

LOCATING THE “LOCAL” IN PEACEBUILDING

Peacebuilding is a growing industry in conflict-affected communities across sub-Saharan Africa and an increasingly important part of the programmatic portfolios of many external donors and partners. This growth has brought with it controversy about how successful peacebuilding efforts are and how to evaluate them, but also some important new areas of consensus. In particular, actors at all levels of the peacebuilding process now recognize the importance of programs that address local drivers and dimensions of conflict and empower local actors and organizations, either alongside or as a substitute for more traditional “liberal” peacebuilding approaches that focus on formal, top-down peace mechanisms. This fact sheet provides a snapshot of findings from a RESOLVE Research Report drawing on an extensive literature review and four case studies from leading examples of post-conflict local peacebuilding in sub-Saharan Africa. The report argues that the “local” in local peacebuilding is best defined as local knowledge of conflict drivers and dynamics and locally defined, contextually specific definitions of peace. This does not necessarily mean working through or empowering “traditional” actors and institutions (a highly contested category, in any case). Nor should it mean a narrow focus on subnational conflict drivers and peace actors to the detriment of assessing how national and international dynamics shape local peace challenges (and vice versa).

International donors and peace actors are most successful when they operate with a keen awareness that all potential peacebuilding actors (national and local actors, but also external donors, “experts,” and implementers) have their own agendas and that peacebuilding efforts that work at the sub-national level and engage local actors are not automatically endowed with legitimacy and community buy-in just because of their “localness.” International actors must also be flexible and open to partnering with a wide range of local actors, including those that don’t meet preconceived international expectations about what an effective local partner looks like (often, old, male, and “traditional”).

For more, see: Kendhammer, Brandon, and Wyatt Chandler. [*Locating the “Local” in Peacebuilding*](#). RESOLVE Network, 2021.

KEY QUESTIONS & DEBATES

Given the critical need for effective peacebuilding and the increasing demand from external donors and partners for accountability and effectiveness, the report reviews a wide range of scholarly and practitioner literature on “local” peacebuilding with the goal of helping policymakers better understand the opportunities, challenges and tradeoffs. Specifically, it addresses four key questions and debates around the applicability of local peacebuilding, with special reference to sub-Saharan African experiences and cases:

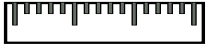
- 1** Where is the “local” in “local peacebuilding”? What actors and spaces count as local (and why), and how might different definitions of the local in peacebuilding practice explain why some programs are more successful in contributing to durable peace than others?
- 2** What are the possible relationships between “liberal”/national and local peace approaches, and what are the promises and pitfalls of “hybrid” peacebuilding?
- 3** What is the best role for external funders and organizations in supporting locally oriented peacebuilding and the work of local peacebuilders, and what are the opportunities and challenges for both sides?
- 4** How can we best measure and evaluate local peacebuilding approaches comparatively and develop best practices, given their commitment to adapting to local contexts?

LESSONS LEARNED & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



“Local” is not easily defined for peacebuilding, and which definition is applied can have considerable impact on peace processes and outcomes.

The absence of a shared framework about what counts as “local” from one context to another (or even within the same space) bring otherwise seemingly compatible efforts into conflict with each other and produce unintended consequences when those conflicts involve the distribution of resources and recognition. Often, the solution to this definitional problem is setting clear organizational priorities based on localized knowledge about a given conflict setting. Such localized knowledge is neither cheap nor easy to come by (especially for external funders), and national governments, conflict actors, and local communities all have their own interests that will shape the flow of information out.



Measurements of local peace must be flexible and condition-dependent.

If, as the literature clearly indicates, definitions of local peace ought to be defined locally by stakeholders, then what needs standardizing is not the outcome but the process of recognizing the need for this input, prioritizing collecting it, and using it to make decisions that engage local stakeholders as partners and owners. Choosing partners with deep and wide local connections (especially among groups that traditional local elites may not reach) over those with readymade, standard M&E experience may incur upfront costs but result in better peacebuilding in the long run.



External actors can and should play a role in local peacebuilding efforts.

External actors may need to review and adjust their policies and procedures for interacting with local actors to address institutional barriers to effective local engagement, but the goal should always be to find ways to make partnerships happen. Local conflicts have national dimensions (and vice versa), and smaller local partners may not always have the necessary connections or skills to manage the logistical and especially the political challenges of bridging that local with the national. External actors who can navigate these challenges are indispensable to local peace efforts that might otherwise be thwarted or never get off the ground.



“Hybrid” peace approaches offer promise, but not everything “hybridizes” easily.

Evidence of incorporating local elements into essentially liberal peacebuilding frameworks is mixed at best. Critical hybrid approaches that treat local empowerment as a form of resistance against liberal peace models often romanticize traditional and cultural alternatives and fail to see their potential pitfalls. Research shows that when international peacebuilders challenge their assumptions and open up to and empower local knowledge and perspectives, they do less harm and more good. The best hybrid peace models are attentive to local-national and local-local connections and relationships and are strategic in how they bridge those spaces.

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