activities designed far from the conflict context. Such activities are rarely effective and such partnerships are rarely meaningful or transformative.

Expanding the number of relationships with practitioners, activists, advocates and researchers based in the Global South will ensure that donors and policymakers can more regularly turn to local actors to lead the production of contextually relevant frameworks and the development and running of programmes. Ultimately, this will ensure not only the inclusion of local voices from the Global South, but will ensure that the peacebuilding sector is actively engaging in redistributing power to those groups.

➤ Establish meaningful partnerships for peace

While investing in local capacities for peace is an important step, such partnerships should be long term and based on mutuality, co-learning and respect. Donors, policymakers and INGOs also must learn to listen carefully to what Global South actors have to say and offer, as well as what is not being said by their new partners so that a new era of partnership begins to be forged. Practicing these listening skills is an important part of establishing sustainable partnerships for peace.

➤ Develop safe and inclusive spaces for conversations about power

As explored in *Time to Decolonise Aid*, conversations about power, who holds it and how it is wielded will not often be raised by local groups. Thus, external actors need to allow opportunities for a critique of their power and practices, and how the use of this power influences peacebuilding efforts. This could start by asking grantees and local partners to complete an anonymous survey that solicits their perceptions of the relationship. This can then be built on by gathering more detailed feedback over an extended period through your regular interactions with partners/grantees. Such a process could both form the basis of a conversation and create the conditions that would allow for this.

➤ **Create space for self organisation and change**

The changes needed in the system will be driven by actors across the spectrum, so it is important that donors, IOs and INGOs create spaces and opportunities for local groups, organisations, partners and grantees to share experiences, self organise and strategise together. It is especially important to create spaces centred around those with more marginalised identities, such as LGBTQ+, women, youth and disabled people, among others. While such strategising may lead to groups challenging an organisation's or individual's power, they must be prepared to accept this, however uncomfortable. For this to be possible, Global North actors need to recognise and move past current approaches which are often consciously or unconsciously self-serving.

As organisations commit to decolonising, it is vital that they frame the inevitable critiques and power challenges as positive steps towards retiring the global-local dynamics that emerged from the colonial era and instead, creating a more horizontal global peacebuilding system where information, resources, and feedback travels reciprocally between Global North and Global South actors.

➤ **Fund courageously and trust generously**

While funders have made various commitments to ensuring that more funding goes directly to local actors, grants remain inflexible and short term, precisely what is not needed in conflict and post conflict contexts. Grant processes used by most bilateral donors, which are mostly adapted from the humanitarian and development funding modalities, are woefully inadequate for peacebuilding. Entirely new funding processes are needed, based on the principles of accessibility, adaptation, trust and flexibility. In addition, modifying the power dynamics between funders and grantees requires more than increased inclusion and accessibility to funds; it requires grantees be entrusted to determine their own priorities and this requires a fundamentally different way of structuring grants so that local actors aren't locked into prescribed activities and outputs that are no longer relevant to the context.

For funders and INGOs committed to decolonising, there has to be a willingness to work with local leaders to create grant parameters that better reflect and respond to the needs and priorities of the local community. There are many examples of toolkits, including those by ICAN and the Peace and Security Funders Group (PSFG) that highlight alternative approaches to funding that would enable funders to be more participatory in their decision-making.

➤ **Support the work of marginalised local communities.**

The power dynamics that privilege global actors over local actors, especially when based in the Global North are often replicated in local contexts. For local actors committed to decolonising, they need to recognise that peace efforts likely privilege actors with more proximity to the Global North. This includes those who speak English or another of the three so-called global languages, those who have had the opportunity to study in the Global North, those who are able to comfortably navigate the compliance processes of the peacebuilding sector, among others. As they seek to shift power from the global to the local for a more horizontal, non-hierarchical, anti-racist peacebuilding process, it is vital to consider who is currently being excluded due to the preferential treatment of some local actors over others.

➤ Expect and insist on the partnership behaviours that matter to you

As the peacebuilding sector begins to decolonise, there will likely be growing pains as Global North actors experience the discomfort of actively relinquishing power and control over the wider sector. It may cause them to feel threatened in their role within peacebuilding.

Regardless of the challenges of the decolonising process, the way the sector decolonises is just as important as the final outcome. To that end, it is important that international actors are respectful, that there is regular, quality communication, that local actors are consulted throughout the process if not leading it and that the engagement is done from a perspective of collaboration and equity, and not condescension or dictation.

Every local actor should determine what partnership behaviours matter to them when engaging with international actors. Then, when developing relationships with international funders, IOs and INGOs, local organisations can return to those markers as expectations for the partnership, giving the international actor something concrete to strive for and giving themselves something concrete to critique should that be necessary.

➤ Recognise the power of local solidarity.

When local organisations form networks, they hold more power when advocating to Global North decision-making institutions. It is important in the decolonising process to reject the idea that other local organisations are necessarily competitors for funding and instead consider the opportunities that could arise from collective action.

Local actors should invest in strengthening local networks. This could include creating opportunities for communal organising, the development of common policy goals, or spaces for discussing different perspectives and needs and how they might be met. There are networks and groupings that support this agenda, such as the [NEAR network](#), [CIVICUS](#) as well as more informal groups of local actors who may already be working collaboratively raise issues at the national and international levels.

