Lasting solutions to fragility depend on peacebuilding

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Introduction

Despite evidence that affirms the value of early action[1], many donors and governments are stepping away from peacebuilding and conflict prevention approaches even as there is a sharp global rise in violent conflicts within, across and between states. These modern conflict environments are being shaped by interlinked, multidimensional threats – hybrid warfare, grey-zone coercion, drone proliferation, cyberattacks and transnational organised crime – amid rising authoritarianism and a fraying multipolar world order where multilateral norms and international law are being increasingly breached.[2]

In responding to such conflicts, many actors now default to military means over diplomacy or peacebuilding to manage, deter or prevent conflict, thus reinforcing a misguided belief that lasting peace can be secured through force. Enforced peace has long been identified as unsustainable 'negative peace'.[3] The move towards militarised responses is accompanied by declining development aid budgets. Waning support for development aid itself reinforces the drift away from peace and development-based solutions.[4]

Yet peacebuilding – if reframed and rooted in today's political and operational realities – remains essential to addressing the multidimensional nature of fragility and conflict. Although it has lost ground as a standalone agenda, an inclusive peacebuilding approach remains critical to ensuring that development, security and humanitarian interventions are effective and sustainable.

The convergence of urgent global challenges demands a move from rhetoric to real integration.[5] Fortunately, practitioners are already testing, refining and proving integrated peacebuilding approaches in complex contexts. A growing body of evidence and experience of peacebuilding's potential for conflict transformation is both an opportunity and an obligation to act more deliberately and ambitiously. Such actions call for adhering to critical red lines that stay within the broad framework of human rights related values and principles even when navigating growing complexities and to negotiate and implement approaches that fit fragile situations. At the same time, action is required to follow the threads set out by key peacebuilding principles that reach across complex conflict situations and engage in an informed political manner in redressing inequalities and injustice.

The following sections provide recommendations for policymakers as well as practitioners to address the new political realities and peacebuilding needs with the aim of transforming fragility towards more stable, inclusive and prosperous societies. The recommendations are underlined with snapshots of examples to better illustrate the proposed approaches. The examples are meant as general illustrations of integrated peacebuilding approaches. They are rooted in real programming activities and draw on the experiences of various organisations.

Integrated peacebuilding is the foundation for effective and sustainable development and security

In fragile and conflict-affected settings, development and military gains will be reversed unless they are grounded in sustainable peace. Addressing the root causes of conflict – inequality, exclusion, injustice, weak governance and fractured legitimacy – is key to long-term progress as tensions at the local level can be exploited politically by various actors. Early, coordinated design across sectors and actors must replace siloed or sequential approaches, ensuring that peacebuilding informs all programming from the outset. Crucially, programme budgets need to ensure that peacebuilding activities and expertise are adequately resourced, rooted in local realities, and informed by meaningful engagement with local communities and leadership. International actors must understand the diversity of stakeholders and political interests – and mitigate risks to those actors – to promote peaceful, well-governed, resilient states. Here are examples of how peacebuilding has been integrated into other sectoral programmes:

▶ Nurture partnerships to support service delivery and governance reforms. Building trust among communities and between citizens and the state is essential for sustainable development, while also providing legitimacy to governance programmes. Example: In Sierra Leone, community-based dialogue initiatives have been linked with health and education service delivery planning, improving both access and trust in local authorities.

▶ Build dialogue into natural resource management and climate adaptation. Environmental challenges can serve as shared entry points for peacebuilding and cooperation across divided communities. Example: In northern Kenya, joint grazing committees have brought pastoralist groups into structured dialogue, reducing human conflicts over land and water while supporting resilience efforts.

▶ Promote multi-stakeholder engagement embedded in food security programming. Inclusive processes can ensure that food security interventions do not exacerbate inequality or marginalisation. Example: In South Sudan, food distribution mechanisms informed by local conflict analysis helped prevent intercommunal tensions in areas hosting internally displaced people.

▶ Include transitional justice measures into political reform and state-building efforts. Integrating truth-telling, acknowledgment or accountability processes into governance or rule-of-law initiatives can address historical grievances. Example: In Colombia, land restitution programmes incorporated transitional justice mechanisms to recognise and repair harms to displaced communities.

▶ **Initiate collective action layered into urban safety and informal settlements.** Organising at the grassroots level around shared issues like safety, public space, or access to services can empower marginalised communities while creating constructive channels for local government engagement. Example: In Colombia, youth-led movements in Medellín helped reframe urban violence prevention constructively as a shared civic agenda.

▶ **Infuse objective-driven processes with analysis to support reform.** Peacebuilding actors can support mediation and reform processes with grounded, context-specific analysis on development related issues that can be less threatening than identity-based confrontation. Example: In Nepal, natural resource co-management frameworks became entry points for a discussion about federalism and inclusive governance after the civil conflict.

These are not easy actions. Donors and governments need to combine careful design and experimentation, with the ability to adapt and learn quickly when planning their responses within fragile conflict settings. It is a balancing act between empowering organisations and actors with locally rooted sources of legitimacy and power on the one hand and strengthening/building a social contract between diverse population groups and the state on the other. Crucially, promoting the integration of peacebuilding into sustainable development requires both the creation of meaningful incentives, and the ability to document progress along the way.

Learning needs must accompany the integrated peacebuilding agenda

Fragile settings are volatile, fluid and ambiguous; no intervention can be designed from the outset with complete information. Furthermore, peacebuilding must respond to evolving socio-political and other conditions at play. As a result, robust and adaptive monitoring, evaluation and learning allows for agile learning from new information and mistakes and for interventions that prove effective to be replicated.

Integrated peacebuilding is inherently political – and development and security actors must engage accordingly

No intervention is neutral. Development, humanitarian and peacebuilding programmes can re-shape local power dynamics, intentionally or not. Actors must acknowledge it and work political-ly – identifying formal and informal power structures, engaging divergent stakeholders, and foster-ing exchange on governance, justice, inclusion and rights. Political dialogue on developmental and (human) security can complement and enrich reform efforts by politicians and the diplomatic com-munity. It can also strengthen legitimate actors and legitimise transformative processes. However, it is essential to navigate power dynamics carefully, avoiding exposing local actors to risk, while also acknowledging the diversity of political perspectives and affiliations that exist at all levels, including the local. Examples are:

▶ Facilitate dialogue on power dynamics through natural resource or land tenure programmes. Pro-grammes focused on land and resource governance can serve as entry points for discussing con-tested ownership, historical grievances, and local power structures. Example: In Colombia, peace-building actors worked with rural development agencies to facilitate land restitution dialogues between displaced communities and government actors as part of the broader peace accord imple-mentation.

▶ Support local governance by facilitating civic participation. Inclusive consultation processes can legitimise local authorities by enabling citizen influence on local decisions. Example: In the East-ern Democratic Republic of the Congo, peacebuilders integrated community forums into infra-structure planning processes, helping build trust between residents and provincial authorities.

▶ Bridge conflict divides through collaborative climate adaptation planning. Where climate stress affects multiple communities, participatory planning can become a potential space to surface competing interests and identify common ground. Example: In Bangladesh, flood resilience pro-gramming incorporated local dialogue structures that included both upstream and downstream communities, improving shared water management while reducing political tensions.

▶ Strengthen inclusive decision making in displacement contexts. Peacebuilding can support dis-placed and host communities to jointly address service access, security concerns and representa-tion. Example: In Uganda, district-level refugee coordination forums gave access to local govern-ments in discussions on land use and public services.

▶ Elevate informal actors in local security or justice reforms. Working politically means recognising who holds influence (formal and informal) and finding ways to engage, balance or counterbalance them constructively. Example: In Somalia, local peacebuilders facilitated engagement between clan elders, women's associations and police forces to inform district-level security reforms that re-flected community priorities.

Integrated peacebuilding can inject new strategic momentum into the localisation agenda and engagement with politically estranged regimes[6]

Localisation needs more than rhetoric – it needs political realism, strategic clarity and operational courage. In politically estranged settings, working with local actors means navigating risk, legitimacy and power – not avoiding them. In environments where numerous national, regional and international interests compete to shape outcomes, it is necessary to be realistic in defining objectives, trade-offs, risks and key choices. Narratives that automatically delegitimise key actors narrow the scope of action and ignore solutions that may be the only viable path forward. This calls for a strategic view and a clear political mandate to engage relevant actors, not to legitimise them, but to achieve mutually amenable outcomes through the organisations, structures, and processes they have built, remaining flexible about the desired end-state. There is also need for collective strategies to engage effectively but minimally with actors who are incompatible with collaboration, but who, if sidelined could endanger others, while also empowering those that are. This means brokering pragmatic compromises that balance red lines rooted in international humanitarian law and human rights with complex local political settlements.[7] In practice, this approach can take many forms. For example, this can include:

▶ Engage actors with local legitimacy – even without international recognition. To have impact, peacebuilding should identify and work with local actors. Example: In Afghanistan, community councils managed basic services after national governance collapsed.

▶ Pursue transformation, not validation, of contested institutions. Provide opportunities for conflict actors to be part of transformative processes. Example: In Mindanao, the Philippines, former armed actors were incrementally integrated into autonomous regional governance.

▶ Minimize harm by managing risk – not by disengaging. Working in politically estranged settings often means finding solutions that benefit local populations whilst maintaining principles. Examples: South Sudan, technical coordination with armed actors protected humanitarian corridors without formal recognition.

▶ Avoid one-size-fits-all local partner models. Local programming needs to be developed based on contextual understandings. Example: In Lebanon, support strategies were adapted to sectarian and informal networks that shape municipal leadership.

▶ Empower local organisations to do what they know best. Local peace-focused organisations know the conflict dynamics and are best suited to develop solutions, thus funding should aim to strengthen such organisations where they exist. Example: In Iraq local organisations were funded to lead projects on post-Islamic State recovery based on developing solutions with local populations.

Conclusion

This policy brief points to the foundational role of peacebuilding in development and security and reiterates that peacebuilding and development are both inherently political and challenging. Nonetheless, rather than stepping away, moving towards stronger integration of peacebuilding and development to manage, deter and prevent conflict is what is needed. It is more likely to lead to a lasting peace than the use of militarised and enforced approaches. In a global context where national security priorities often override shared values, integrated peacebuilding remains essential – not optional. The arguments made in the policy brief are a firm reminder that if development, defence and foreign policy are to deliver sustainable results, peacebuilding must be treated as a political, locally grounded strategy and funded accordingly.

Endnotes

1   See United Nations and World Bank, Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict (World Bank: Washington, DC, 2018), www.pathwaysforpeace.org

2   Burrell, R. S., 'A full spectrum of conflict design: How doctrine should embrace irregular warfare', Irregular Warfare Initiative, 14 Mar. 2023, irregularwarfare.org/articles/a-full-spectrum-of-conflict-design-how-doctrine-should-embrace-irregular-warfare; and D'Cunha, S., Ferraro, T. and Rodenhäuser, T., "'Hybrid threats', 'grey zones', 'competition', and 'proxies': When is it actually war?", Humanitarian Law and Policy blog, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 16 Jan. 2025, blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2025/01/16/hybrid-threats-grey-zones-competition-and-proxies-when-is-it-actually-war

3   See for example International Alert (2023) Alert's approach to peacebuilding – English

4   'Donors in a post-aid world', ODI Global, [n.d.], odi.org/en/about/our-work/donors-in-a-post-aid-world; and 'The future of Global South–Global North cooperation in a post-aid world', Call for Participants, Peace Direct, mailchi.mp/80a08b386596/p4d_2025_gc-gn-1?e=609cf1a3a5

5   United Nations and World Bank (note 1), chapters 7–8.

6   Cliffe, S. et al., 'Aid strategies in 'politically estranged' settings: How donors can stay and deliver in fragile and conflict-affected states', Research Paper, Chatham House/New York University Center on International Cooperation (NYU CIC), 3 Apr. 2023, www.chathamhouse.org/2023/04/aid-strategies-politically-estranged-settings

7   On navigating institutional red lines and peacebuilding, see Campbell, S. P., Global Governance and Local Peace: Accountability and Performance in International Peacebuilding (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2018), doi.org/10.1017/9781108290630

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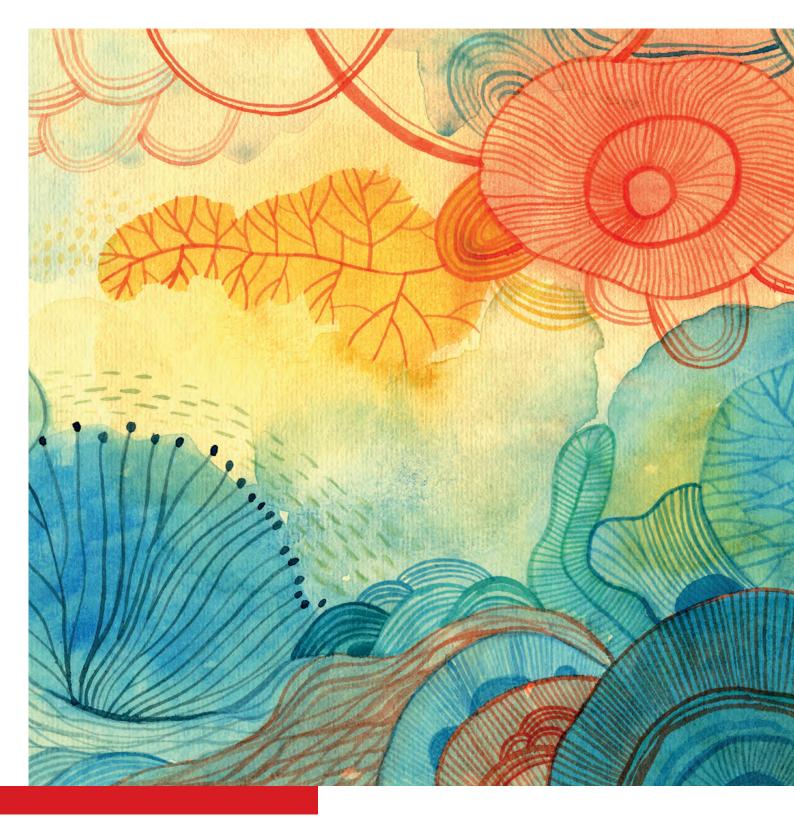
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