



Locally-Led Peacebuilding

Policy Brief

Locally-Led Peacebuilding: From Policy to Action

This policy brief outlines the importance of LLPB programming, identifies best practices for working to advance LLPB, and provides recommendations to the Biden Administration, Donors, and Practitioners for its meaningful implementation.

Introduction

The concept of [locally-led development](#) has been gaining traction in recent years. While some progress has been made, significant cultural, operational, and policy challenges remain and require a tectonic shift in donor culture and operations to overcome existing barriers. If donors are serious about implementing locally-led peacebuilding, which is vital to reducing and preventing conflict and building sustainable peace, then donors must implement operational and cultural reforms.

What is locally-led development?

It is not a single approach, but a range of ways donors, partners, and communities shift decision-making power and program responsibility to local actors. While local leadership is vital in all sectors, peacebuilding is more effective when locally-led, as local peacebuilders are critical to understanding the needs and values of communities impacted by conflict, violence, and fragility. LLPB requires the people and communities most affected by conflict to have the principal authority and influence over the strategy, implementation, evaluation, and resource allocation in peacebuilding interventions. Local communities are well-positioned to develop sustainable, pragmatic, and creative solutions. Notably, locally-led does not only include civil society, as

governments, academia, and religious institutions are also critical to achieve successful implementation.

It's been tried before, but gains have been modest. While gains have been modest for the locally-led agenda, bright spots exist. In the last few years, bilateral and multilateral donors have adopted laws and policies that call for locally-led development and peacebuilding, including the [Global Fragility Act](#), the [United Nations Sustaining Peace Agenda](#), the [Women, Peace, and Security Act](#), the UN Sustaining Peace [Agenda](#), and the [World Bank Group Strategy for Fragility,](#)

[Conflict, and Violence](#). Concurrently, private donors are making [considerable strides](#) because they can take on more risks due to less restrictive procurement rules and the ability to provide unrestricted and core funding. However, these laws, policies, and initiatives have not significantly moved the needle on this agenda to date.

One of the most significant challenges to advance locally-led development and peacebuilding centers around donor procurement mechanisms. Procurement processes are burdensome for local organizations to navigate due to complex application



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processes that require a strong capacity in proposal development, monitoring and evaluation, and financial management. Many donors are risk-averse, and there is skepticism that local actors have the requisite ability to be accountable and implement programming effectively.

Political barriers also prevent successful implementation of policies and laws seeking to advance LLPB. The international community and donors must acknowledge when their policies toward countries run counter to the values of LLPB, such as when they support governments and security forces responsible for violating human rights and closing civic space.

What will it take? Effectively implementing LLPB will require donors to undertake a [major culture shift](#) and an overhaul of their procurement systems, including developing less

burdensome, flexible, and longer-term funding cycles, improving accessibility to funding, and targeting outreach towards local organizations to increase their knowledge and use of existing resources and funding. Donors will also have to invest in local organizations.

While the goal of LLPB is to move more financial assistance, decision-making power, and program responsibility to local organizations, it should not be misconstrued as deploying a zero-sum strategy that pits international and local organizations against each other. Donors must address the inequity of financing models between international and local organizations, while also acknowledging and supporting the critical role of international organizations in international development and peacebuilding. Peacebuilding strategies must employ both a “top-down and bottom-up” approach that links local-level

peace efforts to national, regional, or international efforts seeking systemic change, and international CSOs are integral actors to this strategy.

What is the way forward? LLPB is [essential](#) to preventing and managing violent conflict and building sustainable peace in conflict affected and fragile states. The [Alliance for Peacebuilding](#) and its members are working to ensure successful implementation of the locally-led donor policies and laws. This policy brief outlines the importance of LLPB and identifies opportunities and challenges for donors and implementing partners and provides recommendations to advance LLPB. While this policy brief focuses on the peacebuilding sector, these recommendations are also applicable to international development and humanitarian assistance.

The Importance of Locally-Led Peacebuilding

[LLPB](#) is critical to understanding the needs and values of communities impacted by conflict, violence, and fragility, and recognizes that local solutions and participatory, inclusive processes are fundamental to preventing and reducing violent conflict and building sustainable peace. LLPB is distinct from locally implemented programming, wherein outside donors and international implementers design and fund the programs, but local actors and organizations manage and facilitate activities or pass-through funding to local organizations.

Sustainable peace relies on the [institutionalization](#) of peacebuilding efforts by local actors. [Research](#) and [case studies](#) consistently demonstrate peacebuilding is more effective when locally-led and includes top-down and bottom-up approaches. For example, in Sudan in 2017, the deterioration of farmer-herder relations gave rise to the formation of a local peace committee, which held dialogues and [produced an agreement](#) between the conflict affected groups. Within six months, the agreement [created](#) a decrease in land infringements and violence and increased peaceful dispute-resolution mechanisms. In [Timor Leste](#), peacebuilding programs

facilitated the adoption of bottom-up, locally-led practices, leading to a more sustainable transition process for local ownership of programs away from international interventions.

The COVID-19 global pandemic is more than just a health crisis because it is fueling “[stabilization in reverse](#),” while highlighting the [need](#) for LLPB programs. During the initial crisis, [international organizations evacuated many expatriate staff, halted site visits, and had to rely significantly on local partners](#) due to travel restrictions. Local organizations quickly identified community [needs](#), ensured [conflict-sensitive aid distribution](#), shifted to [online engagement](#), and applied [lessons](#) from previous health crises, such as the [Ebola](#) outbreak. For example, in [Iraq](#), local peacebuilding organizations redirected programs from convening peace committees to “solidarity patrols” to raise awareness about the pandemic and protect vulnerable groups. In [Palestine](#), Taghyeer, the Palestinian National Nonviolence Movement, postponed peacebuilding workshops and trainings and engaged messengers throughout the West Bank to address public health and economic challenges. These efforts demonstrate the resiliency of

local organizations in times of crisis, their importance, and their ability to address local needs. However, progress on localization may be slowed in the COVID-19 mitigation phase as [donors prioritize the pandemic's containment](#), as exemplified in [donor strategies](#) that focus on health and humanitarian assistance.

Additionally, informal or unregistered networks and civil society actors with deep linkages to their communities play a vital role in crisis response, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding. In Ukraine and the region, for instance, [community volunteers](#) are leading the humanitarian and displacement response. Informal and formal local organizations can deploy rapidly in unstable contexts, through community trust and cost-efficiency, to reach geographically diverse communities, deliver aid, share information, and promote peace. However, informal support networks are often ineligible for international financial support or partnership, despite their [ability](#) to respond nimbly to evolving contexts and crises.

Supporting Locally-Led Peacebuilding: Donors and Implementing Partner Organizations

One common mechanism of international funding for LLPB is through the provision of grants to large international organizations with requirements to ensure local inclusion, such as reserving a certain percentage of the funds for sub-awards to local CSOs. For example, the [UN Peacebuilding Fund](#) typically requires 40% of grant funds to be given to national or local organizations and evidence that those partners took part in the program proposal and design process. However, requests for proposals, procurement laws and policies, and internal controls often mandate donors and international organizations undertake time-consuming vetting processes. These requirements effectively disincentivize broader outreach to more localized CSOs outside the capital and undermine the building of sustainable peace.

USAID uses various means to ensure local engagement through design, procurement, management, and assistance measurements. [USAID believes](#) “locally-led development is not a single approach, but a range of ways that USAID, its partners, and communities can work together to shift agenda-setting and decision-making power into the hands of local actors.” In November 2021, USAID Administrator Power, delivered a [speech](#) that [outlined a pledge](#) to dramatically increase the amount of USAID’s funding to local organizations and that 25% of USAID funding would go to local partners within the next four years and 50% by the end of the decade. While acknowledging the challenges associated with launching a new agenda, Administrator Power [admitted](#) that results are lacking with only about 6% of funding going to local organizations globally and the vast amount of USAID funds to address the situation in Ukraine are being funneled through UN agencies. In fact, U.S. [funding for local partners](#) actually fell



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in Fiscal Year 2021 by more than \$200 million.

However, USAID has sought to advance locally-led development before and contended with significant obstacles that undermined ambitious targets. The Obama Administration established USAID Forward seeking to obligate 30% of program funds to local organizations. This initiative increased USAID’s local partnership base and improved its approach, but did not meet the funding target due to overburdensome U.S. regulatory requirements. These requirements failed to account for local contexts and capabilities and imposed challenging vetting procedures.

In 2017, USAID introduced the [Journey to Self-Reliance](#) (J2SR) to address local development challenges with a “commitment to see [these] solutions through effectively, inclusively, and with accountability.”¹ To complement J2SR, USAID introduced the [New Partnerships Initiative](#) (NPI)² in May 2019, which seeks to increase USAID’s partnership base, diversify approaches

and programming models to fit local contexts, and provide financial support to “new or underutilized” recipients of USAID funds.³ Additionally, USAID developed the Capacity Building for Local Development (CBLD-9) indicator to support both initiatives as part of its [Acquisition and Assistance Strategy](#) that places more emphasis on local partner organizational growth and performance priorities rather than compliance factors. USAID’s draft [Local Capacity Development Policy](#) aims to advance local capacity development programming by (1) institutionalizing effective principles-based approaches; (2) articulating a common definition and understanding of capacity and capacity development; and (3) better aligning incentives between USAID and its partners.

Furthermore, [USAID’s Local Works program](#) strives to improve understanding, particularly for Mission and operational staff, about how local organizations adapt and creatively advance objectives in challenging contexts where USAID may not operate.

1. J2SR focuses on outcomes over outputs with national and local leadership. It presented a new vision for development and humanitarian assistance that worked to build local capacity to plan, finance, and implement programs to address their development challenges.

2. NPI broadens the definition of local partners to include U.S.-based or international with locally-led operations, but requires that they be new or underutilized to ensure large traditional partners are not favored. NPI mentoring awards allow USAID’s traditional partners to compete, but only for awards that require them to play a different role, such as facilitating the leadership of local sub-awardees in implementing programs.

3. [Bipartisan legislation](#) proposed in 2021 seeks to resource NPI better and further expand and diversify USAID’s local partners by reducing barriers to entry in solicitations, providing more awards to first-time grantees, and expanding co-creation in prime and sub-awards, authorizing \$250 million through FY 2026. However, it remains unclear how this funding would supplant or complement [different funding streams](#) for local organizations.

Oxfam America and Save the Children's "[Power of Ownership](#)" study highlights cases where USAID and the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) are making efforts to increase local ownership in development programming. This study outlines the [Local Engagement Assessment Framework \(LEAF\) tool](#), which assesses the quality of country ownership of development assistance projects and is currently being piloted across various contexts, sectors, and programming in which USAID works.

Multilateral organizations also recognize the critical role of CSOs in the peacebuilding and conflict prevention sector. The UN's [Community Engagement Guidelines on Peacebuilding and Sustainable Peace](#) provide system-wide operational guidance to UN agencies to engage with local civil society effectively. These guidelines, as well as the UN Peacebuilding Support Office's [May 2022 Thematic Review on Local Peacebuilding](#) identify financing challenges for local organizations and recommend flexible funding, acknowledging the UN's overly bureaucratic financial procedures that often serve as barriers to meeting unique and context-specific needs. The thematic review further explores best practices for locally-led peacebuilding and synergies between donors, implementers, and national and local stakeholders to have measurable impact, including the need for long-

term, flexible support, institutional capacity-building, and trust-building and engagement with informal networks and organizations. [The World Bank Group's Fragility, Conflict, and Violence Strategy](#), developed through global consultations to enhance the Bank's ability to support conflict affected countries, emphasizes the need for inclusion, local partnership, and impactful private sector solutions.

Foundations and private donors are also making considerable strides with LLPB because many are more risk tolerant, have fewer procurement restrictions, and can provide unrestricted funds and core funding. Members of the [Peace and Security Funders Group](#) adapt [funding approaches](#) to local contexts and engage local voices throughout the program design, implementation, and monitoring processes. Some private donors specifically provide emergency support to local organizations, women, and human rights defenders globally, such as through the [Urgent Action Fund](#), which accepts requests in all languages and provides funding within 10 business days. Humanity United [works](#) to change short-term, inflexible practices by [focusing](#) on LLPB initiatives and supporting local peacebuilders through a collaborative partnership with CSOs in [South Sudan](#). Peace Direct's [Local Action Fund](#) provides microgrants for grassroots community initiatives and small grants to locally-led and owned organizations.

The International Civil Society Action Network's [Innovative Peace Fund](#) provides grants and technical support to women-led CSOs and advocates for changes in donor practices through its [Funding Framework](#).

Many international peacebuilding organizations invest significantly in local communities and within their leadership, undertake locally-led capacity-building efforts, and strive to develop long-term local partnerships and strategic relations with local organizations. AfP members including, but not limited to, [Peace Direct](#), [FHI 360](#), the [International Civil Society Action Network](#), [Life & Peace Institute](#), [PartnersGlobal](#), [Counterpart International](#), [IREX](#), [Search for Common Ground](#), and [Saferworld](#), employ innovative approaches to create durable, rather than project-based, engagement. These CSOs create formal, long-term partnership agreements that transcend specific projects, including instituting partner learning exchanges and connecting people globally through project review meetings, training activities, and research and evaluation events that ensure cross-organizational learning, practice groups, and dialogue and knowledge transfers between country programs.

Although these initiatives are improving the effectiveness of LLPB, more work remains to shift the leadership and ownership of local peacebuilding into the hands of local stakeholders. It is important to note that other sectors are also struggling with how to meaningfully engage locally-led organizations. In the humanitarian sector, the [Grand Bargain](#) and the [Grand Bargain 2.0](#) represent a collaborative effort among UN agencies, CSOs, the Red Cross, and governmental agencies to close the humanitarian financing gap, which is key to promoting localization. Grand Bargain signatories are committed to making principled humanitarian action as local as possible while recognizing that international humanitarian actors can continue to play a vital role, particularly in situations of armed conflict. Grand Bargain signatories engage with local and national responders in a spirit of partnership and aim to reinforce, rather than replace local and national capacities.



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Challenges to Implementing Locally-Led Peacebuilding

While the concept of “locally-led” is gaining traction, donors still face significant internal and policy challenges in operationalizing LLPB efforts. Current procurement mechanisms are burdensome for local organizations to navigate due to complex application requirements, [jargon-laced](#) requests for proposals, and a necessary competence in the English language both for applying for and reporting on funds received. In addition, to be competitive, organizations must have capacity in proposal development under short timelines, monitoring and evaluation, financial management, and technical expertise, where a lack of these skills act as a critical barrier for entry for local peacebuilders and organizations. These [capacity deficits exacerbate other obstacles](#) imposed by the international aid community, including risk aversion that limits funding, prejudice, operational constraints, and a general skepticism that local actors have the requisite depth, scope, and scale of impact.

Full inclusion of local organizations in the proposal process can be challenging, even if requirements include local inclusion and/or co-creation. Competitive proposal processes with tight turnaround also lead to ambitious, sometimes unrealistic, targets and work plans. Often, short proposal deadlines hinder international organizations’ ability to identify and meaningfully involve local organizations in the proposal design process. Logistical impediments compound challenges in gathering local perspectives, particularly without established relationships, programs, or offices in-country. Furthermore, donors have begun to prohibit exclusive agreements with local organizations, which undermine local groups’ ability to secure funding if they partner with an international organization that does not win the award. In conflict contexts, these constraints impede much-needed and time-sensitive conflict prevention and peacebuilding programming.

Proposal evaluation processes require rigid staffing plans prescribed by the donor rather than the recipient and thus



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reflect systemic racism, sexism, and unequal access to opportunities. USAID, for example, typically mandates “key personnel” possess specific language and educational competencies. By requiring USAID-funded projects to be led by a “Chief of Party” fluent in English with a Masters’ Degree and 15 years of professional office experience, USAID implicitly excludes local leaders, women, and young people in conflict affected and patriarchal societies. While NGOs might support a brilliant, but non-English speaking female leader with an anglophone assistant, or a youth-led organization might hire senior accounting support, these kinds of more flexible arrangements are penalized or prohibited by the proposal evaluation process.

Another significant barrier to LLPB is that requests for proposals and assistance rigidly outline highly prescriptive program methodologies, which lack the flexibility to apply [adaptive management practices](#) from the start. USAID is trying to address this specific issue by instituting a co-design process that begins by asking for a five-page concept note and then bringing in several organizations to co-create the request for proposal or program. These processes are labor-intensive and benefit larger organizations with more resources, while disadvantaging smaller ones. These co-design processes can disadvantage local and small organizations, as they require a heavy up-front cost in personnel,

time, travel, and resources that are not covered in any potential grant. This co-design process further benefits larger organizations that can carry these short-term costs for longer-term benefits.

Donors are highly risk-averse due to strict procurement laws and regulations. Significant concerns exist among multi- and bi-lateral [donors](#) about the ability of locally-led organizations to provide the legally required financial and institutional oversight during implementation. Local organizations may have challenges absorbing large sums of funds due to insufficient staff and may lack internal control systems.

Informal or unregistered networks and organizations are [highly effective](#) at monitoring and communicating contextual needs, serving as an early warning mechanism, and ensuring equitable and inclusive aid distribution and program participation. Their ability to mobilize and operate quickly and cost-efficiently, in tandem with their community relationships and trust, can expedite the delivery of information and assistance in times of crisis. However, donors are often reluctant to provide financial support or partnership to informal groups due to their lack of paperwork because of procurement regulations and financial and operational risk aversion.

Inflexible funding and short-term

project terms also undermine locally-led implementation and contribute to the difficulty of achieving local ownership and trust between local, national, and international stakeholders. The dearth of resources dedicated to participatory practices is a consistent challenge, particularly in [projects lasting less than five years](#), as they can hardly scratch the surface of deep-rooted disputes and changing contexts. [Participatory practices](#) seek the active engagement of diverse stakeholders and seek to enhance their capacity to identify and implement local needs and solutions. The substantial time, staff, and money to convene stakeholders, gain trust, engage remote communities, and undertake other activities to garner community perspectives are often not included or are the first line item to be cut in internationally funded programs.

Inflexible budgets can oftentimes result in organizational inability to respond appropriately and rapidly to evolving and fragile contexts. Inflexibility to the dynamic nature of conflict and fragility can transfer risk to local organizations, delay success, and even reverse gains. Furthermore, rigid [procedural and cultural trends within the donor community](#), such as formal and informal restrictions on donors contacting sub-partners, results-based management⁴, and resource and time challenges, inhibit local organizations' ability to adapt and respond with innovation in programming.

USAID's [Grants Under Contracts](#) (GUCs) is one approach that seeks to institutionalize sustainable capacity in local organizations and promote

local ownership beyond programs' completion by allowing local CSOs to participate in defining objectives, activity planning and facilitation, and financial management. Mechanisms such as GUCs can assist international implementers in operating with much needed flexibility. However, they cannot be implemented at the scale necessary to provide the dynamism that LLPB programming requires.

Peacebuilding programming typically takes place in conflict affected and fragile states where international implementors are vital and often must lead due to [government threats to local CSOs and civic space restrictions](#). In these situations, international organizations have the requisite security and perceived neutrality to protect local CSOs and facilitate local engagement. Their ability to operate in these environments can help build the capacity of local CSOs and achieve peacebuilding program aims. It is critical to note that international CSOs often have deep connections and experience working in these contexts and many AfP international partners employ expert local staff both at headquarters and locally that also must be considered part of the locally-led process.

Additionally, political will and foreign policy priorities can hamper efforts to support the development of robust civil society, particularly in contexts affected by conflict and authoritarianism. International donors' national security interests often contradict development and peacebuilding policies and assistance. Uganda is a [key regional](#)

[and counterterrorism and stability partner](#), yet despite the government's increasing corruption, human rights abuses, and authoritarianism, significant international security and development assistance continues. This contradicts the U.S.' [stated commitment to democracy and human rights](#) and local leadership. Donor governments must provide an honest assessment and transparency of security and foreign policy priorities and acknowledge that donor interests may subvert LLPB.

Finally, donor peacebuilding budgets are small, insufficient, and inadequately integrated into development and humanitarian programming. The U.S. spends [less than 1%](#) of its annual budget on foreign assistance, of which only 11% is allocated for peacebuilding, political stability, and democracy programming. Additionally, donors place disproportionate emphasis on fiduciary risks and compliance issues and not enough emphasis and funding on understanding what, why, and how programs achieve their desired goals. There is a chronic underfunding of design, monitoring, and evaluation (DM&E) in the peacebuilding field, and therefore, most implementing partners do not or cannot prove their programs prevent conflict, reduce violence, and build sustainable peace. Without adequate resourcing and attention to DM&E, realization of the aims of LLPB, as well as peacebuilding and conflict prevention more broadly, will remain elusive.



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4. Results-based management (RBM) is defined as orienting all action and use of resources towards achieving clearly defined and demonstrable results.

While the Alliance for Peacebuilding and its members recognize the significant efforts, investments, and learning to advance LLPB to date, the following recommendations address the challenges and opportunities outlined above to move this agenda forward more intentionally.

1. Establish risk-tolerant and flexible procurement mechanisms for local organizations.

The current procurement process fundamentally disadvantages local CSOs—and almost entirely excludes informal networks and organizations—and must be reformed. Rigid procurement laws and policies are a major hindrance in creating the needed paradigm shift to prioritize LLPB. Procurement must be less prescriptive and more risk-tolerant of local CSOs to encourage support for new partners and organizations and provide equity and transparency in resource allocation between international and local organizations. Local organizations have far less opportunity to improve their internal capacity and revenue streams since core, unrestricted, and indirect funding are often not provided or allowed by donors or international implementing partners. As many local organizations do not have an established indirect cost rate, their grants from international organizations are only provided for project-related costs.

The USAID [Effective Partnering and Procurement Reform Recommendations](#) were released in 2019 for the [ADS 201](#) that addresses many of the challenges outlined above. They require Missions and Pillar and Regional Bureaus (for Washington-based programming) to develop plans and set context-appropriate goals for engaging new and underutilized partners under NPI, including a potential shift of funding. However, procurement reform should provide local organizations with more and increasingly [flexible and longer-term funding cycles](#) with financial opportunities and tools to better address local problems and implement local solutions. For example, the [UN Community Engagement Guidelines](#) and UN Peacebuilding Support Office's 2022 [thematic review](#) call for smaller scale, predictable, flexible, risk-tolerant, and fit-for-purpose local funding modalities that provide user-friendly, straightforward grant application and reporting criteria templates.

It is critical to invest in improving accessibility and outreach of funding opportunities targeting local organizations. Donors must focus on both increasing funding for LLPB and

improving access towards funding mechanisms. A former USAID Chief Acquisition and Assistance Policy Officer [explained](#), “(T)he only thing that holds (USAID) back is not being accessible for (local) partners that have not worked with us and have a lot to contribute, but, over the years, have not been able to overcome the complex solicitation requirements of USAID.” To improve access to funding opportunities, donors must refine policies and practices to address the structural barriers that local organizations face, including linguistic limitations, onerous proposal requirements, and inflexible, rigid mechanisms that do not differentiate between large, international applicants and local ones. Donors must expand their language capabilities and provide opportunities in languages other than English, while recognizing the [language of peacebuilding](#) in requests for proposals can itself be exclusionary. They must reduce overly burdensome requests for proposals and reporting requirements and develop flexible and equitable mechanisms that allow for more fit-for-purpose adaptations. This should include conducting a full review of the “Key Personnel” and “Chief of Party” proposal evaluation processes



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through a post-colonial and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) lens that rewards local, rather than expatriate leadership. Donors should also consider increasing support to “intermediary” peacebuilding organizations to provide sub-grants to local organizations, particularly information or unregistered networks. Through initiatives like NPI, USAID has introduced mechanisms to promote greater access to funding for local organizations. However, while these mechanisms are a positive step forward, supporting their effective implementation will require dedicated resources.

A parallel, but equally important barrier for funding LLPB has been the lack of [targeted outreach](#) with local organizations to enhance participation and increase their knowledge and use of existing resources, opportunities, and mechanisms. In many instances, local organizations are unable to access these mechanisms because they simply are not aware of them. The launch of USAID’s platform [WorkWithUSAID.org](#) offers a variety of services and tools designed for local organizations to improve organizational

readiness, connect partners to peers and experts, and prepare local organizations to receive USAID funding. [WorkWithUSAID.org](#) is a positive example of USAID’s recent focus on improving funding accessibility, but remains insufficient to engage local organizations, specifically due to language and technology barriers. To ensure local organizations are aware of and can use relevant platforms, resources, and initiatives, donors must invest in marketing, communication, and outreach campaigns that specifically target local organizations.



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2. Increase organizational support funding for local organizations.

Donors must establish funding that supports the organizational development of locally-led organizations. Through indirect cost rates permitted under grants, [unrestricted funding](#), or fees under a contract mechanism, international organizations can invest in their organizational development, including new business development efforts, headquarter costs, innovation, and staff retention that strengthens organizational capacity. These mechanisms can also sustain the international organization’s ability to survive.

However, funding for local CSOs through a grant or partnership with an international organization is often only for implementing a specific, time-limited project and almost always requires an “exit plan” or “sustainability plan.” This gives rise to an unfounded and a very imbalanced assumption

that international organizations are sustainable themselves and that locally-led organizations are not, which creates a bias against locally-led programming and implementation. To the extent donors do provide for overhead or other indirect costs to local organizations, they are rarely sufficient. Some donor policies, such as that of the European Union will only cover 7% of local CSOs’ project-related costs—a fraction of the costs required to cover risk management, organizational development, or staff retention. USAID will provide a de minimis rate of 10% if there has not been a Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement (NICRA) established and approved. This percentage is significantly less than the 20-35% rate most international organizations receive. Therefore, local organizations also need funding to cover core and/or unrestricted and indirect/overhead costs to truly build their organizational capacity.

This funding, in tandem with [support for income-generating activities and the creation of partnerships between](#)

[local governments and local civil society](#), would provide much-needed assistance to local organizations. Specifically, overhead and funding for institutional sustainability can help local groups bridge gaps and maintain activities between projects, address challenges created by project-restricted funds, promote staff retention, and create an operational model similar to that of international NGOs. Through reformed procurement processes and funding streams, donors can help civil society be more robust and sustainable.

Until financial assistance is provided to local CSOs to develop donor-compatible business models that support their organizations in the way the current system supports international organizations, LLPB will remain challenging. Donors must expediently address the inequity of financing models between international versus local CSOs. They should also invest resources to conduct risk assessments and analysis for indirect cost rates for new partners and introduce pre-award risk assessments for local partners.



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3. Commit to strengthening the capacity of local peacebuilding actors.

Capacity related to LLPB includes funding and procurement reform (see Recommendations #1 and #2), but also building organizational, technical, advocacy, and leadership capacity. Capacity development must go beyond traditional training activities to contextualized efforts that include investing in proximate leadership, systems-based and analytical approaches, confidence-building, and practical learning opportunities, such as accompaniment and mentoring. Capacity development should prioritize planning for longer programming timelines, including budgets to implement the plans, and participatory grantmaking to determine the best use of resources. Donors should strive for more adaptive engagement tailored to both international and local organizations' strengths and existing capacity. They should further focus on performance and outcomes over outputs, even if they fall outside of traditional measurement schemes. Such efforts would reinforce mutual learning, promote innovative programming, support more impactful outcomes with less donor-imposed rigidity, and develop greater relevance to dynamic local contexts.

Local actors often require support to effectively advocate for and advance laws and policies that support their work domestically. Donors should support local advocacy initiatives to help strengthen the enabling environment and open civic space, including through legal reforms that provide them with tax and other governmental benefits and access to more funds, similar to those available to non-profit organizations in the U.S. through tax exemptions. These efforts will promote the capacity and sustainability of local civil society in the long term and create more equity between international and local organizations. Too often, donors reserve, channel, and push resources in response to elections for civic engagement and advocacy. However, to strengthen CSOs' capacity and open civic space in their local contexts, donors must proactively enable CSOs

to advocate for themselves.⁵

4. Develop, fund, and implement effective and consistent feedback loops between donors and local partners to support joint accountability and foster adaptive management.

The situation in conflict affected and fragile states is constantly changing. Feedback loops are critical to ensure continuous adaptive management and learning and to foster equitable partnerships between local CSOs and donors. International actors must institutionalize consistent feedback opportunities between donors and local partners to maximize accountability to local populations and provide space for context-specific adaptation. Too often, donors only garner feedback at the end of the program cycle, rather than during program design and implementation. Compounding the problem, donors tend to solicit input from select, city-centric groups, rather than a broader cross-section of communities, at a single point in time. This feedback should occur regularly with diverse stakeholders—including women, youth, faith actors, religious and ethnic minorities, and other marginalized communities—from the outset of the program design process, throughout the program cycle, and upon completion of activities. This consistent communication will provide regular opportunities to share challenges, innovations, successes, and lessons learned and ensure strong working relationships and the implementation of best practices based on broad perspectives.

Consistent feedback is essential because it informs donors what is or is not working at the local level based on evidence, allowing them to utilize adaptive management to ensure grantmaking, program design, and implementation is effective and responsive to conditions and constituents on the ground. However, donors must allow for a proposal solicitation process that provides ample time for community consultation and partnership, as well as awards

that promote inclusive, participatory initiatives and monitoring. [Enhanced level of community engagement at all levels](#) will facilitate more effective measurement of local results and provide opportunities to facilitate adaptation as contexts evolve. Such reforms would allow implementers to scale solutions and address shifting local dynamics, rather than conforming activities and outputs to proposals that do not reflect the current and evolving context.

AfP's [Snapshot of Adaptive Management in Peacebuilding Programs](#) found that "programs must be highly responsive to these shifting contexts...yet current DM&E frameworks are often too rigid and linear to allow for adaptive learning and programming." Donors must develop flexible and agile systems that allow for quick responses to challenges on the ground to pivot activities in real-time. Local actors, through proximate leadership and lived experiences, are best placed to understand the local context and judge what approaches have the greatest chance of success. These actors have the knowledge and relationships required to ensure successful implementation. However, within these highly volatile, non-linear environments, donors must embrace and facilitate the use of adaptive strategies to provide implementing partners with the necessary tools and capacity to be responsive to shifting needs.

Improved adaptive management and implementation of feedback loops support the development of learning agendas and evidence-informed practices, which allow for more effective programming and the sharing of lessons learned during and beyond the program cycle. While more flexible funding and programming models are essential to the success of LLPB, consistent feedback loops can address immediate challenges that arise from the prescriptive nature of donor awards and inform future requests for proposals. International CSOs should further include their sub-partners as active participants in feedback and learning with donors.

5. Requests for proposals

5. See Recommendation #7 on monitoring and effectively responding to closing civic space.



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should require the partnership of local CSO partners in the proposal development process.

Donors should elevate local involvement to a substantial technical review criterion when evaluating proposals, and require applicants to describe the involvement of CSOs, beneficiaries, local institutions, informal networks, and other local actors. Requests for proposals should mandate sub-awardees and consortium partners be part of program design, workplan and budget development, periodic reviews of performance, and inception phases. However, barriers and challenges exist that make this process challenging to realize. Often, USAID and other major donors do not allow local partners to go “exclusive” with international partners. This prohibition limits local organizations’ ability to be an integral part of designing the

proposal, work plan, budget, and beyond. Prohibiting local organizations from serving as exclusive partners results in international organizations marginalizing local groups in the design process due to proprietary proposal processes. It reduces competition for partnerships with the best local organizations and dilutes the ability of the best-placed local organizations to shape the wider consortia. It is also patronizing. Additionally, restrictions and/or limited acceptance of unsolicited proposals from local CSOs further exclude local organizations and undermine program responsiveness and effectiveness.

After the proposal process, an inception or learning phase before the program begins would enable international partners to meaningfully co-create and co-design with local implementing partners. The inception phase should include ample time to build relationships and gain community

buy-in, map out diverse stakeholders for the project, and understand what actors and activities are necessary for the current context. This phase would also ensure the institution of more locally-led management models, whose proximate leadership can ensure programming is more responsive to local needs and capacities, and provide opportunities for local mentorship by international organizations.

Donors and implementers should also consider pilot phases to test assumptions before fully implementing programs to ensure they effectively engage and empower locally-led organizations and stakeholders. Pilot phases can help identify blind spots and solutions for scale. Donors should also institute flexible, adaptable, and discrete phases within programs to ensure objectives, timelines, and activities reflect changing dynamics and provide opportunities to respond and scale effectively. Integration of these phases will allow donors and implementing partners to pause and reflect on the programming, assess the context for any changes (e.g., political transitions, economic shifts, new or transformed conflict), evaluate what is working well, build on these initiatives, support emerging LLPB initiatives, and engage additional stakeholders. Donors and implementing partners can work together to adapt workplans design, monitoring, and evaluation approaches, program descriptions, conflict and gender assessments, and other program-related materials that often remain static and non-responsive to evolving dynamics. Donors and implementers can also reframe activities to incorporate excluded groups better, address implementation barriers, and meet new community needs.

6. Donors should continue to invest in, test, and provide more evidence on the effectiveness of [“Grounded Accountability,”](#) as well as [“Collective Action and Impact.”](#)

Collective Action and Impact is becoming recognized as a powerful and successful [new approach to cross-sector collaboration](#). Collective

Action and Impact stems from the premise that no single organization can solve any major social problem at scale alone. Donors need to play a more intentional role in promoting organizational collaboration, sharing of data, and learning and working in an organized and structured manner. However, prioritizing this agenda will require a fundamental change in how donors view their role, away from simple funding organizations to leading a long-term process of social change. Innovative solutions by one organization alone or the development of organizational capacity in discrete instances are not enough to facilitate the needed paradigm shift to elevate local leadership in peacebuilding. Donors must help create and sustain the leadership required for collective processes, measurement reporting systems, and community ownership that enable cross-sector coalitions to succeed. Collective Action and Impact requires more significant investment and research in the field of peacebuilding and will be critical to moving the locally-led agenda forward.

At the same time, as more robust learning on systems-wide, strategy-level impact within a conflict system emerge, the effort should be accompanied by Grounded Accountability using indicators and results frameworks defined by, and meaningful to, the communities most affected. The Grounded Accountability model adapts and tests the use of community-defined impact indicators and can surface variations of processes for generating indicators and their diverse and manifold utilization to better meet the needs and priorities of local communities affected by conflict, fragility, and closing civic space.

7. Monitor and effectively respond to closing civic space.

The closing of local civic space is an ongoing and ever-growing concern in many conflict affected and fragile states, especially given the rise of authoritarian regimes, and is often “[an early warning sign for fragility, conflict, and violence.](#)” For instance, Nicaragua shut down [144 NGOs as of May 2022](#)



Photo by Hannah Busing on Unsplash

and imprisoned numerous political opposition leaders in an effort to tamp down criticism of President Daniel Ortega in yet another demonstration of [democratic backsliding and political and social instability](#). These actions are raising the alarm in the run-up to the November 2022 presidential election and further entrenching a series of human rights abuses under the Ortega regime.

A politically and/or legally restricted environment impedes the ability of local CSOs and actors to work on stabilization and conflict prevention. Marginalized communities are particularly vulnerable in such environments, but greater U.S. and international diplomatic engagement, coupled with development resources, could differentiate between democracy and authoritarianism. The U.S. Government and international donors should ensure this issue is at the top of their agenda, as early investments can protect and promote stable and resilient societies, support local civil society during times of closing civic space, and advance long-term U.S. national and international security. However, civil society in these contexts is often not supported or protected early enough, which can ultimately hinder LLPB. Both local and international CSOs require adequate financial resources to globally monitor civic space in an effective and consistent manner, perform political economy analyses, and provide donors, governments, and implementers with recommendations

to respond where civic space is closing.

8. Encourage, seek out, and incentivize Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) and private sector investment in LLPB.

Donors, implementing partners, and local organizations should expand [engagement with the private sector](#) to develop partnerships for peace within communities. In peacebuilding, private sector investment can help supplant cumbersome government procurement processes by investing directly into local networks and organizations. These investments help organizations achieve more significant outcomes, strengthen the local ownership of peace initiatives, and help to lay the foundation for sustainable peace. The [private sector also benefits](#) from peaceful and thriving communities, as it allows for commercial and other private sector investment. Corporate social responsibility and shared values are of increasing interest to the private sector. Communities, CSOs, and businesses can have a greater return on their social and development investments through conflict-sensitive approaches, especially in conflict affected or fragile states.⁶ However, private businesses are often risk-averse and require financial guarantees. Through investment protection mechanisms, the [U.S. International Development Finance Corporation](#)

6. View a video from a coffee grower in Ethiopia who has taken this approach [here](#).

and other international financial institutions should incentivize private sector engagement in peacebuilding.

Individual investments and enhancing private sector engagement in peace provide a further opportunity for donors to support the LLPB agenda. Engagement opportunities can include business partnerships with peacebuilding-related goals, such as investing in new social enterprises like [Coffee for Peace](#), which seeks to carry out peace and reconciliation work with conflict-impacted communities in the Philippines. Beyond investment into peace-oriented businesses and initiatives, the private sector also serves as an essential community convener. In the peacebuilding and conflict prevention sector, civil society can work with businesses to [ensure their practices](#) do not exacerbate conflict, enable social and economic development, and leverage governmental relationships in high-level decision-making and peace processes.

9. Ensure elevated local leadership efforts in the implementation of the [Global Fragility Act](#) (GFA) and other peacebuilding and conflict prevention-oriented laws and policies.

Locally-led participation is a key element of the GFA. Section 504(a) (4) of the GFA states the goals of the law must be addressed through participatory, locally-led programs and the empowerment of marginalized groups, such as youth, women, and religious and ethnic minorities. Additionally, Section 504(a)(5) requires the [Global Fragility Strategy](#) to describe approaches that ensure appropriate national leadership and participatory engagement by civil society and local partners in the design, implementation, and monitoring of programs. The GFA called on the Strategy to also address how to strengthen the operating climate for civil society in conflict affected contexts over the 10 years covered by country/regional plans for [Haiti](#), [Libya](#), [Mozambique](#), [Papua New](#)

[Guinea](#), and [Coastal West Africa](#).

Increasing local ownership is critical for the GFA to succeed, and procurement reform is necessary to provide local organizations with more flexible financial opportunities and other tools to generate, implement, and scale local solutions. Now that the [U.S. Government selected the four priority countries and one region](#), the 10-year country plans mandated by the GFA should outline how LLPB will be done more effectively. Furthermore, the GFA calls for a report to Congress outlining the requisite authorities, staffing, and resources needed to implement the GFA. Congress made it clear that it wants the executive branch to calculate what funding and authorities it needs to affect the changes required under the law. This report is a significant opportunity to pilot many of the procurement reforms and other recommendations outlined in this policy. Beyond the U.S., international donors can apply the principles enshrined in the GFA by advancing LLPB and calling for similarly required reforms within their own contexts.

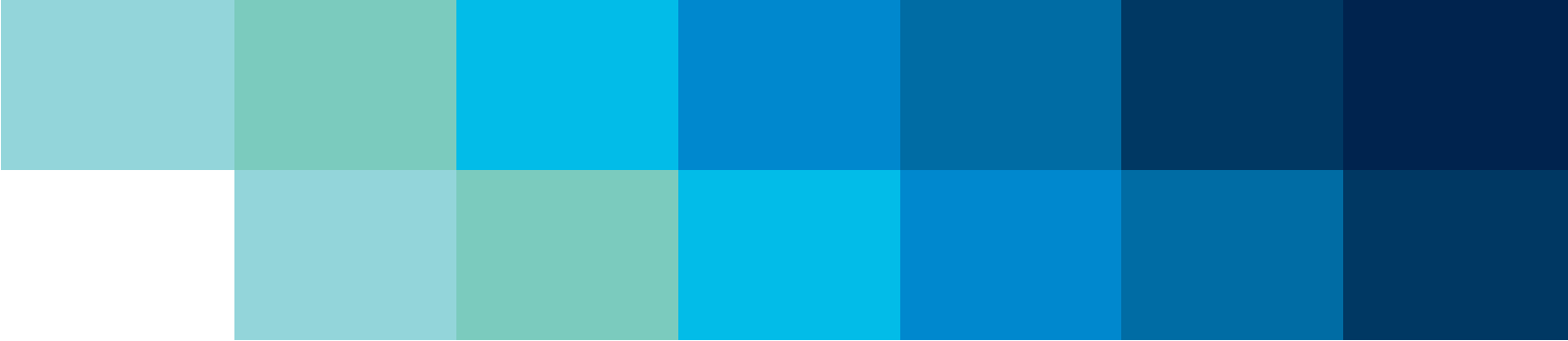
10. Prioritize and integrate the effective use of data and adaptive strategies to develop evidence-based and intentionally developed approaches to DM&E for locally-led peacebuilding programs.

While AfP's research on peacebuilding dynamics, [Perspectives in Peacebuilding](#), found the demand for high-quality data is on an upward trajectory, supporting funds remain lacking and DM&E activities are often seen as an add-on to programming rather than being robustly integrated from the outset. To develop effective partnerships and procurement systems conducive to LLPB, evidence and data must drive programmatic, funding, and procurement decisions. Improving evidence-based DM&E, sufficiently resourcing DM&E, and developing appropriate metrics can advance LLPB efforts and give rise to a prioritization of capacity-building to measure impact

and assess effectiveness. Donors should invest both time and resources to support greater DM&E capacity-building for local organizations to enhance efforts to measure impact, assess effectiveness, and identify opportunities to scale programming. In addition, donors should also focus on developing achievable, realistic, and responsive measures of success of their localization efforts. To reduce overly burdensome reporting requirements and develop streamlined reporting and DM&E systems, it is critical to only require collecting data needed to measure progress, inform evidence-based decision making, and deliver results.

While support for localization is growing amongst international donors, many lack appropriate indicators and evidence to substantiate these efforts and justify increased investment. There is a limited body of published and publicly recognized research evincing the success of both local initiatives and donors' localization efforts. AfP and Peace Direct's report, [Local Peacebuilding: What Works and Why](#), argues this lack of research makes it even more difficult to allocate funding towards LLPB, which is already seen as both time-consuming and risky for donors. For instance, USAID Forward's main measurement developed to assess progress on its localization efforts was the percentage of funds for programs implemented through local systems.⁷ The 2019 audit report, [Despite Optimism About Engaging Local Organizations, USAID Had Challenges Determining Impact and Mitigating Risks](#), found that while "75 percent of the 51 evaluations reviewed determined that the evaluated project was likely to achieve its outcomes, 'clear results related to sustainability and local ownership were ambiguous, and often not explicitly addressed.'" Establishing appropriate metrics to measure LLPB efforts is a critical priority as major donors, including USAID, aim for greater localization efforts, such as in the new [USAID Centroamérica Local Initiative to Empower Local Partners in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras](#).

7. USAID Forward was an Agency-wide reform agenda initiated in 2010 and included a focus on reforming procurement efforts while also increasing the Agency's engagement with local partners. In 2017, USAID officially retired the USAID Forward reform efforts, including the local solutions initiative.



About Alliance for Peacebuilding:

Named the “number one influencer and change agent” among peacebuilding institutions worldwide—AfP is a nonprofit and nonpartisan network of 160+ organizations working in 181 countries to prevent conflict, reduce violence, improve lives, and build sustainable peace. At our core, AfP cultivates a network to strengthen and advance the peacebuilding field, enabling peacebuilding organizations to achieve greater impact—tackling issues too large for any one organization to address alone.



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