



BUILDING PEACE



THE PROBLEM WITH PARTNERSHIPS

ACTION PACK:

Episode 3 - Respect Local Experts



What to know:


Local experts should be trusted

It feels obvious to say that the people who are local to conflicts and communities are the people who best understand the causes of conflict and the needs of those affected. But our sector doesn't reflect that.

Instead, our consultations found that local actors – whether peacebuilders or humanitarians – are often seen as implementers of projects that can be designed in the Global North and copied and pasted across contexts in the Global South. Their valuable expertise – and that of the 'target community' itself – is not recognised, valued or relied upon in project design. This leads to ineffective interventions that don't address community needs or have lasting impact.

It gets worse. Beyond the lack of respect for their expertise, local actors aren't trusted. Their every decision is scrutinised and must be defended. They are questioned for making the only decision possible in the context – because their partner funders or INGOs don't understand it like they do.

It's time to trust partners, and stop demanding they jump through prejudiced hoops – such as suspicion-loaded auditing or reporting requirements that aren't grounded in reality.



“Local actors know the needs of their communities best; they should be heard, and more importantly respected. They don't need to be rescued by international superheroes, they just need a space to perform and advocate their rights.” – Sawssan Abou-Zahr

“Inflexible funding agendas and programs that limit the role of local actors as service and data providers prevent meaningful partnerships between local and external partners”
– Ghida Krisht

What to do:

Trust, respect and flexible funding

“Trust, humility, respect, and mutuality/reciprocity emerged as the foundational values for ‘decolonised partnerships’, with participants highlighting their importance in building relationships and achieving meaningful outcomes. Key behaviours outlined included mutual accountability and responsibility, clear communication, co-creation, shared vision and purpose, and respecting each other’s contributions.”

Trust: *“In order to add value and develop relationships, it is about building trust. How can we create the conditions to build mutual relationships between people where people are valued for what they bring in?”*

Amjad Saleem

“For any partnership to be successful, there has to be mutual trust.”

Alichu Ogbu

Respect: *“There are partnerships between international and local actors that are ‘decolonised’. These are partnerships where international actors give latitude to local actors to define priorities according to real local needs, and who recognise their expertise on the local, and agree to establish a partnership based on mutual respect.”*

Eric Ndayikengurutse (translated from the original French)

How do you put this into practice? Several suggestions were shared in the episode which have practical implications:

- **Open communication** – creating safe space for dialogue where you can talk to each other without fear.
- **Embedding local expertise** – unlearn prejudice about the value of indigenous expertise. Give your local partners’ expertise weight – ensure they can lead on programme design and support them to challenge the imposition of ideas not grounded in the reality of the context. Ask the communities what ideas they have, and be flexible to adapt your plans to their needs and priorities.
- **Fund better** – provide flexible, direct and long-term funding to foster trust, adaptability and sustainability in partnerships. Make sure your partner can navigate changing contexts and plan for sustainable change. And make sure your funding covers core costs for those working on delivering the project – salaries, for example.
- **Treat others as you’d want to be treated** – reconsider your auditing and reporting processes. Accountability can be fair and mutual, not suspicion-loaded and intensive.

Follow the other recommendations in the Transforming Partnerships guide.

Part 1 Defining Key Partnership Principles

Our exploration into partnerships across the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sectors began with a discussion on what we mean by ‘partnerships’ and the principles that underpin them. While donors, policymakers and organisations worldwide have long recognised the need for effective partnerships (see box: ‘Global partnership commitments over the years’), there is surprisingly little in official statements or commitments that provide a definition or conceptualisation of the underpinning principles.

At its core, a partnership is a relationship between at least two organisations with the aim to achieve a common goal.

In *Partnership Principles for cooperation between local, national and international civil society organisations*, CIVICUS and the International Civil Society Centre describe partnerships as: ‘... a powerful tool to achieve societal change. They help local and national CSOs to empower citizens to perform their civic rights and to ensure representation of local communities as well as local ownership of programmes. Moreover, partnerships create benefits on both sides if partners work equally empowered towards mutually agreed objectives. International CSOs have a better chance to achieve long-term effects with higher legitimacy if they engage in partnerships with local and national CSOs.’⁴

In our consultation and focus group discussions with practitioners, most participants had similar aspirations of partnerships and what they could deliver. Godwin Yidana saw partnerships as:

“a trusted, collaborative process in which actors with a shared vision and shared goals journey together in humility, openness, transparency, inclusiveness and equity towards meeting their shared goals.”

In a similar vein, Victor Okechukwu Chimezie defined partnerships as:

“merging skills, ideas and efforts to provide solutions to problems.”

Likewise, Balkis Chaabane said that:

“Personally, and from experience, partnership means leveraging the best of both worlds: the resources and capacity building/development skills that each side can offer to combine the best inputs for a fruitful, impactful outcome. However, a partnership is also about compatibility. It is important to share the mission, vision and values so that there would be no future clash.”

The idea of the need for compatibility in mission and values was one that was picked up by many participants in the consultation.

David Porter put it simply, that ‘partnership is actually caring for the person you are working with’, while Amani Jospin talked of a partnership being like a marriage in which both parties are committed for the long term with a relationship based on trust.

⁴ CIVICUS, International Civil Society Centre, ‘Partnership Principles: For Cooperation Between Local, National and International Civil Society’ (2014). Accessible via: <http://civicus.org/images/stories/Partnership%20Principles.pdf>.

Moise Msabwa provided an extensive set of values, behaviours and expectations that characterise a good partnership. Below is an edited and summarised version (translated from the original French):

- Establish trust at the outset of the partnership.
- Organise good mutual communication of successes and failures.
- Mutually have flexibility, self-sacrifice, hard work and motivation.
- To have a mutual or reciprocal commitment.
- To be mutually understanding.
- Mutually have a real desire to learn from each other.
- Creating a common vision for the partnership to support mutual accountability.
- Focus on mutual sustainability.
- Develop partnership accountability mechanisms during and after partnership.
- Mutually plan long-term reciprocal strategies.
- Mutual concern for improving each other's financial viability.
- Mutual culture of realism about the project in partnership.
- Mutual respect for communication channels.
- Reciprocally, share difficulties and challenges more urgently, not later.
- Support each other.
- Provide for a responsible mutual transition.
- Provide ongoing technical and advocacy support, formal or informal, after the transition.
- Be accountable to each other.

Comments from participants across the consultation revealed a strong alignment with Msabwa's list. Analysis of all the comments received from participants reveals four core values that emerged most frequently: trust, humility, respect and mutuality/reciprocity.

Trust: *"In order to add value and develop relationships, it is about building trust. How can we create the conditions to build mutual relationships between people where people are valued for what they bring in?"*

Amjad Saleem

"For any partnership to be successful, there has to be mutual trust."

Alicho Ogbu

Humility: *"Humility and courage are needed by all."*

John Coonrod

Respect: *"There are partnerships between international and local actors that are 'decolonised'. These are partnerships where international actors give latitude to local actors to define priorities according to real local needs, and who recognise their expertise on the local, and agree to establish a partnership based on mutual respect."*

Eric Ndayikengurutse (translated from the original French)

Mutuality and reciprocity: *"Mutual respect for all is the principal thing. A partnership without mutual trust cannot stand."*

Dennis Ekwere

In addition to the above four core values, there were other frequently cited values and behaviours. These include solidarity, transparency and complimentary, the latter being used interchangeably with mutuality and reciprocity.

Behaviours and actions that emerge from these four values included: being mutually accountable, having clear and respectful communication, co-creating partnerships, having a shared vision and purpose for the partnership, and respecting each other's contributions.

Together, these appear to be the bedrock of all meaningful, decolonised and equitable partnerships.

Building block 2



JOINT PRACTICES

- **Invite partners/prospective partners to share their partnership principles, values and behaviours, and agree on how to put these into practice in your partnership.**
 - Showcase previous successful partnerships that were based on those principles/values/behaviours and use this as the basis of discussion about any new partnership.
 - Co-create a vision document that outlines the aims/purpose of the partnership, distinct from project funding.
 - Engage in values-based decision-making, ensuring that core values are guiding a partnership's actions.
 - Explore together any differences in ideologies and motivations underpinning the idea of partnership.

Vision, purpose and goal setting

GLOBAL SOUTH ACTORS

- **Define what you mean by partnership, and critically assess why you want to establish partnerships with Global North organisations. Carefully consider the spectrum of partnerships, including sub-contractor-type partnerships, and which ones you are comfortable accepting.**
- **Identify what partnership principles, values and behaviours matter to you most. Codify and share these with prospective partners.**
 - Watch: '4 Steps to Non-Profit Partnerships' on YouTube.

POWER AWARE BEHAVIOURS

Develop and articulate your ambition for partnerships with Global North actors.

- Align vision and values with local priorities, development models and indigenous knowledge systems to promote contextual relevance and sustainability in the partnership.
- Read: 'Fostering equitable North-South Civil Society Partnerships: voices from the south' from WACSI and Rights CoLab.
- Read: *Reimagining Civil Society Collaborations in Development: Starting from the South*, edited by Margit van Wessel, Tiina Kontinen, Justice Nyigmah Bawole.

GLOBAL NORTH ACTORS

- **Define what you mean by partnership, and critically assess why you want to establish a partnership with Global South organisations. If you want a sub-contractor-type implementing partner and not a genuine partnership, then be clear about this in your internal and external communications.**
 - Read: 'Global partnerships on paper and in practice: Critical observations from inside a Global Challenge Research Fund capacity-development project' in the Journal of International Development.
 - Take a look at The Pledge for Change 2030.
- **Identify what partnership principles and behaviours matter to you most. Codify and share these with prospective partners.**
 - Watch: '4 Steps to Non-Profit Partnerships' on YouTube.

POWER AWARE BEHAVIOURS

- **Consider how and when you share your vision, purpose and goals with your partners. Invite partners to share theirs first, to avoid your goals influencing theirs.**
 - Allow partners to review your vision, purpose and goals for the partnership internally with their staff, before sharing their thoughts with you.
 - Read: 'NNGO Voices: Leader Perspectives on Locally-Led Development' from humentum.
 - Read: *Reimagining Civil Society Collaborations in Development: Starting from the South*, edited by Margit van Wessel, Tiina Kontinen, Justice Nyigmah Bawole.
 - Read: 'Fostering equitable North-South Civil Society Partnerships: voices from the south' from WACSI and Rights CoLab.

Building block 4



JOINT PRACTICES

- **Commit to reassessing how roles and responsibilities will shift over time, in particular how any role assigned to the Global North partner should diminish.**

→ Read: 'Roles and Skills of partnership brokering' from Partnership Brokers Association.

Practice / Roles and responsibilities

GLOBAL SOUTH ACTORS

- **Use approaches such as Appreciative Inquiry to identify your organisational strengths and assets, rather than gaps, in order to help inform the roles and responsibilities that you should take.**
 - Take a look at Positive Psychology's visual guide on 'How to Apply Appreciative Inquiry'.
- **Proactively communicate with prospective partners about the roles that you expect to play in the partnership.**

POWER AWARE BEHAVIOURS

- **Recognise the inherent power that you hold as the organisation closest to the issue and community. Where there are gaps, or you work with other national or local partners who are closer to the issue you are trying to address, apply the same questions applicable to Global North partners.**

GLOBAL NORTH ACTORS

- **Begin by asking yourself: 'Are we actively working towards a point when we are no longer necessary?'**
 - Read: 'Zombie Missions: Organizations that should close but won't' on NonProfit AF.
 - Take a look at the resources from Stopping As Success, which equip development organisations to effectively transition to local leadership.
- **Have an honest and open discussion with prospective partners about the role that you hope to play in the partnership, while being open to taking on different roles that might emerge to better benefit the partnership.**
 - Take a look at WaterAid's 'Partnerships in Practice Tools'.
- **Unlearn assumptions about who holds technical expertise and what technical expertise is. Reflect on how much of your work is focused on technical vs transformative outcomes.**
 - Read: 'Unlearning: The Other Side of Skills/Knowledge Acquisition' by Julie Winkle Giulioni.
- **Unlearn assumptions about what 'capacity' gaps exist with your Global South partner. Reflect on the capacity gaps that you may have.**
 - Read: 'Time to rethink "capacity" in the Global South' by Global Fund for Community Foundations.
 - Read: 'Rethinking capacity and complementarity for a more local humanitarian action' from Humanitarian Policy Group.
- **When recruiting, consider a broader range of skills beyond technical skills or experience – include relational skills, intercultural communication skills, and lived experience.**
 - Read: 'Lived experience isn't an optional add-on' in Peridot.
 - Read: 'Why employers value intercultural skills' in the British Council's magazine.

POWER AWARE BEHAVIOURS

- **Periodically ask your partner how the power that you hold may unintentionally manifest itself in the relationship.**
 - Analyse your power using the Power Cube framework.
 - Take a look at the Power Awareness Tool from the Spindle/Partos.
- **Start from the position that your role is to be a support team or ‘sidekick’ to your partner, and frame roles and responsibilities from there.**
 - Take a look at the Sidekick Manifesto.
 - Read: Peace Direct’s paper, *The nine roles that intermediaries can play in international cooperation*.
- **De-centre your role and decision-making power by identifying budget, project decisions and specific functions that can be transferred to your partner(s) immediately, as well as those that can be transferred over time.**

Practice / Programme design

JOINT PRACTICES

- Review programme documentation together, before sign-off, to minimise the risk of any misunderstandings.

GLOBAL SOUTH ACTORS

- **Unlearn any prejudice you might hold about the value of indigenous knowledge, especially from the communities you serve.**
- **When communicating with any prospective partner, assert the importance of indigenous knowledge generation as the basis for the programme or project design.**
- **Practice the skill of disagreeing with your partner if/when you feel that the programme design is not being led by you and/or if you are not being consulted on key decisions.**
 - Take a look at the checklist ‘Eight steps to effective conflict management’ from the Canadian government’s dispute resolution process.
- **Build in inception phases to projects to enable the project design to be ‘stress-tested’ in communities and then adapted following feedback.**

POWER AWARE BEHAVIOURS

- **Resist efforts by your Global North partner to include activities and outcomes that you don’t agree with.**

GLOBAL NORTH ACTORS

- Unlearn any prejudice you might hold about the value of indigenous knowledge.
- For Global North donors, ensure that calls for proposals are designed in a more accessible way for a wider range of Global South actors to apply.
 - Examples include: applications forms in different languages, longer deadlines, FAQs, opportunities to receive questions.
- Ensure that project/programme design is led by the Global South partner, and agree how the Global South partner can challenge and/or refuse any imposition of ideas and activities.
- Modify the risk profile for the project/programme to enable your Global South partner more freedom to experiment and adapt.
 - Take a look at some of the learnings from Peace Direct's Youth Action for Peace Programme in *Youth Action for Peace – Programme Evaluation*.

POWER AWARE BEHAVIOURS

- Be aware that changes to programme design/activities proposed by you may be interpreted as instructions, which partners may find hard to challenge.

Practice / Budgeting

JOINT PRACTICES

- Review the final budget together, before it is signed off, to ensure that both parties have a shared understanding of each budget line.

GLOBAL SOUTH ACTORS

- Develop a long-term budget to share with your partner, even if short duration projects are all that is on offer.
- In your budgets, show the full amount needed to run your project, including proportionate salary, rent and other overhead costs, even where your partner is only funding part of this.
- Build in costs that support strengthening the partnership, for example a yearly in-person meeting to review the health of the partnership.
- Build in sufficient staff time to enable the fostering of a meaningful relationship with your partner.
- Build in emergency or contingency funds into budgets to enable you to adapt quickly to any rapid change in the context.
- Construct the budget in ways that allow maximum flexibility, for example aggregating similar activities together. This approach enables greater adaptability and freedom for you to adjust the specifics of activities as needed.

POWER AWARE BEHAVIOURS

- **Assert your claim to some of the overheads, unless your overheads can be built into the budget.**
 - Read: 'Five Initiatives for Successful Cost Recovery' by Shila Nhemi on humentum.
- **Recognise how budget discussions are often the most obvious manifestation of Global North control over their partners. Call out such behaviours if you observe this, and train staff to be alert to the ways that this might show up in the work.**
 - Read: 'Breaking the starvation cycle – How international funders can stop trapping their grantees in the starvation cycle and start building their resilience' by humentum.

GLOBAL NORTH ACTORS

- **Share the full project budgets and documents that you are submitting to your donors.**
- **Build in institutional strengthening budget lines and not just costs for programme delivery.**
 - Examples include new software and hardware, office renovation costs, staff training, exchange visits, subscriptions to paid learning content online, improvements to internet access, and vehicle purchases.
- **Build in costs that support strengthening the partnership, for example a yearly in-person meeting to review the health of the partnership.**
- **Build in sufficient staff time to enable the fostering of a meaningful relationship with your partner.**
- **Eliminate the discrepancy in pay scales between any in-country expatriate staff and staff from local partners. Work towards transferring all roles allocated to expatriate staff to local partners.**
 - For transitions, read Stopping As Success's 'Practical Guidelines on Responsible Transitions and Partnerships'.
- **Build in emergency or contingency funds into budgets to enable you to adapt quickly to any rapid change in the context.**

POWER AWARE BEHAVIOURS

- **Share overheads, in line with the proportion of direct costs managed by each partner.**
 - Read: 'Five Initiatives for Successful Cost Recovery' by Shila Nhemi, on humentum.
- **Be prepared to justify your budget lines in the same way as you expect of your partners.**
- **Recognise how budget discussions are often the most obvious manifestation of Global North control over their partners. Invite partners to call out such behaviours if they observe this, and train staff to be alert to the ways that this might show up in their work.**
 - Read: 'Breaking the starvation cycle – How international funders can stop trapping their grantees in the starvation cycle and start building their resilience' by humentum.

JOINT PRACTICES

- Regularly share updates on your fundraising efforts, to build a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities that both parties face.

Practice / Funding**GLOBAL SOUTH ACTORS**

- **Challenge the ‘Global North funding dependency’ mindset and explore how this mindset may have influenced your strategy and plans.**
 - Take a look at the African Visionary Fund and Thousand Currents.
- **Identify funding and in-kind contributions from your own communities and constituents.**
 - Take a look at the resources on community philanthropy from the Global Fund for Community Foundations.

GLOBAL NORTH ACTORS

- **Analyse how your funding may have created dependency among your partners and develop a strategy to counter this.**
 - Read: ‘Breaking the starvation cycle – How international funders can stop trapping their grantees in the starvation cycle and start building their resilience’ from humentum.
- **Provide unrestricted funding, and at the least ensure that flexibility is built into restricted funding.**
 - Take a look at the ‘trust-based philanthropy project’.
- **Support your partner to access funding opportunities directly.**
- **Begin with an assumption that you should provide multi-year funding for project activities, unless there is a compelling reason not to.**
- **Explore funding models that help strengthen the ecosystem of actors in the Global South.**
 - Take a look at Thousand Currents.

POWER AWARE BEHAVIOURS

- **Resist the urge to control how partners use unrestricted funding.**
- **Share information on your donors and encourage ways to facilitate funding directly to your Global South partner.**

Funding as a proxy for power and trust

Throughout the consultation, participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of flexible funding when rethinking partnerships between Global North and Global South entities. Rather than focusing on the size or value of grants, participants talked about the quality of funding as being much more important; ‘highly valued’ funding instead of ‘high value’ funding.

While funding is only one dimension of partnership, it is the most visible and most contentious manifestation of most partnerships. Participants highlighted how funding to local actors in the Global South is used by the Global North as an instrument of control and power. But they also described how funding modalities often reflect a lack of trust in local actors:

“Inflexible funding agendas and programs that limit the role of local actors as service and data providers prevent meaningful partnerships between local and external partners”

Ghida Krisht

“race, gender, age, education, all massively impact [on] who can access funding and the knowledge, tools and relationships that deliver funding”

Craig Pollard

Furthermore, the pursuit of funding by Global North INGOs entrenches power imbalances that are difficult to untangle. As Aditi Gupta remarked, the relationship between Global North and Global South actors is:

“often based on the need to access funding – from both sides – resulting in civil society having to ‘professionalise’ to western standards in order to gain access to funding streams, and international organisations gain legitimacy with funders by bringing in local partners. The resulting power dynamic is inherently unequal and colonial, perpetuating rigid systems and less opportunity for small organisations without connections.”

If funding is such a potent symbol of the health of a partnership, what can be done to change the status quo? Below is a list of ten key recommendations for Global North funders made by participants in the global consultation:

1. Fund directly, and not through Global North intermediaries.
2. Provide unrestricted funding as a true demonstration of your trust in the partnership.
3. If unrestricted funding is not possible, provide flexible funding to enable your partner to adapt to changes in the context.
4. Provide multi-year funding, thereby helping your partner to avoid ‘feast or famine’ funding cycles and enabling them to plan long-term.
5. Co-design programmes with your partners and be prepared to change your assumptions and plans if they don’t align with your partners’ needs.
6. Modify your risk appetite to enable you to experiment with different funding mechanisms for local actors.
7. Work with other donors to establish country-based pooled funds earmarked for local actors, thereby coordinating efforts and sharing risk.

8. Change your reporting requirements and formats so that local actors can report in their language and in different ways, such as video, oral reporting or WhatsApp recorded messages.
9. Provide non-financial support through convening, networking, and advocacy opportunities.
10. Support local organisations to generate their own income.

Using this list, Peace Direct launched a public survey on social media to gauge practitioner views on how to prioritise funding to local CSOs in the Global South. Nearly 325 practitioners responded, with the top four recommendations highlighted here:

Priority 1: Fund local CSOs directly instead of relying on intermediaries from the Global North to disburse grants in partnerships.

Priority 2: Provide unrestricted funding that allows local actors to utilise funds according to their specific needs and priorities.

Priority 3: Provide multi-year funding to provide stability for local actors and enable them to implement long-term initiatives that are more sustainable.

Priority 4: Provide more flexible funding for local actors.

Survey respondents provided additional valuable insights regarding the importance of the funding selection process. They emphasised the importance of involving local actors directly in decision-making. By including local voices, they argued that funding design can be community-led, ensuring that grants address the actual needs and priorities of the communities they serve. To achieve this, respondents proposed adopting more participatory grant-making approaches that allow for greater community engagement. Additionally, respondents suggested that donors should adopt more flexible eligibility criteria for local organisations to access funds, including removing the requirement for a large annual income and lowering the threshold for organisational and financial management capacity.

Respondents also advocated for diversifying the pool of grantees and providing financial support to new and innovative ideas. Instead of solely funding more established organisations, there should be spaces created for new grantees in order to foster creativity and encourage fresh perspectives. Furthermore, taking an intersectional lens to grant-making is crucial to ensure that funding is distributed equitably and addresses various social issues. Respondents further emphasised the need to avoid disproportionate amounts of funding being earmarked for specific causes, and called for more rapid response mechanisms to reduce delivery time and enable timely support during crises.

Sustainability was another critical aspect highlighted by respondents. Many suggested that up to 20% of grants be earmarked for organisational development, allowing CSOs to focus strengthening their internal capacity while implementing programmes. Additionally, earmarking funds to assist organisations in raising additional funds, such as through fundraising trips or activities, could help local actors create a more sustainable financial base. Many respondents also saw the need to support social enterprise models as a way to enhance the financial resilience and independence of local CSOs in the Global South.

Operationalising the recommendations

Some of the recommendations were discussed by participants in our consultation and focus group discussions, offering insights into how organisations have tried to implement them.

One example of how to talk about power was shared by Karen Karnicki, a Program Officer for the Rockefeller Brothers Fund’s peacebuilding programme, during the consultations. She explained how she leads with vulnerability to confront her positionality. Karen explained how she shared her weaknesses, recognised her faults and was self-reflective when talking to partners. Although this did not build trust straight away, in time and through continuously leading with vulnerability, her local partners were encouraged to do the same. Ultimately, this process allowed both parties to speak up and share thoughts and feelings about the partnership that would not have traditionally been discussed. She said:

“One thing that I think has been helpful has been sharing what I am learning or going through with partners [...] and] creating space for people to just be people. So, I think maybe both of those things [...] being vulnerable and having that emotional connection [is fundamental to] the learning the process, the emotion, the humanity underlying all the work that we do.”

Building trust in a relationship is fundamental to a partnership. Initially it requires a leap of faith and can take time to be solidified. But through open, honest and transparent communication, it can underpin and form the basis of any partnership.

One of the most challenging recommendations for Global North actors is to decentre themselves and their role. Shifting decision-making to local actors requires funding partners, donors and intermediaries to change their own behaviours and adapt existing policies, guidelines and partnership agreements to hold themselves accountable.

Sarah Mueller, a Project Manager at Robert Bosch-Stiftung, explained how, in her role, she is able to centre decision-making with local actors. By doing so, she can act in solidarity with her local partners, recognising and prioritising the local community’s interest and the responsibility to address the issues at hand. She said:

“I would see the developing of a project and its ideas, as the role of our partners. We are not so much involved, unless they need our partnership, in that because I don’t think we have the expertise. I think that is mostly with our partners.”

Regarding the need to be more flexible in reporting, Corie Walsh from Humanity United noted that:

“It’s really important that partners be able to report in their native languages. We’re dealing with incredibly sensitive personal traumatic issues that our partners should not have to translate into English.”

Introducing oral or visual reporting formats that complement or can be used as alternatives to written narratives can ensure the effective transfer of information but also move beyond the colonial misconception that oral tradition is inadequate, unobjective and lacking in rigour.⁹

⁹ Myra Khan, ‘The role of oral traditions within marginalised societies and their validity within archives’ (April 2021). Available at: <https://lib.asu.edu/news/role-oral-traditions-within-marginalized-societies-and-their-validity-within-archives-myra>

Case study

Adapting funding approaches towards local actors: The Innovative Peace Fund¹⁰

Women and Peace Studies Organization (WPSO) is a local peacebuilding organisation that has been active in Afghanistan since 2012. Since 2018, we at WPSO have received financial support through the International Civil Society Action Network's (ICAN) 'Innovative Peace Fund'.

At the beginning of this partnership, we proposed starting a network of local women peacebuilders that would be active throughout the country. ICAN recognised that we are the best placed to understand the solutions for our own context and gave us the financial and technical support needed to turn our idea into a sustainable programme. With this support, the network grew to over 200 members in all.

The funding we received through this fund initially focused on supporting us to build out our focal points network. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic spread across Afghanistan in 2020, we informed ICAN that the local peacebuilders were not able to mobilise their local communities as we had originally planned. ICAN was able to provide us with additional rapid response funding that enabled us to integrate COVID-related safety guidance and create opportunities for local women peacebuilders to continue their peacebuilding work. This funding was directly based on the community needs identified by the members of the local focal points network.

While the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing, the Taliban offensive in August 2021 made it impossible for many peacebuilders to continue their community mobilisation work. ICAN was understanding and responsive, working with us not only to shift funding to meet new needs on the ground but also helping us relocate and evacuate our staff and members of the local women peacebuilders' network. Through a rigorous communication process – over WhatsApp, Signal, and via email and phone calls – ICAN supported us to provide internal relocation and security emergency support to the peacebuilders and move them to a safer place.

During late 2022, Afghanistan's south-eastern region was hit by a strong earthquake that affected over 10,000 homes. We turned to ICAN and flagged the immediate needs of female-headed households, which were being side-lined because most of the aid workers were male and could not enter their homes. ICAN responded by mobilising additional funds that enabled us to support these marginalised families. ICAN trusted that women peacebuilders on the ground were in the best position to assess the risk and determine the best approach to addressing it.

Most recently, in December 2022, the Taliban decree banning women from working in NGOs put WPSO in a compromised position. Instead of halting their support to Afghan women like many other international organisations, ICAN immediately started consulting with us and other Afghan partners to determine how to continue sustaining WPSO. After many consultations, we shifted our strategy and together developed an approach that would allow us to continue operations and maintain our female staff and our focal points network.

The relationship between WPSO and ICAN has not been that of a typical donor and grantee, but rather an equal partnership that has flourished over the years. Despite many difficult days in Afghanistan, WPSO and ICAN have remained in constant communication, sharing needs and realities from the context, and proposing solutions. ICAN is always by our side – valuing our expertise in Afghanistan and trusting our approach, while offering the institutional support, strategic guidance, and solidarity we need to sustain our organisation.

Wazhma Frogh

Founder of WPSO; Afghan human rights activist
Twitter: @WPSOAfghanistan @FroghWazhma

¹⁰ This case study is adapted from a version previously published in ICAN's 2022 Annual Report: <https://www.icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/ICAN-Annual-Report-2022-Mobile-Version.pdf>.



Transforming Partnerships in International Cooperation

A practical resource for civil society, donors, INGOs and Intermediaries



The guidance and recommendations in this pack are just a snippet of the advice collated from activists across the Global South and North. To learn more, and find more ways to put decolonisation into practice, read the Transforming Partnerships guide in full, via peacedirect.org

