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Locating the “Local” in Peacebuilding

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

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.¹

Despite their increasing visibility, however, local peacebuilding efforts have a mixed record of accomplishment. While there’s little question among practitioners and academics that local engagement in designing and implementing peacebuilding programs is a necessary (if not sufficient) component of effective peacebuilding, there’s less consensus on why some internationally-backed local initiatives succeed and others produce adverse consequences.² From debates over what exactly the “local” component of local peacebuilding means to concerns around the role of external donors and organizations and challenges in determining the legitimacy of “traditional” practices in deeply-divided communities, there are many challenges and pitfalls for sponsors of local peace.

The debate surrounding the effectiveness of internationally supported local peacebuilding has two main components. The first is rooted in critiques of the “liberal” or state-centric peacebuilding model that emphasizes internationally-supported economic and political liberalization (including formal peace bargains, negotiated power-sharing agreements, and elections) as the most effective long-term “remedies for civil conflict.”³ Today, few liberal peacebuilders dispute the need to incorporate local-level conflict lenses and engage local-level actors in order to generate legitimacy and community buy-in and address local drivers of conflict. Still, critics remain suspicious that many of these new efforts at local engagement reflect problematic donor assumptions about what communities want and need and fail to genuinely

1 For an early statement of this principle, see: David Smock, *Creative Approaches to Managing Conflict in Africa: Findings from USIP-Funded Projects*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, April 1997), <https://www.usip.org/publications/1997/04/creative-approaches-managing-conflict-africa-findings-usip-funded-projects>.

2 Séverine Autessere, “International Peacebuilding and Local Success: Assumptions and Effectiveness,” *International Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (2017): 114-132, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viw054>.

3 The debate over “liberal peacebuilding” is well-summarized in: Roland Paris, “Saving Liberal Peacebuilding,” *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 2 (April 2010): 337-365, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000057>.

center local drivers and experiences of conflict and the skills and expertise of sub-national and grassroots actors.⁴

The second component of the debate is the difficulty of determining which local actors and what local knowledge are most important to peacebuilding and of effectively evaluating local interventions in complex environments. Despite advances in developing best practices for transitioning from INGO-led to locally led initiatives in the wider development field,⁵ there has been little practice-oriented research to date on how recent or ongoing conflict and humanitarian needs might affect similar efforts in the peacebuilding space. What the existing research does show, however, is the danger of idealizing local actors and “local knowledge” as independent or disconnected from the wider political challenges that often undermine peacebuilding efforts.

Although local and national-level *experiences* of conflict may be quite different, “local,” “national,” and “international” conflict drivers and actors often interact in complex webs that blur such distinctions. Even the best-intentioned international actors often struggle to make sense of these dynamics, which can and do shift rapidly. Similarly, embracing “local knowledge” uncritically as an alternative to top-down models raises its own concerns about whose voices and traditions in any given community are to be treated as “authentic” and “legitimate.” **In the absence of clarity, policymakers and donors support local peace most effectively when they are clear about which local conflict drivers and dynamics they intend to address and when they empower local actors with the necessary skills and connections to facilitate programs that meet locally-defined needs and understandings of “peace.”**

Contributions

Given the critical need for effective peacebuilding and the increasing demand from external donors and partners for accountability and effectiveness, this 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.

4 One classic example of this tendency, also discussed below, are efforts to extend the truth and reconciliation commission model as a vehicle for fostering local participation in peace processes, even in communities that resist verbally remembering violence and possess other locally legitimate models for processing trauma and facilitating reintegration. See: Rosalind Shaw, *Rethinking Truth and Reconciliation Commissions: Lessons from Sierra Leone*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2005), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2005/02/rethinking-truth-and-reconciliation-commissions-lessons-sierra-leone>.

5 See, for instance: the USAID-funded “Stopping As Success” research program, which explored transitions from INGO led to locally led development. “Stopping As Success” case studies included several post-conflict communities and peace-related initiatives, but did not explicitly consider how conflict dynamics or drivers and ongoing humanitarian interventions might impact these efforts. “About Us,” Stopping As Success, accessed September 20, 2021, <https://www.stoppingassuccess.org/about-us/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CStopping%20As%20Success%3A%20Transitioning%20to,and%20responsible%20transitions%20out%20of.> See also: Megan Renoir and Grace Boone, eds., *What Transformation Takes: Evidence of Responsible INGO Transitions to Locally Led Development Around the World* (London: Peace Direct, 2020), <https://www.peacedirect.org/publications/what-transformation-takes/>.

- 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?
- What are the possible relationships between “liberal”/national and local peace approaches, and what are the promises and pitfalls of “hybrid” peacebuilding?
- 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?
- How can we best measure and evaluate local peacebuilding approaches comparatively and develop best practices, given their commitment to adapting to local contexts?

Findings and Recommendations

Drawing on an extensive literature review and four case studies from leading examples of post-conflict local peacebuilding in sub-Saharan Africa, **this 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”).

INTRODUCTION

Today more than ever, the consensus is that building durable, sustainable peace after conflict requires engaging with local actors, incorporating local knowledge and practices, and meeting locally defined needs. Unfortunately for those looking for practical recommendations and solutions, this consensus masks confusion and disagreement about what “the local” actually means for peacebuilding. This conceptual confusion relates to the origins of the “local turn” in a body of scholarly and practitioner research that emphasized the failures of liberal peacebuilding practices centered on electoral democracy, good

governance, rights, the rule of law, and open markets.⁶ In principle, what local peacebuilders have in common is the goal of “establishing an infrastructure across all levels of society . . . that empowers the resources for reconciliation from within that society and maximizes the contribution from outside.”⁷ In practice, there is tension between romanticized notions of the local as an alternative to liberal peacebuilding models and the messiness inherent in working with local actors who hold complex views and are embedded in multiple, overlapping power structures.⁸

If we are to find some common definition of the “local” and why it is important for effective peacebuilding, where might we begin? One recent review of the literature argued that while nearly every piece of scholarship or programming guide offered a slightly different definition, basic approaches clustered around two poles. The first defines the local in relationship to the national and international realms, emphasizing the importance of sub-national conflict drivers, actors, and institutions and decentralized processes in effective peacebuilding. The second approach focuses on the emancipatory potential to empower communities by engaging with local agency and knowledge and employing peacebuilding techniques that build on and are sensitive to local understandings of peace.⁹

Approaches adopting the first perspective point out that even national and international conflicts take place in sub-national contexts that must be identified and targeted for peacebuilding to succeed. As Stathys Kalyvas has argued, not only are so-called “national” conflicts rarely the same in scope or intensity across an entire national territory but even conflicts seemingly organized around clear national master cleavages are often shaped by local grievances and conflict dynamics that play out differently from neighborhood to neighborhood, village to village.¹⁰ What makes “local” peacebuilding unique is its commitment to focusing on subnational spaces, communities, and actors (“at the level of the individual, the family, the clan, the district, the province, and the ethnic group when it is not a national-level one,” as Severine Autesserre puts it).¹¹ The challenge is identifying the right subnational lens, given that “local stakeholders . . . comprise many political, economic, social, and religious subgroups and hold very varied (and at times conflicting) interests and traditions.”¹² Knowing that subnational spaces are important for both conflict dynamics and peacebuilding tells us relatively little about which specific local stakeholders are the most important for bringing about peace or what kind of support they need.

6 Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver Richmond, “Myth or Reality: Opposing Views on the Liberal Peace and Post-war Reconstruction,” *Global Society* 21, no. 4 (2007): 491-497, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600820701562710>.

7 John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 1998), xvi.

8 Andreas T. Hirblinger and Claudia Simons, “The Good, the Bad, and the Powerful: Representations of the ‘local’ in Peacebuilding,” *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 5 (2015): 422-439, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010615580055>.

9 Hanna Leonardsson and Gustav Rudd, “The ‘local turn’ in peacebuilding: a literature review of effective and emancipatory local peacebuilding,” *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015): 825-839, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1029905>.

10 Stathys Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

11 Autesserre, “International Peacebuilding and Local Success,” 116.

12 *Ibid.*

Approaches that adopt the second perspective view the local not just as a set of subnational spaces and actors, but as a field of social practice defined by everyday behaviors, beliefs, experiences, and interactions around conflict and coexistence in deeply divided societies. Roger Mac Ginty, whose concept of “everyday peace” is influential in local peacebuilding practice, emphasizes that local communities are fluid, heterogeneous spaces with many existing strategies and practices for avoiding conflict and maintaining peace in daily life even amidst ongoing social violence. (Much of Mac Ginty’s work references his experiences in Northern Ireland in the 1970s).¹³ Contrasted with top-down peace initiatives that define the terms and techniques of peacebuilding centrally, local peacebuilding is tied to the engagement with and support of these local, grassroots practices and strategies (such as “everyday peace”) that emerge bottom-up from community spaces. This perspective also points to the value of measuring success in peacemaking and peacebuilding by drawing on “local frameworks” of cultural practice, knowledge, and experience. This definition suggests that, in holding to locally driven standards, outside actors can lend support to individuals and communities directly impacted by conflict, but it is those individuals and communities that must make decisions about what kind of peace to build and at what level that work must occur. In effect, only local actors can define the “local” in local peacebuilding.¹⁴

This emphasis on local as bottom-up rather than simply subnational comes through clearly in guides for practitioners. For example, Peace Direct and Alliance for Peacebuilding categorize the localness of peacebuilding efforts on a scale of how much ownership is provided to grassroots actors, from “locally led and owned, where local people and groups design the approach and set priorities, while outsiders assist with resources” to “locally managed, where the approach comes from the outside, but is “transplanted” to local management” and “locally implemented, primarily an outside approach, including external priorities that local people or organizations are supposed to implement.”¹⁵ What matters here is not where local actors are located spatially or relative to national/international actors but how much their agency is acknowledged and incorporated into program design and implementation.

Unfortunately, advocating for local ownership of peacebuilding processes and bottom-up engagement with a community’s existing social practices of conflict mitigation and avoidance is not as simple as it seems. What local signifies in these calls is not just agency and empowerment for non-state or marginalized groups but a sense of “legitimacy and authenticity” that comes from the grassroots.¹⁶ Practitioners and scholars alike often point to the importance of centering “traditional” or “indigenous” practices and “civil traditions” in rebuilding social ties and “dismantling systems of violence” in post-conflict communities.¹⁷ But not all local and traditional practices (think of gender norms that limit women’s ability to advocate for their safety in public spaces) are also “necessarily compatible with the aim of working towards

13 Roger Mac Ginty, “Everyday Peace: Bottom-up and Local Agency in Conflict-Affected Societies,” *Security Dialogue* 45, no. 6 (2014): 548–564, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010614550899>.

14 A point made relatively early on in: A.B. Fetherston and Carolyn Nordstrom, “Overcoming Habitus in Conflict Management: UN Peacekeeping and War Zone Ethnography,” *Peace & Change* 20, no. 1 (1995): 94–119, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0130.1995.tb00625.x>.

15 Phil Vernon, *Local Peacebuilding: What Works and Why* (Peace Direct and Alliance for Peacebuilding, July 19, 2019), <https://www.peaceinsight.org/reports/whatworks>.

16 Mac Ginty, “Everyday Peace,” 561.

17 Carolyn Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), xviii.

a less violent society.”¹⁸ Nor are all traditional institutions and practices legitimate and authentic for all community members. Struggles within communities over who has the power to define the “traditional” for external audiences often date back to colonial practices of indirect rule that empowered some traditional authorities over others, and peacebuilding efforts to privilege and raise up local voices inevitably become participants (unwitting or otherwise) in these power struggles.¹⁹ When the “local” becomes not just a spatial descriptor but a value judgement of a community or individual’s contribution to an authentic, legitimate peacebuilding process, it can become increasingly difficult to also acknowledge that local communities are fragmented and contested spaces.

A HYBRID APPROACH?

The ambiguities of the “local” in local peacebuilding also come into play amidst the growing popularity of hybrid peace approaches that attempt to bridge the national/international and the subnational, the liberal and the local. Where and what is the local in hybrid peacebuilding? Once again, the answer depends on the assumptions and goals peacebuilders bring to the question.

On one side are scholars and practitioners who define hybrid peacebuilding in terms of combining the best and most effective practices from locally oriented and liberal peacebuilding models. They tend as a result to define the local as the opposite of “top-down,” with a particular emphasis on subnational actors and spaces.²⁰ On the other end are those who see “hybrid” peacebuilding as a form of local resistance to global elites imposing “liberal internationalist and institutionalist architecture[s] of peace, security, and global governance.”²¹ In this sense, “local” is as much a matter of resisting “liberal” and colonial forms of governance in peacebuilding as it is a specific place where peace processes take place, and “hybrid” peacebuilding is less a combining or balancing of local and liberal approaches than it is the product of frictions between global and local actors that have at least the potential to produce something entirely new.²² These approaches have radically different implications for the kinds of working and power relationships we might expect to emerge between external donors and partners and local peacebuilders, not only in terms of programming but also in terms of who would define the terms of success or failure.

18 Christoph Daniel Schaefer, “Local Practices and Normative Frameworks in Peacebuilding,” *International Peacekeeping* 17, no. 4 (2010): 499, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2010.516659>.

19 See, for instance: Hirblinger and Simons, “The Good, the Bad, and the Powerful,” 13; Claudia Simons and Franzisca Zanker, *Questioning the Local in Peacebuilding* (Working Papers Series Nr. 10, Priority Programme 1448 of the German Research Foundation, 2014), https://lost-research-group.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/SPP1448_WP10_Simons_Zanker.pdf.

20 MaryAnne Iwara, *Hybrid Peacebuilding Approaches in Africa: Harnessing Complementary Parallels* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.37805/pn2020.15.lpbj>.

21 Oliver Richmond, “The Dilemmas of a Hybrid Peace,” *E-International Relations*, December 23, 2012, <https://www.e-ir.info/2012/12/23/the-dilemmas-of-a-hybrid-peace/>. See also: Roger Mac Ginty, “Hybrid Peace: The Interaction Between Top-Down and Bottom-Up Peace,” *Security Dialogue* 41, no. 4 (2010): 391–412, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010610374312>.

22 See: Annika Björkdahl and Kristine Hoglund, “Precarious Peacebuilding: Friction in Global-Local Encounters,” *Peacebuilding* 1, no. 3 (2013): 289–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2013.813170>.

Complicating things further, there is only mixed evidence that incorporating “local” measures and actors into peacebuilding processes makes them more successful or durable, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. One body of research, identified with the work of Séverine Autesserre, argues that by focusing on the national and international dimensions of complex conflicts, international peacebuilders often fail to attend to the local drivers of conflict (land tenure, the use and abuse of “traditional” authority, local-level power/resource conflicts) that sustain violence even after national-level bargains are struck.²³ And even when they make the effort to intervene in these local conflict dynamics, international peacekeepers and peacemakers often fail to bring about durable peace because their own professional assumptions, practices, and habits prevent them from engaging authentically and effectively with local knowledge and needs.²⁴ Put differently, while not all local approaches are guaranteed to be effective at building or sustaining peace, there is no evidence that international actors or agencies have special skills or resources that local peacebuilders intrinsically lack. The widespread failure of top-down peacebuilding programs demonstrates the need to incorporate bottom-up (“local”) voices and perspectives.

A second body of research, however, finds that incorporating local actors and addressing local power dynamics within larger national peace and power-sharing arrangements seems to have little impact on whether or not these arrangements reduce local-level violence. This is not to say that local dynamics play no role in preventing or driving resurgent violence in post-conflict settings. Rather, it suggests that the “local” and the “national” are not always the distinct units of analysis that hybrid peacebuilding models assume, and that conflicts over power and resources often operate across these various levels.²⁵

One example of this dynamic is how the nature and scope of national power-sharing and elite pacts often shape the choices and incentives of local actors. For instance, that national power-sharing arrangements in post-conflict Burundi and Liberia were not extended down into local communities did not prevent local actors from taking their cues from them. In mid-2000s DRC, extensive efforts to construct localized power-sharing bargains in the Kivus did not prevent the renewal of violence when new conflict vectors emerged.²⁶ Moreover, as Giulia Piccolino has argued in the case of Côte d’Ivoire, the absence of a national-level power-sharing bargain following Laurent Gbagbo’s removal from power in 2011 created a “victor’s peace” dynamic against which local-level efforts at peacebuilding and reconciliation have foundered.²⁷

23 Séverine Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

24 Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

25 Shahar Hameiri and Lee Jones, “Against Hybridity in the Study of Peacebuilding and Statebuilding,” in *Hybridity on the Ground in Peacebuilding and Development*, eds. Joanne Wallis et al. (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2018), 99-114, <http://doi.org/10.22459/HGPD.03.2018>.

26 Claudia Simons, Franzisca Zanker, Andreas Mehler and Denis M. Tull, “Power-sharing in Africa’s war zones: how important is the local level?,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 51, no. 4 (2013): 681-706, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X13000645>.

27 Giulia Piccolino, “Local Peacebuilding in a Victor’s Peace. Why Local Peace Fails Without National Reconciliation,” *International Peacekeeping* 26, no. 3 (2019): 354-379, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2019.1583559>

Put differently, while the absence of engagement with local knowledge and needs can derail liberal peacebuilding efforts, local-level peace and reconciliation efforts do not obviously or naturally trickle up into national peace agreements or spontaneous peace.²⁸ National elites often have vested interests in framing conflict as a local, bottom-up issue, with the goal of relegating peacebuilding initiatives to sub-national projects in order to prevent peacebuilding efforts from disrupting their control over key national processes. These efforts are abetted by well-meaning donors and implementers who brand activities as diverse as “rebuilding roads, constructing schools, training judges, providing assistance to refugee populations, building local courts, equipping police forces, providing seed funding for small businesses, establishing truth and reconciliation commissions, launching military attacks, developing taxation offices, and training leaders in conflict resolution techniques” as peacebuilding in an effort to show that what they are already doing also might potentially address local conflict drivers.²⁹ There is also the risk that in the uncertain political climate of a new power-sharing arrangement, otherwise limited in scope, “local” conflicts might be strategically amplified by national actors looking to destabilize or maintain the status quo. In other words, hybrid approaches as they are commonly understood may draw too sharp a line between national negotiations and actors and local dynamics to be addressed with traditional or customary practices, rather than seeing both as interconnected in complex and not always immediately visible ways.

This tension between liberal peacebuilding’s alleged neglect of local agency/empowerment and local peacebuilding’s potential blind spot around the relationship between national political dynamics and the goals/interests of local actors is especially apparent when we consider the challenges of defining the “local.” The critical, agency/empowerment version of peacebuilding’s “local turn” borrows heavily from related debates in the development and humanitarian fields that also emphasize the importance of local knowledge and local ownership as supplements to top-down, internationally led initiatives. But these fields’ efforts to localize their perspectives and activities face their own challenges, including a lack of certainty about the goals at play (i.e., is the point of localization to most efficiently target resources where they are needed or to center local actors even if they sometimes lack capacity to create sustainable change?).

As Barakat and Milton argue, “localization” in the wider development space is difficult to separate from a desire to break down institutional and practice-based silos in favor of horizontal approaches.³⁰ Logically, devolving resources, recognition, and agency down to local organizations and actors with an integrated, cross-sectoral view of the combined challenges and barriers to peace and development is one way to accomplish that goal. But it also leaves open difficult questions about what to do about the fact that many conflicts are driven not just by discrete local and national factors but complex international dynam-

28 Anita Ernstorfer, Diana Chigas, and Hannah Vaughan-Lee, “From Little to Large: When Does Peacebuilding Add Up?” *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 10, no. 1 (2015): 72–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080%2F15423166.2015.1009323>.

29 Susannah Campbell, *Global Governance and Local Peace: Accountability and Performance in International Peacebuilding* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 9-10.

30 Sultan Barakat and Sansom Milton, “Localisation Across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus,” *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 15, no. 2 (2020): 147–163, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1542316620922805>

ics (illicit arms and goods flows, for instance) that local actors may have little leverage over.³¹ Devolution also leaves open the question of who owns the failures of hybrid approaches and who is responsible for negotiating the best balance within a hybrid plan between national and local or grassroots and external actors. Partnering with and empowering local actors does not absolve INGOs and other external donors/partners if and when peacebuilding efforts fail or underachieve.

ROLE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS?

Today, most major international actors in the field support some sort of local peacebuilding as a component of their portfolio. They tend to have the resources and connections to support the implementation of local approaches, but it is far from clear what their best role is or how they can avoid (inadvertently or otherwise) inflicting harm.³² One approach, emerging out of research focused on INGOs, finds that international actors are most effective not when they take the lead but when they serve as “risk absorbers” that make it easier for other large donors to direct aid to local peacebuilders who lack the long organizational track record or administrative capacity that outside funders prefer for practical or regulatory reasons. Ideally, this intermediary, backstopping role lends credibility and logistical support to locally designed efforts without taking ownership or undermining local agency and provides a safety net for donors if local-level initiatives struggle or fail.³³

But even as external actors express support for local peacebuilding, they often find it challenging to actually implement effective local initiatives. For one, even when international intermediaries are in place, many donors still struggle to overcome their own institutional and security barriers to partnering with local actors in conflict zones. Perhaps biggest among these is that the accountability systems put in place by international and bilateral donors are often focused upwards—on ensuring the effective use of donor funds—rather than downwards—on ensuring accountability to local stakeholders. Building in such downward accountability often requires bending or even breaking rules initially intended to make projects more efficient and effective.³⁴ For instance, the most credible local potential partners in any given context may lack the resources or experience to meet donor criteria for monitoring and evaluation or accounting practices.³⁵ And the short, funding cycle-based timeframes that accompany many externally implemented initiatives may make it difficult for credible potential local peacebuilders who lack estab-

31 A point made extensively in the work of Gearoid Millar, for instance: Gearoid Millar, “Towards a Trans-Scalar Peace System: Challenging Complex Global Conflict Systems,” *Peacebuilding* 8, no. 3, (2020): 261-278, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2019.1634866>.

32 Well-known contributions to this debate include: Autesserre, Peaceland; Séverine Autesserre, *Global Governance and Local Peace: Accountability and Performance in International Peacebuilding* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Annika Björkdahl, Kristine Höglund, Gearoid Millar, Jair Van der Lijn, and Willemijn Verkoren, eds., *Peacebuilding and Friction: Global and Local Encounters in Post-conflict Societies* (London: Routledge, 2016); Oliver Richmond, *The Transformation of Peace* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005).

33 Jannie Lilja and Kristine Höglund, “The Role of the External in Local Peacebuilding: Enabling Action—Managing Risk,” *Global Governance* 24, no. 3 (2018): 411-430, <https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02403007>.

34 Campbell, *Global Governance and Local Peace*.

35 Carolyn Hayman, “Local First in Peacebuilding,” *Peace Review* 25, no. 1 (2013): 17–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2013.759756>.

lished organizational platforms to effectively mobilize and engage with external donors and partners on the necessary timeline.³⁶

Creating more institutional flexibility at the international level is important, but so is the kind of local knowledge-gathering and access to grassroots networks that can take donors and INGOs years to build. Without pre-existing local ties, finding and prioritizing representatives of specific demographic communities to participate in partnerships can be difficult.³⁷ Similarly, INGOs and bilateral aid agencies tend to display a preference for working with internationally oriented partners who share their basic assumptions, values, and priorities. But the same stances that make these potential partners attractive to donors are a double-edged sword when it comes to engaging many influential domestic actors who are interested in peace and development but fearful that they will be accompanied by the imposition of “Western” views on religion and gender, among other areas.³⁸ Determining how to best ease donor concerns around strict timeframes and accountability while encouraging partnerships with less conventional-looking local actors, either by engaging risk absorber intermediaries or some other way, is an important area for investment in further research and best practice-building.

MEASUREMENTS OF LOCAL PEACE

A key concern with the fuzziness of the “local” in local peace is the challenge of measuring and evaluating local peace. As Roger Mac Ginty has argued, the “technocratic turn” in peacebuilding emphasizes the importance of clear, standardized conflict analyses and outcome measurements in the field, both as a way of appearing neutral in politically charged conflict and post-conflict settings and in order to facilitate cross-case lesson-learning around programmatic best practices.³⁹ This standardization privileges indicators of peace and conflict intensity that are easy and affordable to measure or are directly related to assessments of peacebuilding programs rather than more contextual, localized approaches that center lived experiences of conflict and reconciliation. Such indicators often end up serving as auditing and compliance tools rather than meaningful evaluations of how much peacebuilding programs have contributed to actual peace.⁴⁰ The result is peacebuilding that emphasizes familiar technocratic responses such as state capacity building and good governance over bottom-up, local priorities.⁴¹

36 Timothy Donais, *Peacebuilding and Local Ownership: Post-Conflict Consensus-Building* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

37 Cedric de Coning, “Understanding Peacebuilding as Essentially Local,” *Stability* 2, no. 1 (2013): 1–6, <http://doi.org/10.5334/sta.as>.

38 This issue is explored in detail in the case of northern Nigeria in: Fatima Adamu, “A Double-Edged Sword: Challenging Women’s Oppression within Muslim Society in Northern Nigeria,” *Gender and Development* 7, no. 1 (1999): 56–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/741922934>. More broadly, see: Donais, *Peacebuilding and Local Ownership*.

39 Roger Mac Ginty, “Indicators+: A proposal for everyday peace indicators.” *Evaluation and Program Planning* 36, no. 1 (2013): 56–63, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2012.07.001>.

40 AnnJanette Rosga and Margaret L. Satterthwaite, “The trust in indicators: Measuring human rights,” *Berkeley Journal of International Law* 27, no. 2 (2009): 253–315, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1298540>.

41 Roger Mac Ginty, “Routine peace: Technocracy and peacebuilding.” *Cooperation and Conflict* 47, no. 3 (2012): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0010836712444825>.

These critiques have a point. Reliance on standardized technical measurements over context-dependent indicators can provide a false sense of accomplishment in conflict zones, as monitoring and evaluation criteria are met but conflict and instability remain.⁴² Likewise, standardized, national-level measurements can miss local conflict drivers and dynamics important for predicting future violence or measuring the success of national peacebuilding efforts.⁴³ And at worst, emphasizing national-level indicators or confusing easy-to-measure with rigor when evaluating program outcomes may actually lead to less effective programming that disempowers local communities in peacebuilding processes.⁴⁴ In this sense, the choice of how to measure (or even the choice not to measure) “local peace” can have a lasting impact on the relationships between peacebuilders and local actors.

What can be done better? The literature on local peace indicators suggests that these measurements are most useful when they emerge from the bottom up, focusing on locally meaningful units (villages or neighborhoods), indicators/measures of peace and conflict generated from lived experience, and findings that are available and useful to local actors. Mac Ginty’s own examples include measurements of “the resumption of cultural practices that declined during conflict” and “a decline in sectarian graffiti,” among others.⁴⁵ This approach addresses many of the above concerns but also raises some of its own. For one, it tends to assume that there is an unproblematic, uncontested local to consult with and draw from in terms of identifying locally meaningful peace indicators rather than a fractured and fragmented terrain full of actors with competing interests and complex ties to national and international conflict actors. For another, it offers little guidance as to how we might integrate national and local indicators. Micro-level measures of “local peace” divorced from global and national conflict contexts are no less a barrier to effectively measuring the progress of peacebuilding than those that ignore the perils of standardization and easy quantification. New and emerging approaches, including “adaptive peacebuilding” and “complexity-oriented monitoring and evaluation,” offer a possible way out of these challenges by emphasizing the need to embed “collaborative mechanisms” that allow local, national, and international actors to consider program monitoring and evaluation outcomes and make collective decisions about to “discontinue, expand, or adjust” peacebuilding efforts in an ongoing manner.⁴⁶

42 MacGinty, “Indicators+: A proposal for everyday peace indicators.”

43 See, for instance: Willem F.M. De Vries, “Meaningful measures: Indicators on progress, progress on Indicators,” *International Statistical Review* 69, no. 2 (2001): 313–331, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1403818>; Timothy Donais, “Empowerment or imposition? Dilemmas of local ownership on post-conflict peacebuilding processes,” *Peace and Change* 34, no. 1 (2009): 3–26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0130.2009.00531.x>.

44 Martha Caddell and Helen Yanacopulos, “Knowing but not knowing: Conflict, development and denial,” *Conflict, Security and Development* 6, no. 4 (2006): 557–579, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678800601066561>.

45 MacGinty, “Indicators+: A proposal for everyday peace indicators,” 46.

46 See, for instance: Cedric de Coning, “Adapting Peacebuilding,” *International Affairs* 94, no 2 (2018): 310, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix251>; Charles T. Hunt, “Avoiding Perplexity: Complexity-Oriented Monitoring and Evaluation for UN Peace Operations,” in *Complexity Thinking for Peacebuilding Practice and Evaluation*, eds. Emery Brusset, Cedric de Coning, and Bryn Hughes (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 79–109.

CHALLENGES OF FINDING THE “LOCAL” IN LOCAL PEACEBUILDING IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Ambiguity about what the “local” is and where it is located creates challenges for international actors who want to support local peacebuilding processes. This section builds on the above analyses by identifying some key recurring patterns in the problems local peacebuilding initiatives face in sub-Saharan Africa. Before doing that, however, it is useful to reflect on some of the most important assumptions external and internal actors bring to local peacebuilding initiatives in the region.

Many policy analyses and guides to hybrid and local peacebuilding in Sub-Saharan Africa present these efforts as virtually synonymous with the engagement (or modification or revival) of traditional practices and institutions.⁴⁷ There are several reasons why this is a problem. One is the assumption that these types of practices possess a certain inherent and broad-based legitimacy. This may be true at times, but the complexity and pluralism in most African communities means that any effort to apply traditional institutions or practices beyond the most micro-level often create their own conflicts around whose “local” merits recognition.

Another reason is the claim, common particularly in African academic circles, that political conflicts on the continent are not really about religion or ethnic identities but are instead instrumental, elite-driven efforts to capture an otherwise illegitimate state. These dynamics are a legacy of colonial institutions that stoked social division and rejected the empowerment of local voices and knowledge and can only be reversed by restoring or rebuilding social solidarity around locally meaningful values and practices.⁴⁸ There’s considerable truth to this basic analysis. A large literature on ethnic conflict in Africa finds that much of it is driven precisely by the strategic calculations of elites attempting to build durable political coalitions in the context of weak institutions and a political economy in which access to resources depends on controlling the state.⁴⁹ The identity cleavages at play in most countries were indelibly shaped

47 Among many others, see: Smock, *Creative Approaches to Managing Conflict in Africa*, 16-22.

48 For instance, see: Tim Murithi, “African Approaches to Building Peace and Social Solidarity,” *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 6, no. 2 (2007): 9–33, <https://doi.org/10.4314/ajcr.v6i2.39402>.

49 Broadly, see: Andreas Wimmer, “Who Owns the State? Understanding Ethnic Conflict in Post-Colonial Societies,” *Nations and Nationalism* 3, no. 4 (1997): 631–666, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1354-5078.1997.00631.x>. Among the many good illustrative country case studies, see three from Nigeria: Larry Diamond, “Cleavage, Conflict, and Anxiety in the Second Nigerian Republic,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 20, no. 4 (1982): 629–668, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022278x00000288>; Brandon Kendhammer, “Talking Ethnic but Hearing Multi-Ethnic: The Peoples’ Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria and Durable Multi-Ethnic Parties in the Midst of Violence,” *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 48, no. 1 (2010): 48–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14662040903444509>; Christian Chukwue-buka Ezeibe and Okey Marcellus Ikeanyibe, “Ethnic Politics, Hate Speech, and Access to Political Power in Nigeria,” *Africa Today* 63, no. 4 (2017): 65–83, <https://doi.org/10.2979/africatoday.63.4.04>.

by the dynamics of colonial rule, including the introduction of new political and legal regimes of inequality that are reflected in post-colonial conflict dynamics today.⁵⁰

The challenge in turning the insight that ethnic conflict is often instigated by political entrepreneurs into a framework for local peacebuilding is similar to the difficulty of adopting traditional mechanisms in plural communities. Recognizing why elites mobilize ethnic and religious identities and how that mobilization serves as a conflict driver is not the same as addressing the underlying issues—including political/economic circumstances and institutional weaknesses—that make such a strategy so attractive in the first place. As Rothchild and Roeder argued almost 20 years ago, the default strategy for security and peace in divided societies—power-sharing, both at the national and local levels—often incentivizes future mobilization along familiar cleavages.⁵¹ In the context of local peacebuilding all of the following examples point to the limits of “local” efforts to share power or build social cohesion in the absence of wider-scale success in changing core political incentive structures.

The next four sections each present a country case-study illustrating one key challenge in adapting the concept of the “local” into peacebuilding efforts. None of the cases represent clear stories of failure (or success) of local peacebuilding and they cannot contain every single difficulty or problem an international (or a “local”) peacebuilder might conceivably encounter. Rather, each highlights a common kind of challenge or pitfall emerging out of the tensions discussed in previous sections. The first, which examines a prominent “local” peacebuilding organization in post-civil war Sierra Leone, emphasizes how difficult it can be to reconcile competing definitions of “local” in practice. The second, which looks at the “victor’s peace” in post-war Côte d’Ivoire, points to the difficulty in drawing a clear distinction between the “local” and the “national” when the two are politically linked by actors bridging both spaces. The third, South Sudan, argues that decentralizing power down to local governments is only effective when local actors and interests are also incorporated into national-level peacebuilding. And the fourth, Burundi, is a cautionary tale about how political competition over which local peacebuilding institutions merit official recognition leads to the exclusion of marginalized voices.

Sierra Leone: when definitions of “local” clash

In post-war Sierra Leone, most of the country’s most visible peacebuilding programs have tried to incorporate local elements as a means of building legitimacy for their efforts. Unsurprisingly, what these efforts have meant by “local” has varied widely, from the physical spaces they have occupied to their relationship with local actors and their invocation of traditional and customary practices. Not all of these efforts have translated into support and participation from Sierra Leoneans. Even some of the more suc-

50 For instance, see: Mahmood Mamdani, “Indirect Rule, Civil Society, and Ethnicity: The African Dilemma,” *Social Justice* 23, no. 1/2 (63-64) (1996): 145–150, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29766931>; Robert Blanton, T. David Mason, and Brian Athow, “Colonial Style and Post-Colonial Ethnic Conflict in Africa,” *Journal of Peace Research* 38, no. 4 (July 1, 2001): 473–491, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02F0022343301038004005>.

51 Donald Rothchild and Philip Roeder, “Dilemmas of State Building in Divided Societies,” in *Sustainable Peace: Power and Democracy After Civil Wars*, eds. Donald Rothchild and Philip Roeder (Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 13.

successful programs have generated concerns about how effectively they engaged locally defined needs and empowered local communities. These concerns reflect that what looks “locally” traditional, legitimate, and authentic to an international donor audience may not be experienced in the same way in communities recovering from conflict.

On one side of these dynamics is the suite of essentially liberal peacebuilding programs initiated by a combination of international actors (most notably the United Nations) and the Sierra Leonean government near the end of the formal conflict in 2002, including a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program, the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL), and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). All made some efforts to incorporate “local” elements into their practice, but the TRC especially struggled with the tensions of deciding what the “local” would mean to a process conceived externally and based on practices developed elsewhere. As Rosalind Shaw argued, the TRC’s core challenge was the assumption that the model of “pain and the verbalization of truth . . . [as a] . . . path to healing” embodied by public testimony was universal and could be readily adapted to local realities by doing little more than translating its messaging into the local Krio language, drawing vague parallels between its processes and local traditional practices, and offering to include chiefs and community leaders.⁵² In essence, what the TRC saw as “local” was simply gathering testimony across the country and focusing it on individuals who had participated or suffered violence rather than on prosecuting leaders/elites. As a result, the process suffered from relatively low levels of public engagement. Even international human rights organizations were skeptical that the final product contributed much to healing and a full accounting of the violence.⁵³

On the local/hybrid side were organizations conceived and run by Sierra Leoneans, such as Fambul Tok, the local flagship alternative to the TRC. Fambul Tok’s programming has centered on its bonfire ceremony that the organization has described as based on local culture and traditions and providing a space that empowers ordinary people to discuss the war and its consequences openly and critically. As they acknowledge, the bonfire ceremony is not modeled on any particular community’s specific tradition and is meant to be flexible to local context while also recognizably “local.” For those who see it as successful, this grassroots flexibility is Fambul Tok’s key strength. It was able to gain support among local chiefs and build a sense of legitimacy in many of the communities where it operates—often for months prior to staging an event, with operatives living and working locally—even as it supported individuals to come forward and criticize those same chiefs.⁵⁴

Critics, on the other hand, have emphasized how Fambul Tok—which has been funded primarily by a U.S. foundation called Catalyst for Peace—performed “localness” in ways that reflect international assumptions about tradition and local legitimacy, while glossing over local-local tensions. In particular, Fambul Tok framed its efforts as re-establishing a kind of social harmony and cohesion that had existed before

52 Rosalind Shaw, “Memory Frictions: Localizing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone,” *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1, no. 2 (2007): 191, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijm008>.

53 International Crisis Group, *Sierra Leone: The State of Security and Governance*, September 2, 2003, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/sierra-leone/sierra-leone-state-security-and-governance>.

54 Andrew Iliff, “Root and Branch: Discourses of ‘Tradition’ in Grassroots Transitional Justice,” *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 6, no. 2 (2012): 263-265, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijj001>.

the war, “imply[ing] that old traditions were somehow better and re-introducing them is necessary for building peaceful communities.” They stage-managed their bonfire ceremonies in order to mask what is often widespread local reluctance to speak publicly about these issues and recreate existing community power hierarchies that have historically marginalized women, youth, and local minorities.⁵⁵

While many Sierra Leoneans approve of and support Fambul Tok, the above critique also reflects real long-term local dynamics. In many pre-war communities, assessments of the credibility and fairness of local authorities and justice practices varied widely. Even at their best, these authorities were often seen as a compromise—perhaps better connected to local realities than national institutions but still “expensive [and] unpredictable,” especially for those (such as young men) without much traditional status.⁵⁶ They were also badly disrupted by the war, where local leaders attacked and killed over old local grievances, and resources previously provided by the national government (salaries, for instance) became unavailable. Fambul Tok’s framework depended on the perception that these institutions represented most Sierra Leoneans in rural communities, but other research has found that after the war many of the most vulnerable members of these communities (women and youth, in particular) were skeptical of restoring “traditional” practices and wanted to create more egalitarian structures instead.⁵⁷ Fambul Tok’s formula of engagement may have been effective at providing access to truth and reconciliation in communities poorly served by the TRC, yet it did not reflect the complexities of the “local” across time and space.

Côte d’Ivoire: when “local” is also national

In Côte d’Ivoire, local peacebuilding has been marked by two distinct eras. In the first, during the civil war (2002-2011), international attention was directed primarily at national-level political negotiations in search of a power-sharing settlement. However, at the local level there were a number of small, bottom-up initiatives in both rural and urban communities designed to ease tensions amidst violence and address conflict stemming from daily, local conflict drivers. Some initiatives—particularly in rural areas, where land tenure and use were the major local conflict drivers—involved traditional leaders, while others saw NGOs and even agricultural laborers take on important roles. Locally focused efforts generally aimed at resolving local land disputes or providing resettlement opportunities for workers who had been expelled by militias, along with leading symbolic reconciliation activities based in local cultural practices. In urban areas, religious leaders and organizations were often central in facilitating inter-group tolerance and peace activities. In both cases, the goal of these initiatives was not

55 Laura S. Martin “Deconstructing the Local in Peacebuilding Practice: Representations and Realities of Fambul Tok in Sierra Leone,” *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (February 1, 2021): 393, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1825071>.

56 Steven Archibald and Paul Richards, “Converts to Human Rights? Popular Debate about War and Justice in Rural Central Sierra Leone,” *Africa* 72, no. 3 (2002): 344, <https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2002.72.3.339>.

57 *Ibid.*

necessarily to scale up to national peace bargaining but rather to carve out local “zones of peace” that insulated local communities from the wider ongoing conflict.⁵⁸

The second era, which followed Laurent Gbagbo’s arrest in April 2011 and Alassane Ouattara’s presidency, was essentially a “victor’s peace” in which one local side of a long-running conflict was able to impose a political settlement. As Giulia Piccolino argued, this context re-shaped the dynamics of local peacebuilding efforts away from the “tension between the liberal peace promoted by international policy makers and a local dimension identified with customary practices and identity politics,” described by the “local turn” literature, and towards the national government defining the terms of how local spaces and actors participate in peacemaking.⁵⁹ The result, she argues, is that the Ouattara government co-opted the language and programming around social cohesion pushed by the international community during the initial peace process for its own ends.

What were those ends? As Piccolino argues, the “zones of peace” efforts were initially supported by the language of “social cohesion” and “peace and reduction of tensions between different communities” (the official charge of the Programme National de Réconciliation et de Cohésion Sociale [PNRCS], the government’s marquee local peacebuilding program). But under the Ouattara administration, they were instead deployed to deflect real tensions at the national level around the government’s commitment (or lack thereof) to democratization and its marginalization of Gbagbo supporters in favor of a focus on local conflicts that were putatively disconnected from these wider dynamics. The effect was that efforts at building durable social cohesion that addressed drivers of conflict (including land tenure) were undermined because many local actors possessed unresolved national-level grievances around the Ouattara government’s imposed peace.⁶⁰

Both the international community and the Ouattara government’s idealized versions of social cohesion as a thing that can be achieved through local engagement and reconciliation runs up against the realities of an uncertain and increasingly authoritarian political space.⁶¹ Thorny questions of security, land reform, and political ambition have consistently gotten in the way of efforts to achieve greater stability and prevented serious reckoning with the legacy of war-era violence by all sides.⁶² This problem has persisted even as the government has funneled resources into “local” programming that generally bypasses the grassroots efforts of the war years in favor of projects with a more tightly controlled agenda. Ultimately, Côte d’Ivoire highlights the vulnerability of local peacebuilding in the context of military victories and/or regimes with authoritarian tendencies. It points to the inadequacy of a local

58 Jeremy Allouche and Paul Jackson, “Zones of Peace and Local Peace Processes in Côte d’Ivoire and Sierra Leone,” *Peacebuilding* 7, no. 1 (2019): 71–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2018.1491276>.

59 For a wider comparative analysis of how domestic elites can capture the peacebuilding process in post-conflict settings and use it to reinforce a “neopatrimonial political order,” see: Naazneen Barma, *The Peacebuilding Puzzle: Political Order in Post-Conflict States* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

60 Piccolino, “Local Peacebuilding in a Victor’s Peace.”

61 Bruno Charbonneau, “Côte d’Ivoire : possibilités et limites d’une réconciliation.” *Afrique contemporaine* 245, no. 1 (2013): 111–129, <https://doi.org/10.3917/afco.245.0111>.

62 International Crisis Group, *Côte d’Ivoire’s Great West: Key to Reconciliation*, January 28, 2014, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/c%3%B4te-divoire/cote-d-ivoire-s-great-west-key-reconciliation>.

focus in the absence of an effective national-level peace and reconciliation program, even when local conflict drivers were central to the original conflict.

South Sudan: when “local” is not bottom-up

The dynamics of local peacebuilding in post-war South Sudan are inseparable from the grievances and international appeals mobilized by the South Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) during the 1983-2005 conflict. Having cast itself as a local force fighting for liberation from a violent, authoritarian, and exploitative central government in Khartoum, the SPLM/A’s post-war agenda intentionally emphasized its commitment to local self-government as a peacebuilding project.⁶³ The new government’s plan to engage in a form of “decentralized state building” that aimed to devolve power to local communities and decision-makers and “safe-guard the right to self-rule” amidst a deeply divided ethnic landscape earned a massive outpouring of financial and technical support from the international community and considerable initial optimism.⁶⁴

The argument in favor of “peace through devolved government”⁶⁵ rested on two key arguments. The first was that after decades of violence and misrule from Khartoum, any post-war government in Juba would lack much of the needed administrative capacity to govern effectively, let alone to build sustainable peace in communities with long histories of violence and mistrust. The SPLM/A had “never succeeded in developing a participatory civilian party structure,” and could not count on being a source of grassroots organizing for peace.⁶⁶ The second was that South Sudan’s ethnic fragmentation and legacy of indirect colonial rule left it with a patchwork of local governance and conflict resolution mechanisms, few of which might plausibly scale up beyond a single community or region. There were few (if any) unifying “social norms of collective action” or “anchors of cultural unity” and very mixed experiences of “traditional” institutions serving as a source of accountability.⁶⁷ As the argument went, this combination of a lack of central government/party resources and historical fragmentation called for serious investment in decentralized, bottom-up institutions that could build social cohesion and preserve the peace.

Almost immediately following formal independence in 2011, however, the SPLM/A began to walk back some of the most significant aspects of the original decentralization plan, providing Juba with additional centralized authority.⁶⁸ These changes were justified by concerns that fully committing to decentralization might fuel tribalism by creating new resource and power struggles at the local level. This fear had already played out in 2010 with an armed rebellion in Jonglei State focused on the perceived marginaliza-

63 Hirblinger and Simons, “The Good, the Bad, and the Powerful,” 6.

64 Sara Simone, “Post-conflict Decentralization: Dynamics of Land and Power in Unity State – South Sudan,” *UNISCI Discussion Papers* 33 (2014): 35-56, https://doi.org/10.5209/rev_UNIS.2013.n33.44814.

65 Hirblinger and Simons. “The Good, the Bad, and the Powerful,” 6.

66 Kate Almqvist Knopf, *Fragility and State-Society Relations in South Sudan* (Washington, D.C.: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2013), 15, <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ARP04EN-Fragility-and-State-Society-Relations-in-South-Sudan.pdf>.

67 *Ibid*, 9.

68 Luka Kuol, “The federalism-decentralisation-peace nexus in South Sudan,” in *The Struggle for South Sudan: Challenges of Security and State Formation*, eds. Sarah Logan and Luka Kuol (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 82-102, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781788316361.ch-005>.

tion of the Murle community and in 2013 when Riek Machar’s removal as vice president helped trigger mass violence between Dinka and Nuer soldiers that soon spread into wider ethnic strife. Over the next half-decade, violence and insecurity ebbed and flowed while the central government did little to encourage national- or local-level accountability mechanisms.

As Andreas Hirblinger and Claudia Simons have argued, the SPLA and the international community’s initial confidence in “build[ing] peace through devolved governance” was rooted in an overly optimistic reading of the capacity and legitimacy of local elites. As in Côte d’Ivoire, there is a small but important track record of local, bottom-up peacebuilding led by a combination of religious (the South Sudan Council of Churches’ Action Plan for Peace, Kuron Peace Village) and traditional (the Wunlit people-to-people dialogue in 1999) institutions that have periodically succeeded in bringing about local-level reconciliation and security.⁶⁹ But romantic notions of “traditional authorities as ‘peace-makers’” and cooperation between chieftaincies and elected local government cooperation soon gave way to a messier reality in which devolving power and resources to local elites intensified local conflicts, leading to violence and demands for even smaller local administrative units.⁷⁰ Instead of investing in local grassroots organizing and greater electoral participation, the SPLM/A turned to greater top-down control, substituting loyal appointed caretaker governments for elected local officials.⁷¹ Paradoxically, the SPLM/A’s handling of decentralization as a local peacebuilding strategy actually marginalized many of the grassroots resources that had a track-record of building social cohesion and fueled continued ethnic conflict.⁷²

Burundi: when “local” is exclusionary

Both during and after the Burundian Civil War (1993-2005), international and NGO peacebuilding efforts have largely focused on building and maintaining an ethnic power-sharing system intended to defuse potential political/resource conflicts. As Devon Curtis has argued, this process was never exactly “liberal” —international actors adopted a “stabilization first” approach over promoting markets and democratic elections as panaceas to violence. Many Burundian political actors saw their participation in the peace process as an opportunity to extract concessions that would allow them to enrich themselves and their supporters. The biggest beneficiaries of the process were Pierre Nkurunziza and his National Council for the Defense of Democracy-Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) party, which won the 2005 post-war elections despite having rejected the 1998-2000 Arusha Agreement process, and continuing their violence until a 2003 ceasefire agreement won them a greater role in the national power-sharing bargain.⁷³

69 Emmaculate Asige Liaga and Cori Wielenga, “Social Cohesion From the Top-Down or Bottom-Up? The Cases of South Sudan and Burundi,” *Peace & Change* 45, no. 3 (2020): 404-405, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pech.12424>.

70 Matthew Pritchard and Aly Verjee, “South Sudan: From 10 States to 32 States and Back Again: What lessons can be taken from South Sudan’s experience of boundary and state management?,” *United States Institute of Peace*, March 1, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/03/south-sudan-10-states-32-states-and-back-again>.

71 Hirblinger and Simons, “The Good, the Bad, and the Powerful,” 8.

72 Liaga and Wielenga, “Social Cohesion From the Top-Down or Bottom-Up?,” 407.

73 Devon Curtis, “The international peacebuilding paradox: Power sharing and post-conflict governance in Burundi,” *African Affairs* 112, no. 446 (2013): 72-91, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/ads080>.

These power-sharing dynamics have loomed large over post-conflict efforts to rebuild social cohesion and secure peace at the local level. As in South Sudan, local and international assessments of the country's history of conflict emphasized Burundi's legacy of centralized authority and the insufficient representation of local knowledge and voice in government. Post-war donor assistance focused heavily on investments in civil society and support for local-level governance initiatives. But while there have been a plethora of innovative efforts to craft local peace, civil society space in Burundi remains restricted, and the Nkurunziza government (prior to his death in 2020) consistently sought to shrink the space where civil society groups that might critique the government or revisit the CNDD-FDD's war-era conduct could operate.⁷⁴ The result has been a persistent struggle to define local peacebuilding and conflict resolution institutions in terms of their relationship to national political legacies and parties and to marginalize those that do not represent the CNDD-FDD's interest in maintaining power.

The most important site of conflict around definitions of local and local legitimacy are the *bashingantahe*, a local pre-colonial conflict resolution institution that operated across the country. Historically made up of a group of local notables possessing "judicial, moral and political authority" separate from the aristocracy and royal court,⁷⁵ the *bashingantahe* operated as a community-centered "corrective to local administrative authorities" who may have had little local knowledge or connection.⁷⁶ Colonial legal and administrative interventions simultaneously co-opted and sapped much of the independence and authority from the *bashingantahe*. As a result, the *bashingantahe* played little role in facilitating transitional justice or reconciliation following the mass violence episodes in 1972 and 1988. Their initial sources of legitimacy sapped, the *bashingantahe* were re-configured and re-introduced from above by decree in 1997 and proposed as a possible peacebuilding institution in the 1998 transitional constitution.⁷⁷

Following the Arusha Agreement in 2000, the UNDP funded a major local/international collaborative effort to fully revive the *bashingantahe*, identifying communities where the institution and its members still functioned and helping launch a new National Council of the *Bashingantahe* in 2002 with formal NGO status.⁷⁸ But despite—or perhaps because of—their strong initial international support, the *bashingantahe*'s empowerment faced significant opposition from the CNDD-FDD, that saw them as both associated with the political order they had fought to overthrow and a barrier to their own consolidation of local power. Instead, the Nkurunziza government threw its weight behind the *conseils collinaires*, a new level of local elected government established, also with international assistance, in 2005. The CNDD-FDD has consistently argued that by virtue of their association with the previous Tutsi-led regimes the *bashingantahe* no longer reflect real tradition in the local communities, and that

74 Amnesty International, "Locked Down: Burundi: A Shrinking of Political Space," July 29, 2014, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AFR16/002/2014/en/>.

75 Bert Ingelaere and Dominik Kohlhagen, "Situating Social Imaginaries in Transitional Justice: The *Bushingantahe* in Burundi," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 6, no. 1 (March 1, 2012): 43, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijr033>.

76 Thomas Laely, "Peasants, Local Communities, and Central Power in Burundi," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 35, no. 4 (1997): 407, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022278x97002590>.

77 Ingelaere and Kohlhagen, "Situating Social Imaginaries in Transitional Justice," 44.

78 *Ibid.*

the local councils (which have tended to be dominated electorally by the CNDD-FDD) better represent the experiences and needs of local communities today.⁷⁹

The politicization of competing local peacebuilding mechanisms has had real consequences for their ability to function effectively. The state's marginalization of the *bashingantahe* (both legally and politically) has reduced the range of their ability to intervene. They depend increasingly on their status as an NGO and on their adoption of international rights and democracy language rather than on their traditional authority for their legitimacy with external donors and partners.⁸⁰ By challenging the international donor community's definition of local as traditional and substituting its own preferred version of local representation with the *conseils collinaires*, the CNDD-FDD has been able to further restrict the space available for critical or marginalized local voices. The result is a local peacebuilding system that pits competing versions of the local against each other to the exclusion of most.

LESSONS LEARNED AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As this report demonstrates, local peacebuilding is important but far from easy to get right. For policy-makers and external donors/partners looking to support local peacebuilding initiatives and programs, we offer four important lessons learned, each with its own recommendations:

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

Despite considerable consensus that “local” matters for peacebuilding, there are numerous competing definitions within the field of what “local” means. This might seem at first glance like an academic problem, but these competing ideas go along with different understandings of the goal of local peacebuilding programs and activities. **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.**

Nor can the problem of these differing definitions be wished away by pointing out (rightly) that all local peacebuilding is necessarily context-specific and that no particular set of programs or projects should be expected to transfer automatically to a new community, country, or region. More than just a matter of context specificity, confusion about whether local peacebuilding is intended to address specific sub-national conflict drivers or to empower local voices and actors creates confusion about whether or not local peacebuilding efforts meet their goals. At worst, this confusion contributes to the idea that local

79 Hirblinger and Simons. “The Good, the Bad, and the Powerful.”

80 Rowan Popplewell, “Civil Society, Hybridity and Peacebuilding in Burundi: Questioning Authenticity,” *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 129–146, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1432347>.

engagement is just another organizational box to check rather than something that can be done more or less well on the basis of a clear assessment of conflict drivers and community needs.

Often, **the solution to this definitional problem is setting clear organizational priorities based on localized knowledge about a given conflict setting.** A well-developed, bottom-up understanding of conflict drivers and key actors (including when and how they are embedded in national and international-level conflict dynamics and political structures) can clarify the goals of a local peacebuilding intervention before it begins and make the outcomes more readily accessible. **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.** Nonetheless, developing localized knowledge that incorporates these competing interests is a necessary part of the solution to the problem of “local” peacebuilding programs that do not contribute to sustainable, long-term peace.

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

Those who fund and manage local peacebuilding programs want to standardize their monitoring and evaluation (M&E) indicators and procedures as much as possible. M&E is important for accountability (upwards and downwards), particularly for complex, multi-initiative programs operating in many locations. The complicating factor is that when “peace” and “local” have competing, context-specific meanings, standardization creates as many difficulties as it does advantages. **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.**

Going further, organizations that do not let their definitions of local peace differ across time and place are more likely to be misled (intentionally or accidentally) into believing that programs that perform stylized, simplistic ideas of “local” (shallow representations of custom and tradition that do not reflect community-level variations or incorporate marginalized and dissenting voices) are more effective than they are. M&E requirements and assessment tools that privilege certain kinds of local partners (e.g., with history of international funding, fluent in the language and assumptions of liberal peacebuilding) over those operating with less familiar institutional structures may have a downstream impact on programs’ abilities to address unfamiliar or highly local conflict drivers that are not easily understood or measured with standard tools. **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.**

Similarly, as the “adaptive peacebuilding” literature suggests, holistic evaluations of local peacebuilding are easier if the programming itself reflects the complexity of the problem and setting. Running many smaller, locally supported programs and evaluating them frequently as part of an “iterative process of

structured adaptation” that involves locally-led decision-making may be more effective than large, big-tent programs including dozens of discrete activities and hundreds of benchmarks and targets.⁸¹

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

As the previous recommendations make clear, local peacebuilding does not need to exclude external actors, but it does require them to make careful, locally informed decisions. The literature points to the value of external donors and partners who can absorb risk, allowing for partnerships with local partners who may lack familiar organizational structures but are well-placed to identify and serve locally defined needs. To accomplish this, **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.** Security and accountability concerns are understandable and should continue to play a role in decision-making, but **the goal should always be to find ways to make partnerships happen.**

On a somewhat different note, it is also important that external actors take advantage of their own positionality in the peacebuilding ecosystem to identify and help manage supra-local issues. **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.** Especially in authoritarian spaces, external donors and partners will need to be aware of the challenges local actors face attempting to work outside of officially supported or informally endorsed traditional or cultural peacebuilding frameworks, that do double-duty with efforts to secure the current regime’s preferred status quo. 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.***

The promise of hybrid peacebuilding is obvious.⁸² By aligning proven strategies and smart theories of change from a variety of peacemaking frameworks, peacebuilders can improve outcomes and empower previously marginalized voices. The reality is more challenging. **Evidence that 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.**

What’s the best way forward? **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.** This does not mean shifting all resources to the micro-community level or working only on bottom-up or grassroots programs to the detriment of national peace bargains. **The best hybrid peace models are attentive to local-national and local-local connections and relationships and are strategic**

⁸¹ de Coning, “Adaptive Peacebuilding,” 310.

⁸² Iwara, *Hybrid Peacebuilding Approaches in Africa*.

in how they bridge those spaces. They empower local actors and peacemakers without ignoring their embeddedness in national (and international) conflict dynamics and see hybrid peacemaking as a flexible model rather than a full-blown alternative to the old way of doing things.

CONCLUSION

Local peacebuilding is a crucial component of creating durable, sustainable peace in post-conflict communities. But as easy as it seems to identify the “local,” a review of the existing research suggests that there is considerable confusion among peacebuilders when it comes to what and where the “local” really is and why peacebuilding needs to focus on it. Competing goals and priorities, logistical and monitoring and evaluation challenges, and the inseparability of local, national, and international conflict dynamics all make a simple definition of the “local” in local peacebuilding elusive.

At its core, what makes local peacebuilding effective is not simply that it targets sub-national drivers of conflict, nor that it empowers local actors. Rather, it is that it builds on local knowledge and assessments of conflict and identifies and works towards meeting locally defined needs. As can be observed in the case-studies, all sub-nationally oriented peacebuilding programs genuinely rely on local knowledge and focus on local needs, and not all programs that are owned by local actors account for the diversity of local voices and needs. External donors and partners need to be wary of their own assumptions—including romanticized ideas of traditional practices as an always-legitimate alternative to the work of outside organizations—and be flexible towards their partners to effectively target and support local peacebuilding efforts and avoid unintended harm. These cautions are especially important in authoritarian contexts, where local peace efforts may subvert the need for national-level reform.

The critical eye that this report directs towards its local peacebuilding case-studies does not mean that such efforts are bound to fail. Rather, it points to the complicated realities of an idea that has sometimes been seen as a surefire alternative to liberal peacebuilding models that failed to adapt to local contexts. Further research on local peacebuilding is necessary to provide a clearer sense of what actually works, not by necessarily identifying universal best practices but by clarifying when and under what circumstances these competing definitions of the “local” are most effective.

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