



Policy Brief No.5 • July 2022

Local peace actors and external funding mechanisms: Towards greater agency for local actors?

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Executive Summary

International donor organizations are often the only source of resources for local actors in conflict-affected communities. This gives donors an outsized ability to influence the choices and approaches of the local peacebuilders. In the South Caucasus, reliance on external funding for the implementation of peacebuilding initiatives in local contexts has become a standard practice for many peace actors. As an interconnected geographic region with a long history of intractable conflict with significant periods of escalation, the South Caucasus represents a good case study for the examination of how donor engagement mechanisms impact the local peacebuilding practices. This Policy Brief presents a discussion of donor–local actor interaction in the framework of the intersection of the “liberal peace” and “local turn” paradigms. It emphasizes two major components of this interaction: funding approaches available to the local actors and the positionality of local needs in these global funding schemes. The Policy Brief seeks to improve understandings of the role and impact that international donors have on shaping local peace approaches in a given context. It also presents recommendations on how to develop constructive synergies between local and international actors in a way that is based on shared understanding and complementarity, and a way that is egalitarian and emancipatory in nature.

Policy Recommendations

- ⇒ Peacebuilding funding must transition from its current dominant fixed format to a more flexible and bespoke structure that will allow for, and even encourage better incorporation of local needs into program design. This will require a deeper conversation between donors and recipients, and more attention to local needs. In particular, donors will need to compromise on “universal” goals and norms which may not be entirely applicable in certain contexts.
- ⇒ Donor agencies must put effort into learning the “local language”, which means learning to understand what things, words, and actions mean in the local context. An important step towards this is transitioning from a “reporting” format of communication to a “story-telling” format of interaction.
- ⇒ Donor agencies need to create in-person, regular, and sustained interaction opportunities with the local actors. Targeted solicitation of feedback and ideas should become mainstream and standard practices for international actors.

Introduction

The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the bipolar world gave an impetus to the rise of the concept of “liberal peace,” an idea which argued that liberal democracies, where people and the society are actively engaged in the constructive decision-making process on social, economic, and political matters, are more peaceful. Liberal peace approaches to addressing domestic and international conflicts through strengthening citizen participation, building democratic institutions, and developing market economies became increasingly popular (Mac Ginty 2008). The recent decade, however, has seen an increase in the critique of liberal peace for being destructive or illegitimate (Mac Ginty 2012; Paris 2010; Paris and Sisk 2009). Liberal peacebuilding is often criticized for implementation approaches that heavily rely on models that have roots in the colonial-era thinking, in which the Global North and, in particular, the Western powers have a duty to “civilize” the populations of the Global South that often are locked in deadly conflicts (Paris 2002). One of the central pillars of the critique of liberal peacebuilding is the underlying fundamental assumption that Western conceptualizations of peace and peacebuilding are the “correct” and the desirable ways of addressing conflict and violence internationally (Goetschel and Hagmann 2009). Embracing the assumptions that liberal peace approaches are the right answer to international conflict and crisis situations, many Western governments created agencies that were charged with the development of policies and crafting programs, projects, and strategies guided by this dominant conceptualization of peace. Despite the growing critique of liberal peace as being “focused on individualism, structural functionalism and state centrism” that can prevent constructive change (Ghunta 2018, 2), the liberal peace paradigm largely continues to inform policy development of international organizations and donor agencies. Funding mechanisms and project guidelines for peacebuilding interventions offered to local actors are indicative of this continued trend.

This Policy Brief takes the South Caucasus as a case study to describe and present the nature of relationships that local actors develop with the donors and international actors as they design and implement their peacebuilding projects and interventions. The following question frames the foundation of the analysis: what are the dynamics of the donor/international-actor relationship and how does it affect the nature of locally developed peacebuilding interventions? To answer this question, the Policy Brief draws on data collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 45 representatives of 40 different local peace organizations in the South Caucasus to present analysis of the impact of international funding approaches on locally developed peacebuilding interventions. It also utilizes reflective practice and action research approaches (Shillings and Jones 2020; Chataway 1997), since the author of the policy brief is a former local peacebuilding practitioner currently representing a Western academic institution. The policy brief argues that international donors, through their funding mechanisms, have a significant impact on the shaping of peacebuilding architecture in the region. Despite being external actors, international donors and partners, have a major impact on shaping approaches to peacebuilding on the local level.

The peacebuilding and reconciliation domain in the South Caucasus represents the intermarriage of local and international actors. As exclusively external actors within the local peacebuilding domain, international donors and international organizations are not part of the permanent societal structure in any of the countries in the South Caucasus. However, due to their ability to create opportunities, and provide resources and access to other actors within the international community, they have become a powerful center of gravity for the local actors. Figure 1 below, titled the “shift in the societal structure,” illustrates the substantial impact that international organizations and the donor community have on the structure of the local societal hierarchy.

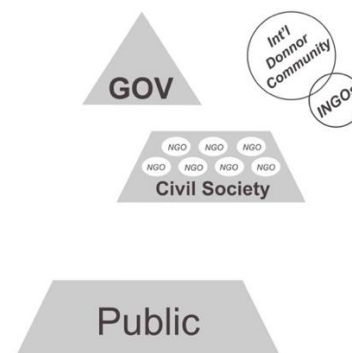


Figure 1: Shift in the societal structure

The interventionist nature of liberal peace approaches repeatedly results in the adoption of peace narratives and approaches that may not have anchoring within the intervention societies. This external nature of peacebuilding programming has the potential to negatively affect the authenticity and relevance of peacebuilding projects. As more powerful actors within the donor-local NGO relationship dyad, donors are able to influence the actions of the local actors by creating negative interdependencies that force local peace actors to gravitate towards the more powerful (economic, political, and discursive) actor. This process of gravitation increases the gap between the local peace actors and their social and human base in turn, thereby negatively affecting their ability to develop locally-anchored and people-centered approaches to the existing social and political conflicts (Aggestam 2003). Many of these patterns are traceable in the dynamics of donor-local actor interaction in the South Caucasus. As evident from the figure 1, local actors’ dependency on donor funding as virtually the only source of financial support, their desire to be perceived as “reliable” and “fundable” organizations in order to maintain the existing relationships with the donors, result in a very visible and major shift in the societal structure of the South Caucasus societies (Tadevosyan 2019). This process of gravitation to the donor axis emphasizes the strong desire, or need, of the local actors to embrace and reproduce Western liberal peace narratives and values, despite their limited potential for taking root within each

of these societies. Many of the local actors in the region have learned "donor-speak" and were able to successfully abide by the rules of engagement presented by the international donors (Tadevosyan 2019).

Like other contexts, in the South Caucasus as well, the relationships between donors and local actors are influenced by the normative divide that exists between the Global North and the Global South. International donors as Global North actors frequently leverage their discursive, economic and political power to create a "funder-recipient" interaction framework, where local actors are assigned minimal agency and can mostly perform an operational role of an implementer (Ebrahim 2003), in this case of the "liberal peace" priorities of the external funders. This imbalanced "funder-recipient" framework is very descriptive of the majority of relationships that local actors develop with the funders in the South Caucasus. Despite lip-service generally being paid to the importance of local needs, the local experts are also given very limited space to develop and nurture agency that would support and advance grassroots peacebuilding approaches with local awareness. The current existing international-local engagement practices in the South Caucasus that is dominated by the high-power positions of the international actors, weakens the positioning of local actors in the societies and keep them in a relatively powerless position.

The South Caucasus Context and Key Terms

South Caucasus is one of the most turbulent regions of the former Soviet Union. All three former Soviet Socialist republics of the region – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia went through several rounds of violent conflicts first in the early 1990s and later in 2008, and more recently in 2020. Ethno-political and territorial disputes resulted in the emergence of one non-recognized (Nagorno-Karabakh) and two partly recognized (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) states. The interconnectedness of the region and the location of these countries at the center of an important energy resources corridor makes it more vulnerable to global geopolitical dynamics, especially to the confrontation between Russia and the West.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, while actively celebrated as a victory over the suppressive communist regime, had a much more devastating impact on the people that got caught in the middle of the conflicts that accompanied it. The final years of the Soviet Union were marked by the advancement of policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost* in an attempt to bring fresh air into the stagnant Soviet system. These policies, eventually, opened the flood gates for nationalist movements that swept through most of the former Soviet republics. The South Caucasus countries were hit particularly hard. As all the three countries of the region started to develop highly exclusive national projects, nationalist sentiment and ethnic grievances paved the way for the first ethnic clashes that later transformed into full-scale wars (Allen 2022; Gamaghelyan and Rumyantsev 2021). Armenians (in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh), Azerbaijanis, Abkhaz, Georgians, and South Ossetians largely view the military phases of the conflicts in the early 1990s as the "wars of independence"

and "national-liberation" that were foundational for the establishment of their respective states.

Within this context, local peace actors (often in the form of non-governmental organizations) emerged as important pillars of conflict and post-conflict development of the South Caucasus states. While the term "local peace actor" can mean different things in different conflict/geographical contexts, in the context of the South Caucasus and for the purposes of this Policy Brief, **local peace actors** are defined as those locally created and legally registered entities that operate on the territory of one of the South Caucasus states and have been engaged in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and reconciliation work as they define it. This operational definition excludes locally staffed and operated branches of international organizations such as Saferworld, Eurasia Partnership Foundation, etc. In contrast to local actors, the term **international donor** is used to describe those outside actors who have very clear outside national affiliations, are state or non-state in nature, and provide financial support for peacebuilding and conflict resolution work either through open competition grants or as private philanthropic donations. Finally, the term **funding mechanism** refers to the legal and procedural ways through which donors make the funding for peacebuilding work available to the local actors.

The spectrum of peacebuilding work in the South Caucasus is very wide. Local peace actors engage in three main categories of work: internal (work within their own societies), cross-border dialogues (Track 1,5, Track 2 and Track 3), and partnership with international organizations (local organizations become implementing partners of projects developed by INGOs). It is important to also note the diversity of the categories of internal work. The key areas in this segment are: human rights, advocacy and democratization, analytical engagement and policy development, work with youth, and work with language and culture (Tadevosyan 2019). While nothing suggests that one or another way of thinking about peacebuilding yields better results, the conceptualization of peace work can affect the nature of relationships that local actors build with international donors and other actors.

Liberal peace and the concept of 'local' in peacebuilding

Building peace and designing interventions and policies that heavily emphasize the liberal peace philosophy has been the dominant trend in the field for several decades now. While the post-Cold War years have registered a decline in armed conflict around the world (Mack 2007), questions about the effectiveness and efficiency of peacebuilding policies and interventions remain. Liberal peace approaches are being critiqued for being Western-centered and not respecting local traditions or paying enough attention to the needs of the local peace actors, often leaving them even more exposed and vulnerable to the local conflict contexts (Autesserre 2014). In concurrence, the innovative research by Mac Ginty and Firchow on *Everyday Peace Indicators* shows that local perspectives of peace and security are rarely if ever reflected in the policy documents of major donors or peacebuilding organizations (Firchow and Mac Ginty 2014). Not

only do the concepts of liberal peace not reflect local perspectives, but the primacy of such a kind of peace is assumed to be something of a given that does not require further elaboration. This approach echoes the ongoing clash between two different visions of local ownership in peacebuilding and post-war contexts. On the one hand, proponents of the liberal approach see local ownership as a commitment by the local actors to adopt and implement approaches developed by outside actors in concurrence with liberal peace theory. On the other hand, the communitarian approach to local ownership emphasizes the agency of local actors and focuses on the necessity of a peacebuilding process that is developed, managed, and implemented by the local actors rather than external ones (Donais 2009). In this context, the "local turn" in peace studies should be understood and conceptualized as a way of supporting local actors in the global South rather than defining them by the needs or views of actors in the global North (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013).

The growing critique of liberal peace approaches has created space for post-liberal peacebuilding approaches to develop. Post-liberal peacebuilding puts a much stronger emphasis on the issue of local ownership and locally-led efforts in the areas of development, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution. In contrast to liberal peace approaches where international intervenors become the dominant actors in shaping the type of peace that is being created, post-liberal approaches emphasize the centrality of local decisions about what kind of peace is appropriate (Debiel and Rinck 2016). The understanding of the centrality of the locally made decisions about peace, its content, its form, and implementation, while acknowledged, rarely becomes an integrated part of outside intervention mechanisms. Autesserre rightfully argues that regardless of type, foreign intervenors, at best, can only support peace initiatives (Autesserre 2017). With the growing acknowledgment that bottom-up peacebuilding plays a central role in stopping the spread of the violence and paving a way towards sustainable resolution of the conflicts, terms such as local ownership, local partnership, and participation became the central pieces of the vocabulary of peace and development practitioners, as well as policymakers.

However, while the terminology was internalized, there were several distinct problematic aspects associated with the usage and conceptualization of these concepts among the international and donor community. First of all, these concepts carry a heavy Western imprint (Chandler 2006; Paris 2004; Pugh 2005). Peace studies is a field that is largely built on the colonial practices of knowledge production where the local contexts, local actors, and local dynamics are the object of the study, "continue to struggle with discerning the local's actual nature" (Hirblinger and Simons 2015, 423). In addition, there is significant ambiguity about what "local" means and what are the operational boundaries of the local. While local is usually conceptualized in contrast to international or outside, this understanding is overly simplistic. The conceptualization of local and international as binary opposites is the main problem of the current literature on the local turn in peacebuilding (Paffenholz 2015). This binary conceptualization is weak because it implies that both local and international actors are monolithic and universal. At the same

time, new emerging donors such as China and other BRIC countries already challenge our dominant view of donors being representatives of the unified liberal West with neo-liberal development agendas.

Conceptualization of "local" continues to remain largely in the framework of the liberal peacebuilding paradigm, which still sees the local as an object of intervention and not a driving force behind the peacebuilding processes (Debiel and Rinck 2016). Even though scholars like Paffenholz stress that binary conceptualization of local and international is problematic, the concept of local continues to be explained largely in comparison to international and, even if implicitly, in contrast to liberalism (Belloni 2012; Hellmüller 2012; Kappler and Richmond 2011; Mac Ginty 2010; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Pouligny 2005; Tadjbakhsh 2011). With the increased engagement with the local, there has been a change in at least recognizing its complexity and dynamic nature. At the same time, scholars and practitioners continue to objectify the local as something that needs to be "discovered, understood or empowered" (Hirblinger and Simons 2015, 423). Scholars also caution against romanticizing the local and placing unrealistic emphasis that the key to peace rests within the local (Donais 2009; Mac Ginty 2008).

Limitations of a Programmatic Approach to Peacebuilding

The existing reluctance and inability to clearly define what peace means and what substantive elements define it in each individual context leads to the development of peace interventions that are programmatic in nature. A heavy reliance on project management logic in peacebuilding programming supports the idea that peace is something that can be developed externally by a certain group of individuals who possess the required knowledge, have the needed financial means, and can access key partners (Goetschel and Hagmann 2009, 62). This bureaucratic approach to peace engineering results in the development and application of a certain standard set of concepts, goals and tools in response to generalized conflict scenarios which not only lack depth but also fail to recognize specific characteristics and dynamics of each individual conflict context.

The tension between the liberal and communal conceptualization of local ownership extends to the operational level of peacebuilding implementation. While there is substantive evidence that externally developed interventions create confrontation and marginalization on the local level, nevertheless practitioners need to pay closer attention to the process of adaptation and reconfiguration of external intervention models by the local actors (Verkoren and van Leeuwen 2013). The practices, frameworks, and structures of international organizations result in the development of a larger gap between international actors and the local communities they serve and have "wider implications for the mutual interaction and learning process between international peacebuilders and local actors" (da Costa and Karlsrud 2012, 54). Foreign donor assumptions about what local actors lack, and what they need are the major driving force behind the political and economic support of foreign interventions. Even with the growing recognition that Western

civil society practices and discourses often do not fit well with many of the local contexts, internationals continue to strongly rely on these practices and discourses in their intervention models and support mechanisms (Verkoren and van Leeuwen 2013). Some scholars believe that heavy reliance on such practices can be detrimental not only to a particular peacebuilding initiative but such funding mechanisms that are exclusively driven by an external logic "can actually destroy local capacities and projects rather than enable them" (Autesserre 2017, 125).

Compounding these trends, it is arguably a universal practice for many external peacebuilding interventions to take the form of project implementation. Peacebuilding and reconciliation projects are designed by international and local actors to apply actionable solutions to a certain set of problems on the ground. At the same time, while in some cases these project-oriented and pragmatic thinking helps to advance the technical implementation of certain project aspects, the domination of project-oriented thinking can become a limiting factor for facilitating peacebuilding (Lederach 1998). Taking this critique further, scholars like Pul (2016), Muvingi (2016), and Neufeldt (2016) underline that peacebuilding and development projects that are built around grant-making and heavily rely on Western cultural values and administrative procedures are detrimental to local peacebuilding efforts. Externally designed projects or projects that are designed with Western normative values at their core also raise an issue of norm transfer and its implications on the local level. Western-style peacebuilding programming relies heavily on such concepts as "theories of change," and other assumptions that are a product of Western discourses and thinking. Based on their education and socialization within a specific set of values, foreign practitioners develop shared practices, narratives, and habits that become the basis of their *modus operandi* in conflict intervention contexts. This leads to the development and institutionalization of what can be called a "set of transferable skills and knowledge" that foreign intervenors feel comfortable applying to any conflict and post-conflict contexts (Autesserre 2017; Zahar 2012). This technocratic approach to peacebuilding leaves very little room to constructively integrate local perspectives and they often are viewed "as hurdles to be overcome or obstacles to be avoided than as potential sources of sustainable solutions" (Donais 2009, 8). In addition, donor-driven peace that is built on the need to generate and show quick peacebuilding impact "with narrow project goals and timeframes" (Goetschel and Hagmann 2009, 64) does not allow for a more meaningful conceptualization of peace that would reflect the local perspectives and will be time and context-specific.

Challenges of Existing Funding Mechanisms in the South Caucasus

Implementation of the liberal peacebuilding agenda takes different forms: direct peacebuilding interventions by international actors or the development of funding mechanisms that are made available for local peace actors are only two of the possible avenues (Creary and Byrne 2014). Funding opportunities created by international donors become even more appealing

and important in contexts where local fundraising is not available or is impossible. In the South Caucasus, the majority of the local organizations are heavily dependent on the funding opportunities created by diverse international donors. Local organizations put significant effort and time into the process of tracking down solicitation announcements by the donors that are not regularly engaged in the region, keeping up with the funding cycle of more regularly engaged donors, and searching for organizations and foundations that have a history of interest in the region or issue area. Local peace NGOs in the region try to support and maintain their peacebuilding work by developing applications based on the specific approach identified by the funder (e.g. people-to-people approach), or specific issue areas prioritized by the donor (e.g. work with youth or cultural preservation). Working within the framework of this pre-determined funding on the one hand allows the local peace actors to continue an important engagement within the peacebuilding and conflict resolution domain. On the other hand, however, there are major limitations to this one-sided and top-down funding approach. It only provides a very limited space, if at all, for designing intervention programs that are reflective of urgent local issues. Pre-determined funding requires local actors to prioritize the needs and views of the donor, even if these are at the expense of the real needs of the communities that they are/will be engaging with.

This approach has been dominant in the region for over two decades now. The prevalence of this type of funding mechanism enabled the local organizations to develop significant flexibility and positioned them well to respond to the needs and priorities of foreign funders. On the one hand, local peace actors recognized that working with this type of funding approach over the years allowed them to develop a very diverse organizational profile with the ability to engage with a wide range of issues and apply a multitude of approaches. On the other hand, however, it has negatively affected their ability to have agency in the development of conflict-related policies and shaping funding priorities that are informed by primarily local needs. This passive consumerism of local NGOs not only limits the opportunities to address the real urgent issues on the ground but also negatively impacts the positioning of these local actors within their societies and communities. As representatives of functioning civil society, local actors in the South Caucasus see one of their main roles as being active contributors to the policy development on a range of issues, including the conflicts. Following the lead of international donors, while this allows them to carry out certain kinds of conflict resolution and peacebuilding programs, it diminishes their reputation in the eyes of local communities to the status of "freeloaders" (interview conducted with a Yerevan-based NGO, 2017) who capitalize on conflict situations in order to attract foreign funding.

The suppressed agency of local actors becomes an even more urgent issue in highly restrictive and internationally challenging settings. Unlike their colleagues from internationally recognized Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, local peace actors in unrecognized/partly recognized Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh rarely, if ever, can count on direct support by international donors for their peacebuilding activities. Limitations

of international law and active policies of non-recognition pursued by the parent states (in this case Azerbaijan and Georgia) prevent many international organizations from developing bilateral cooperation and funding mechanisms with these actors. This limits the engagement of local peace actors in these settings to the instrumentalized role of implementing partners of major international organizations. Most of these international actors have a solid reputation and high level of organizational integrity and develop their programs and engagements with the best interest of local actors in mind. Nevertheless, many of the projects implemented by these outside actors carry a heavy imprint of their organizational culture, approaches, and values. Local voices in these cases become a valuable addition to the program design, but rarely are the core of the project. Cognizant of the political limitations that exist for their environments, local actors from these de facto entities still regard these indirect funding opportunities as a good way of supporting peacebuilding activities within their communities. However, the lack of direct access to donors, as well as donors' inability to directly engage with these communities, do not allow for grounded peacebuilding work to develop and limits advocacy on behalf of the communities that these local actors represent.

In contrast to working with pre-determined funding, some of the local peacebuilding organizations are able to develop an alternative way of engaging with the international donor community. Instead of adapting to pre-existing frameworks that fall within the donor-grantee relational domain, local actors with strong organizational development are able to establish more egalitarian relations with the donors within the partnership for peace domain. The latter allows local organizations to work with more flexible bespoke funding rather than generic calls for proposals. One of the distinctive features of stronger organizational development is the fundamental awareness of organizational interests and approaches in the field of peacebuilding and reconciliation. For example, some local organizations based on a wide range of factors (personal and professional background of the core team members, personal histories and experience with the conflict, or simply passion), have made an informed choice of focusing on a certain set of conflict issues or working with specific target groups (former combatants, journalists, young leaders, scholars and historians, for instance). Many years of consistent work in their local communities also have equipped these organizations with a strong understanding and awareness of realistic approaches that work within their specific contexts and localities. As such, these actors, when appropriate, can resist donors' push for "unnecessary innovation."

The local peace actors whose peacebuilding engagement is based on fundamental awareness of their interests and approaches grounded in years of experience more often look for donors with whom they can work out bespoke funding mechanisms. These organizations prioritize viable peacebuilding approaches and meaningful project design over simple grant acquisition. Some of the organizations that were interviewed for this data collection shared that they have previously refused funding opportunities that required working within a particular framework or project design that they perceived as not reflecting the values, views, and

practices of their organization. This careful and weighted selection of international supporters and partners also helps with strengthening their internal positions within the local communities. Far too often local peacebuilding organizations in the region are accused of promoting foreign and "enemy" agendas. Often seen as "gold diggers" and "money chasers" (interview conducted with a Tbilisi-based NGO, 2017), local peace organizations face the challenge of justifying the value of their peacebuilding work to their immediate constituencies. In the regional public discourse, there is the derogatory term "*grant-eaters*" (Luciani 2021) used to single out the money-driven nature of peacebuilding work and accuse local actors of financial self-interest in this field. A high level of development and profound awareness of their interests, values, and approaches does not necessarily yield larger grant opportunities. However, it allows these organizations to achieve the leverage to negotiate specifically tailored and customized funding that responds better to the local needs and has stronger alignment with the organizational practices.

The final challenge of the existing funding mechanisms in the region is the political motivations and caveats that accompany many of the available funding streams. Political sensitivities that are guided by domestic and foreign policies of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia further obstruct the process of meaningful partnership development between funders and local peace actors. Bilateral relations that many donor countries and organizations develop with the host governments and the necessity to maintain these relations in volatile geopolitical contexts swing the pendulum of dominance towards smaller-scale and less ambitious projects. As testified by several local peace actors, in many cases peacebuilding work requires the presentation and pursuance of unconventional and bold steps that are married with certain risks. The fear of failure and concern that their names can possibly be associated with unsuccessful intervention projects many donors shy away from funding proposals that are deemed as "high-risk."

Local Needs in the Light of Global Funding

Derivative from the existing funding mechanisms is the issue of meaningful incorporation of local needs into the existing global funding schemes. In the case of predetermined funding, the agency for defining the priority issue areas for peacebuilding and conflict resolution engagements rests within the funders, often Western capitals (Heideman 2013). Interviewed representatives of the local peacebuilding community in the South Caucasus, only in very selected cases spoke about their ability to have an impact on donors' views of the local needs. International donors come to the region with already formed perceptions about the nature of conflict and are ready to offer funding opportunities that largely reflect their understanding of how their preconceived priorities should apply to the local environment. Donors' ability to not only listen, but actually hear what local actors are communicating to them about their immediate contexts is highly underdeveloped according to the local peace actors. The situation is even worse with respect to donors' readiness to include local expertise and analysis of needs and possibilities as structural and foundational

elements of their funding approaches. The majority of communication between the donors and local actors is guided by programmatic approach to building peace. Biweekly, quarterly

One of the rare cases when donors really listened to the local actors and adapted their funding approaches was mentioned by a Tskhinval/i-based local actor who shared that after extensive conversations and consultations with representatives of European donor agencies, they were able to agree on the continuation of engagement in personal capacities rather than as registered organizations even though previously one of the requirements for receiving funding was that the recipient should be a registered organization. The donor's understanding of the local context and empathy towards the inability of local peace actors to safely operate during that period in their society not only helped to ensure the safety of these local actors but also helped to provide for the continuity of engagement between the conflict-affected parties at a critical time within the conflict cycle (increased Russian pressure on de facto authorities).

Figure 3: Illustrative case of positive local-global synergy

and annual reports with some anecdotal success stories are central to the communication pattern between donors and local actors. Instances of joint analysis, strategizing and project design are examples of rare positive experiences that local actors enthusiastically report, rather than functioning practices of donor-local actor cooperation in the South Caucasus. Local actors implicitly emphasized the need for telling the story of their work, including successes and challenges, rather than relying on rigid reporting matrices.

Local peace actors interviewed for this data collection, unenthusiastically admitted that the local needs of the immediate communities on the line of contact (Armenia-Azerbaijan) or administrative boundary lines (Georgia-Abkhazia and Georgia-South Ossetia) rarely are reflected in the existing funding mechanisms. While local actors do not dismiss the importance of institution-building and democratization, gender equality and economic security, and other areas of liberal development in the process of state-building and subsequent resolution of conflicts, they underlined the need for sequencing and prioritizing issues that are the most urgent at a given time in each community context. "It feels that often donors ask us to build this beautiful mansion, which, of course, we all want, but they are giving us tools and resources to start from the second floor or balcony instead of solid foundation" (Yerevan-based NGO). This gap between local and global results in disproportionate adaptation on the part of the local actors to international agendas and existing funding. At best, local actors find creative ways of including activities in the program design that will help them to address the most urgent needs of the local communities while adapting to the priority areas/issues identified by the donors.

Such major misalignment between the available global funding and local needs is due to a diverse set of objective and subjective

One of the examples of the "misplaced" funding priority was the push by the Western government donor agencies for LGBTQI+ programming either independently or through the use of intersectionality with the conflict-related issues in the region. All South Caucasus societies are extremely conservative and patriarchal where LGBTQI+ topics are regarded as endangering national identity and thus national security. Local actors, regardless of their openness and western orientation felt that programming around LGBTQI+ issues currently in their societies will further marginalize the peacebuilding and civil society work and limit opportunities for engagement around other more urgent conflict-related issues. Local actors felt that donors often shoot from the hip which frequently backfires. Instead of emphasizing this particular issue, it would've been better if the donor organizations allocated these funds to another domain or issues that slowly would allow the development civic understanding about the broader human rights as an appropriate foundation to engage around such sensitive and controversial topics.

Figure 2: Illustrative case of disconnect between donor priority and local needs

factors. First, opportunities are limited for international donors to develop first-hand knowledge about the needs of local communities. The current praxis of interaction applied by many representatives of donor organizations reduces opportunities for direct and deep connection with the local communities to learn, see and experience the most urgent issues for them. One commonality that all South Caucasus countries (de jure and de facto) have is the development gap between the center and periphery. Central metropolitan areas where most donors have their representations (if they have designated country offices) are far ahead of rural and border regions. The local population in the capitals and remote/border villages face different challenges, have different concerns, and are open to different types of engagements and issues to discuss. Second, limited staffing, the workload of international actors, and changing priorities in response to new emerging crisis situations or geopolitical changes prevent donors from having sustained and prolonged engagement with the local communities to learn about their issues. Donors with no permanent representation in the country or only with one regional country office (usually located in Tbilisi, Georgia) face additional limitations. In such cases, donors rely only on infrequent short-term trips to the region, which, unfortunately, do not encourage in-depth study and understanding of all the problems of the local population in the conflict-affected communities. A veteran peacebuilder from Sukhum/i (Abkhazia) described this challenge very accurately: "With just tourist visits once a year, a donor can never get the right idea of what is happening within the society" (Interview conducted with a Sukhum/i-based NGO, 2017). Third, the access of international actors to de facto states is also limited due to

policies of non-recognition and special requirements set by central and de facto authorities. For example, in the case of South Ossetia, international actors are prohibited to access the region from the Russian border due to the law on "Occupied territories of Georgia," while at the same time they are not able to cross the boundary line from the Georgian side since the de facto authorities do not allow it. Similarly, since the international community recognizes the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, access to Nagorno-Karabakh through Armenia is extremely complicated, while access from the Azerbaijani side implies crossing an active militarized contact line. And finally, international donor organizations, especially government-affiliated, are described by a high level of personnel mobility and turnover. This complicates and constrains sustainable relationship building with the donors as the local actors have to build relationships with new officers and donor representatives every 3-5 years. This usually includes presenting the history of over two decades of work that they have been doing, explaining specific contextual challenges, and justifying programmatic approaches.

Conclusion

Liberal peace approaches and peace implementation from outside have received substantial critique during the past decade. The need to understand and take into consideration local needs, local perspectives on peace, and locally appropriate ways of building sustainable peace on the ground are increasingly recognized and emphasized both by academia and by practitioners. While there might be a desire and tendency to *replace* outside peacebuilding interventions with locally designed and implemented processes, it is important to recognize the merit of each of these different types of approaches and develop a space where they can co-exist in a constructive synergy building on each other's strengths and filling in the gaps (Allen 2020). It is key to recognize that building and supporting sustainable peace is less about the replacement of currently existing approaches and is more about finding ways of addressing some of the fundamental challenges and shortcomings of the currently operational approaches. One of these shortcomings is the current default way of funding peacebuilding work at the local level. Within the current paradigm the reputation, authority, and economic power of the donor organizations "creates incentives for the on-the-ground peacebuilders to adopt – or, at least, claim to adopt – assumptions in which they might not have originally believed or which they may actually disagree" (Autesserre 2017, 121). Developing funding priorities that align with the donors' profile and interests but support and take into consideration the real needs of conflict-affected communities is a key to successful and sustainable peacebuilding. This requires a more sustained and long-term partnership development between local and international actors where the expertise of local peace actors is emphasized.

Recommendations

- ⇒ Peacebuilding funding must transition from its current dominant fixed format to a more flexible and bespoke structure that will allow for better incorporation of local needs into program design. This will require a deeper conversation between donors and recipients, and more attention to local needs. In particular, donors will need to compromise on "universal" goals and norms which may not be entirely applicable in certain contexts.
- ⇒ Donor agencies must put effort into learning the "local language", which means learning to understand what things, words, and actions mean in the local context. An important step towards this is transitioning from a "reporting" format of communication to a "story-telling" format of interaction.
- ⇒ Donor agencies need to create in-person, regular, and sustained interaction opportunities with the local actors. Targeted solicitation of feedback and ideas should become mainstream and standard practices for international actors.

About the Author

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About Ottawa Dialogue

Established in 2009, Ottawa Dialogue is a university-based organization that brings together research and action in the field of dialogue and mediation. Guided by the needs of the parties in conflict, Ottawa Dialogue develops and carries out quiet and long-term, dialogue-driven initiatives around the world.

Endnotes

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