

Local Peacebuilder Perspectives on the U.S. Global Fragility Act

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**Alliance for
Peacebuilding**



Addressing fragility and building resilient societies requires policies, programs and processes that are locally led, owned and informed. Local peacebuilders are trusted mediators, mobilizers and messengers in their communities, and are best suited to develop and implement programs and policies that address conflict dynamics and fragility. Despite their unique capacity to build peace, local peacebuilders are often overlooked and excluded by external actors.

In December 2019, the U.S. government passed the Global Fragility Act (GFA), which creates the first-ever comprehensive U.S. government strategy to tackle and prevent violent conflict and build a lasting peace.

The GFA recognizes the importance of local leadership and mandates the U.S. government to develop its Global Fragility Strategy in consultation with local civil society and national and local governments, among other partners.

In June 2020, Peace Direct and the Alliance for Peacebuilding hosted a virtual consultation with local peacebuilders from around the world using the website Platform4Dialogue. More than 140 participants from 39 countries spanning six continents shared how the U.S. government can best engage local partners, overcome barriers to engagement, and support local peacebuilders in building long-term peace. This report presents their key findings and recommendations.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Local peacebuilders are not only willing to participate in consultations with the U.S. government -- they are essential. There is a vast network of peacebuilders around the world beyond the United States' traditional partners that the U.S. government should engage to enhance the Global Fragility Strategy. With overwhelming consensus, participants agreed that consultations with local actors and civil society are necessary for the Global Fragility Strategy to be both effective and credible.
2. External consultations and programming often exclude local actors and do not account for barriers to their participation. This is especially true for marginalized groups, such as women and youth, as well as local actors in hard-to-reach areas due to conflict, location, or other obstacles. Barriers are often context-specific and need to be addressed early by external actors to ensure inclusive participation and success.
3. Partial participation of local actors and relying on limited sources will result in an incomplete understanding of the local context and failed approaches. Including all groups in consultations and programming will provide a holistic understanding of conflict dynamics, drivers of violence, and other programmatic needs that will strengthen the Global Fragility Act.
4. Solutions must be designed, driven, implemented, and owned by local actors. Programs that recognize local capacity and integrate local perspectives from the earliest stages of design improve understanding of local context and ensure programming is centered on community needs.
5. External actors have an important role to play in supporting local solutions and promoting peace. Local peacebuilders often recognize the U.S. as a helpful partner, but more can be done to ensure its credibility in communities and build long-term relationships of trust and mutual accountability. The U.S. and other external actors provide resources that are not regularly accessible to local peacebuilding organizations, including vital trauma, psychosocial and mental health resources.
6. Flexibility in program design and funding is essential to adapt to evolving local dynamics. Local peacebuilders are adaptable and able to quickly address challenges and find solutions, but are often beholden to rigid program and grant requirements, as well as inflexible funds.



"To overcome challenges to local participation, we need to prioritize the bottom-top approach of our project design and implementation. Participation in project design, promote owner[ship], and community engagement. In relation to peace, more or less addressing issues from the root cause rather than dealing with effect. This brings [a] lasting solution." - Dlanga Yusuf, Nigeria

Local peacebuilders explain challenges to participation and how the U.S. can mitigate barriers.

To work with external actors, including the U.S., local actors must overcome a range of challenges. These include contextual barriers, such as language, literacy and location, as well as risk of engagement for reasons such as retaliation. Other barriers include donor-driven programs and processes, such as strict or unclear proposal requirements and high-standards for financial or reporting ability.

"Ownership at the local level must always be the key and while I am 100 percent for accountability and transparent processes that prevent abuse of donor funds, I hold the opinion that current designs and monitoring systems are more concerned with keeping and maintaining the protocols versus the boosting of local ownership and participation for those who were there before, during and after the programmers are long gone." - Daniel Njoroge, Kenya

"Efforts to include local participation can be improved if local actors can speak for themselves and the suggestions they give are given priority." - Ada Ichoja Ohaba, Nigeria

"Most local NGOs for the sake of accessing funding end up working with the program design framework of the donor even when it is clear there is a need for modification." - Godwin Okoko, Nigeria

Local peacebuilders share ideas for improving U.S. engagement.

Local civil society has tremendous potential and capacity, know the needs of their organizations and communities, and are experts in their local context. They also know how best external actors, such as the U.S. government, can engage with them through support and resources. Consulting early to understand local needs and capabilities is cost effective and more likely to result in successful and context-aware programming. Early consultations with local civil society also ensures that resources and time are well-used, and that programs do not suffer from frivolous activities, such as unnecessary externally driven capacity building.

"Involving civil society organizations and grassroots organizations that are truly connected to the communities and that understand the context and the needs is key." - Reem Alsalem, Jordan



"Before intervention in any country, the U.S. should conduct a comprehensive conflict analysis of the conflict context to clearly understand the dynamics, actors involved and their relationship, the issues and peace actors who could be used to solve the problem. The analysis should be conducted by local experts and not international consultants who know nothing about the conflict situations." - Garba Auwdu Talle, Ghana

"Especially when the goal of programming is transformation, it is important to fully integrate civil society into planning or it is likely that the harmful structures preventing transformation will co-opt the planning process. Involving strategic parts of civil society in any programmatic planning and implementation, including women, indigenous peoples and youth, can be transformative in and of itself." - Taylor Ramsey, United States

"When any civil society takes sides and is included in the development and implementation of programs that are going to be applied on itself and for its own benefit, it will be the first to put them into practice and go out to defend them." (translated) - Octavio Cruz Gonzalez, Colombia

Local peacebuilders emphasize the need to work with flexibility and adaptiveness in fragile contexts and crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating conflict dynamics around the world and its impact is particularly acute for communities within fragile contexts. Peacebuilders are struggling to sustain their work amidst shifting donor priorities, urgent local needs, and physical distancing guidelines. Decreases in financial support and rigid programming requirements are making it difficult for peacebuilders to both "flatten the curve" and address pre-existing conflict dynamics.

COVID-19 is exposing many of the fault lines in the relationship that governments, donors, and international actors have with local peacebuilders. However, it is also highlighting how local peacebuilders are best positioned to guide their communities through a crisis. Governments, donors, and international actors should support and amplify local leaders during times of crisis by providing them the flexibility in funding and programming to respond to urgent needs.



"Senior religious authorities are supporting governmental social distancing and other regulations during the health crisis, publicly proclaiming that limiting infection and saving lives overrides religious ritual and practice. Religious communities and faith-based organizations mobilized early and are working among many of the most hard-hit and poor areas to provide food security, health needs, education on how to protect against the pandemic and more. Early responses from religious actors have contributed to 'flattening the curve' and mitigating further damage."
- Anonymous

"Carryover lessons from COVID-19 have shown us that even in countries with advanced systems, poor citizen participation coupled with failures in public policy and timeliness of interventions make an already bad situation worse. A people-centric response barometer-like mechanism is [needed] that involves local communities having clear, precise information and communication and structures having the resilience to manage such crises. Working together to build networks such as peacebuilding will not only help with coordination of efforts but in identifying vulnerabilities in real time and deploying the necessary timely response. What is required is an effective early warning and early response system."
- Elly Maloba, Kenya

Local peacebuilders urge the U.S. to enter more humbly and listen more carefully.

Increasingly, the U.S. needs to examine its role as an intervener in conflict. The U.S. will have more or less legitimacy in different contexts and needs to consider carefully how it engages in each. Local peacebuilders recognize the need for engaging all actors - victims and perpetrators - in appropriate ways to build lasting peace and heal divided communities.

Some noted the importance of the U.S. not bringing its own assumptions of good and bad, or restricting engagement with those it deems enemies. Growing global attention to conflict and injustice at home in the U.S. itself, also means that the U.S. needs to enter with much more humility and ensure consistency in its policies at home and abroad.

"Everybody who wants and/or can be engaged should be engaged. After all, we are here to build peace and peacebuilding, in most cases follows atrocities. Sometimes it is even difficult to draw lines between victims and perpetrators. Have everybody on board and leave nobody behind. If the U.S. approaches peacebuilding with such openness, it will find it easy to accommodate and include as many actors as possible." - Ibrahim Magara, Kenya



"My recommendation is that all of the above players need to critically assess their own and others' perceptions of the standing of the USA against each of the above criteria before embarking on the consultation. Most importantly, they need to genuinely address any gaps identified in the assessment of their past performance." - Rees Barrett, Australia

"...the U.S. should focus attention more on community based groups who understand the local dynamics and are closer to the people. Here I am talking about CBOs, CSOs, women, youth and gender based groups. The U.S. normally focuses too much on the state actors, there should be a refocusing on the local-level actors at the grassroots." - Garba Auwdu Talle, Ghana

"There is a huge gap in the U.S. policy approach towards conflict settings where it partners. The policy excludes marginalised communities (victims of violence) and the

perpetrators (who are directly involved in causing violence). It focuses on elite rulers and suppressive regimes in the form of disbursing the development funds and support for peacebuilding. The U.S. needs to devise inclusive peacebuilding policy to engage the local conflict driving actors (e.g., ethnoreligious community leaders), government officials and civil society members equally." - Qamar Jafri, Pakistan

"The U.S. government - as is the case with other donors- has a lot of leverage to ensure that space for participation in a given country remains open. It is a matter of using that unique position and voice in a measured and principled manner. This means advocating that rules and regulations that would seek to further restrict the activities of civil society, control and reduce their funding are changed to be in line with international human rights standards." - Reem Alsalem, Jordan

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. ENTER CONSULTATIONS WITH HUMILITY AND AN OPEN MIND.

The U.S. government should enter consultations with local actors without predetermined solutions, conflicts of interest, or biases. Consultations should be used as a space to listen to local perspectives and learn about the needs of the community, not as a space for assumptions and impositions.

2. ENGAGE THE ENTIRETY OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY.

The U.S. government should identify representatives from all actors involved when engaging in consultations and programming. This process can be guided by local peacebuilders who can ensure that all groups, including marginalized and hard-to-reach populations, are appropriately represented.

3. INCLUDE AND PRIORITIZE LOCAL PERSPECTIVES.

The U.S. government should consult local peacebuilders in the development of the Global Fragility Strategy as well as throughout the entire project life cycle, including conflict assessments, planning, design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. The U.S. should also share additional learning and outcomes with local actors and civil society.

4. BUILD LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS OF TRUST AND MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY.

The U.S. government should make an effort to continue these partnerships with local organizations to build mutual understanding and trust. Local actors are experts and well-positioned in their communities and provide a valuable resource to the U.S. government which should not be underestimated or disregarded. Building trust is a long-term process and the U.S. government should be consistent in its efforts to foster positive partnerships through engagement and inclusion.

5. STRENGTHEN LOCAL CAPACITIES FOR PEACE AS A PRIMARY STRATEGY FOR REDUCING FRAGILITY.

The U.S. Government, through the Global Fragility Act, should engage with existing local networks to not only learn about local initiatives addressing fragility and conflict but also to help strengthen and scale-up these initiatives in sustainable ways, providing resources where there are gaps and in ways that do not distort local systems.

6. ADDRESS BARRIERS TO LOCAL ENGAGEMENT EARLY.

The U.S. government should work with local actors to identify context-specific barriers to groups' participation, especially those often and historically marginalized. The U.S. government should ensure these barriers are addressed early to the best extent possible. Maintaining an understanding of these contexts, in correspondence with local actors, will ensure inclusivity and comprehensive programming.

7. INCLUDE ATTENTION TO TRAUMA, PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACTS, AND MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS.

The U.S. government should support locally-owned and locally-led initiatives to address trauma, psychological impacts, and mental health. Confronting trauma is an integral part of resiliency-building and reconciliation. There is a high correlation between trauma or other mental health issues (e.g. substance abuse) and violence or war resumption. Where needed, the U.S. government can support INGOs in providing capacity training on trauma healing in addition to local practices for prevention work.

8. RESPECT AND ENSURE THE PROTECTION OF ALL PARTICIPANTS.

The U.S. government should respect and ensure the protection of all engaged actors, especially local civil society actors whose work and lives may be put at risk by engaging with external governments, or the U.S. in particular. Specifically, the U.S. government should protect the identities of all participants and only share information after obtaining permission from them.

9. SUPPORT ADAPTIVE AND FLEXIBLE PROGRAMMING AND FUNDING.

The Global Fragility Strategy needs to account for the fragile contexts in which it works, which can be affected by conflict, civil unrest, crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, and other unforeseeable factors. Programs should be flexible and allow for local peacebuilders and organizations to adapt and quickly respond to challenges, without the restrictions of rigid program structures. Funding for local groups should be flexible and multi-year. For all programming and funding, the U.S. government should ensure sustainability mechanisms and transition plans are built in from the beginning. Ultimately, peace is a long-term process, not a project.



About Alliance for Peacebuilding

Alliance for Peacebuilding is a nonpartisan network of 120+ organizations working in 153 countries working to end violent conflict and sustain peace. We build coalitions in key areas of strategy and policy to elevate the entire peacebuilding field.

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About Peace Direct

Peace Direct works with local people to stop violence and build sustainable peace. We believe that local people should lead all peacebuilding efforts.

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