
Toward a Third Local Turn: Identifying and Addressing Obstacles to Localization in Peacebuilding

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Localization in peacebuilding, development, and humanitarian work is grounded on the claim that principles of both justice and effectiveness demand a transfer of power from international to local actors, and thus a change in the current donor–recipient relationship and the way international cooperation works and is structured. Like any transfer of power, this creates opportunities and provokes resistance. This article conducts a structured analysis of secondary literature and publicly available contributions from Southern practitioners to identify obstacles to localization in peacebuilding and explore concrete entry points for mitigating them. The mitigation strategies seek to rectify persistent power imbalances between international and local actors in the peacebuilding field. The article’s focus on practical steps toward localization helps to overcome the stuckness of the debate in the peacebuilding literature and move beyond the mere criticism of neoliberal peacebuilding. The article paves the way toward a third local turn in peacebuilding, which concentrates on how to achieve localization in everyday peacebuilding, focusing on its more radical, decolonial implications

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and avoiding the neutralizing effects of the incumbent, technocratic approach to peacebuilding.

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Introduction

“Localization” in international cooperation describes the norms, principles, and practices of a transfer of power, agency, and funds from international to local actors. It has been proposed as a solution to a dysfunctional and colonial aid system since at least the 1960s (first, in the language of decolonization of aid: Boateng 2021). Beginning in the 1990s, the language of localization began to appear in the development assistance and humanitarian aid sectors. These debates have resulted in a set of normative principles and frameworks that highlight not only the importance of local actors but also the need for a “localization” (Bonacker, von Heusinger, and Zimmer 2016) or “decolonization” (Peace Direct 2021) of aid.

Although the localization debate has reached the peacebuilding field only recently, the interaction between internationals and locals in peacebuilding has been at the core of various academic and practitioner conversations since the early 1990s. The corresponding debates within the peacebuilding literature have mainly taken place under the rubric of two “local turns.” The first local turn developed a new conceptual understanding of peacebuilding, which stressed the agency of local (i.e., non-elite, national) actors, and the key role they play in achieving lasting peace (Lederach 1997). Scholars in the second local turn described local actors’ resistance to peacebuilding interventions steered from the outside and developed a more nuanced understanding of the various actors, interests, and tensions encompassed by the local (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Paffenholz 2015). Related scholarship has discussed conflict sensitivity in peacebuilding (Bush 1998; Woodrow and Chigas 2009), the negative consequences of the NGO-ization and professionalization of peacebuilding (Paffenholz et al. 2010; Pearce 2010; Mac Ginty 2012), and, more recently, proposals to decolonize peacebuilding (Weerawardhana 2018; Randazzo 2021).

The literature outlined above presents a rich source of findings about why peacebuilding without local actors in the driving seat is

not possible. It also elaborates on the challenging relationship between internationals and locals when it comes to power relations and operational practicalities such as capacity and institution building, funding, monitoring, and accountability. Projects continue to be designed according to global templates and funding streams and often are managed by international staff. Local organizations that do succeed in raising donor funds have to assimilate to Northern donor practices that in effect act as gatekeepers to other local organizations seeking funding.

Researchers and practitioners have shown increasing awareness of this biased relationship between Northern and Southern actors that impedes localization. However, the academic debate on localization in peacebuilding remains stuck and has struggled to move beyond simply criticizing (neo)liberal peacebuilding. Importantly, it lacks creativity and answers for how to address the fundamental problem of localization. Even as rhetorical commitments to localization have become nearly ubiquitous across the development, humanitarianism, and peacebuilding fields, the share of assistance directly made available to local and national nongovernmental organizations has barely moved in years.

This article sets out to develop a better grasp of why localization is not materializing. It uses secondary literature to identify obstacles to localization and to explore concrete strategies for how to mitigate them. To counterbalance the exclusion of Southern experts from academic forums, we also draw on “altac” public forum contributions (talks, essays, etc.) from Southern scholars and practitioners in the peacebuilding and development fields. The analysis points to two overarching categories of obstacles to localization. The first revolves around the issue of power and describes the multifaceted dominance of Northern actors across various dimensions that directly affect peacebuilding and marginalize the local. These power asymmetries, which benefit donor countries and national elites in the South, mirror broader neocolonial power structures. The second explanation sees localization as a matter of closing the gap between intention and outcome. In this view, a set of challenges ranging from the trivial to the fundamental stand in the way of a clear objective (i.e., general agreement about what it would mean to localize) and sincere commitment. Despite interesting examples of alternative approaches to aid practices, there is a general lack of creativity in implementing a more transformative agenda that cannot only be explained by inherent resistances.

We acknowledge that reversing the colonial power structure is difficult to achieve in one go. We therefore concentrate on strategies to promote localization in peacebuilding under the shadow of persistent power asymmetries. Compiling and discussing the different types of obstacles and exploring corresponding mitigation strategies could help to overcome stuckness. We argue this can be considered an early example of a third local turn in peacebuilding. This third local turn builds on earlier criticism of (neo)liberal peacebuilding and incorporates recent proposals for the decolonization of peacebuilding as well as the localization debates from humanitarian aid and development.

The third local turn moves peacebuilders toward a pragmatic discussion of how to transfer power, agency, and funds from international to local actors. Concretely, this requires us to decolonize the knowledge that informs peacebuilding interventions; to support direct, flexible, and risk-positive approaches to funding; to replace technocratic programming and monitoring with creative and participatory approaches; and to help create an environment conducive to local peacebuilders' work. More research and exchanges between practitioners and researchers on how to implement the mitigation strategies outlined in this article will be necessary to implement the third turn. This special issue of *Negotiation Journal* is an important first step in this regard.

The article begins with a history of the localization debate in peacebuilding, from the two "local turns" to the influence of humanitarian and development localization debates on peacebuilding. We then demonstrate the discrepancy between international normative commitments to localization in peacebuilding and peacebuilding practices. Drawing on academic and practitioner literature reviews, including evaluation reports to analyze power dynamics at play, we then identify obstacles that hamper localization in the peacebuilding field as well as corresponding strategies to address them. We conclude with a wrap-up of the key findings.

A Short History of Localization in Peacebuilding

Localization is not a new idea. If we define it as the claim that principles of both justice and effectiveness demand a transfer of power, agency, and money from international to local actors, then localization has been proposed as a solution to a dysfunctional and colonial aid system since at least the 1960s (Boateng 2021).¹ The "localization agenda," on the other hand, is generally treated as beginning in the 1990s. Milestones included the 1992 OECD Development Assistance Committee Guidelines on Programming Aid for Development, which

Table One
Significant Developments in Localization Norms Since 1992

Processes and Forums	Milestones
OECD Development Assistance Committee Guidelines on Programming Aid for Development	1992. <i>Development Cooperation: A Guide to the Rules and Regulations</i> 1996. <i>Shaping the 21st Century: The contribution of development co-operation</i> 2007. <i>The DAC Guidelines on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment</i> 2008. <i>The DAC Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations</i> <i>The DAC Guidelines for Poverty Reduction</i> 2010. The OECD-DAC Recommendation on Good Institutional Donorship 2011. The DAC Recommendation on Aid for Trade 2016. The DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development Nexus
High-Level Forums on Aid Effectiveness (2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2016)	2005. Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness 2008. Accra. Agenda for Action 2011. Busan. Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (the New Deal) ^a
World Humanitarian Summit (WHS)	2016. Resulted in a set of 51 commitments by major donors and aid organizations to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian aid (the Grand Bargain)

^aCollection of principles and criteria for North–South cooperation endorsed at the fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan in November 2011. The New Deal emerged out of a demand by a group of self-identified “fragile, conflict-affected and transitional situations.”

identified engagement with local actors as the core pillar of a more efficient aid system (Mateos and Solà-Martín 2022). See Table One. Similarly, within peacebuilding, the engagement of local peace-builders has been a topic of academic and practitioner debate since

the early 1990s (Lederach 1997; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Paffenholz 2015).

Overall, in international cooperation, there is considerable agreement that localization is both effective and normatively desirable, alongside considerable confusion about who qualifies as local and what it would mean to localize. Hence, the local is sometimes described as community-level or grassroots actors, sometimes as nation state-level actors, and sometimes as meso-level actors between these two poles, especially in the form of NGO-ized civil society organizations (CSOs) headquartered in Southern capitals. Lately, there is also a distinction made between national and subnational local spheres, so as to do more justice to the reality of local spaces outside of the capitals that are not necessarily all grassroots communities but include regional administrative and power centers.

The peacebuilding field has its own distinct history of imagining the “local,” which can be grouped into two distinct phases or “local turns in peacebuilding” (Paffenholz 2015). The first local turn was triggered by the unipolar moment at the end of the Cold War that raised hopes that non-international armed conflicts (many of which had turned on the Cold War axis) would gradually be resolved, led by a revitalized United Nations. The UN Agenda for Peace (Boutros-Ghali 1992) became the main reference document for a policy conceptualization of peacebuilding practice (though an earlier academic conceptualization can be traced to Galtung’s definition of peacebuilding (1975)). In the UN Agenda for Peace, peacebuilding is defined as an outside intervention in support of national peace processes in conflict countries, with the objective of ending violence and rebuilding states after wars. After several successful UN peace missions during the early 1990s, the failure of the UN and the international community to support sustainable peace in places like Somalia, Rwanda, or the former Yugoslavia began to undermine this orthodoxy. This led to a reorientation of the debate in research and practice in two directions. First, conflict management scholars began to research more effective ways of conducting peacebuilding and statebuilding (De Soto and Del Castillo 1994; Hampson 1996; Walter 1997; Call and Cousens 2008; Barnett and Zürcher 2009). Second, the then-newly established conflict transformation school, with John Paul Lederach (1997) as its most prominent representative, advocated a different conceptual understanding of peacebuilding, emphasizing the necessity of empowering local people as the primary authors of peacebuilding instead of externally designed and driven peace interventions. The main assumption behind this shift was that ultimately only local actors from within the conflict context would be able to build sustainable peace in their own countries.

The second local turn in peacebuilding (Paffenholz 2015) began as a critique of the liberal peacebuilding project, triggered by the failure of international liberal peacebuilding, especially in the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Scholars in the second local turn highlighted the resistance of local actors to the excesses of the liberal peacebuilding project (Lund 2003; Paris 2004). The earliest works in the second local turn were criticized for an overly binary categorization of local and international, as well as at times romanticized depictions of the “local” (Paffenholz 2015). Scholars like Mac Ginty (2010) and Björkdahl and Gusic (2015) pointed to the role of hybridity and deconstructed the local as a nexus, rather than a specific type of actor or social position (Paffenholz 2015; Ljungkvist and Jarstad 2021). For example, Mac Ginty argues for an interpretation of the local “in its own right, and not as a mere adjunct to the somehow more important levels of analysis such as the state, the region or the metropolis” (Mac Ginty 2015: 848).

More evidence emerged from case study research demonstrating more detailed features of the distinctiveness of “the local” and complicated the binary presentation of the “good local” and the “bad international.” However, studies also highlighted more concrete cases of how the system of international dominance works in peacebuilding. Autesserre’s work on armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo shows how international actors refrained from addressing the underlying causes of local violence but rather focused on humanitarian programs and organizing elections. Congolese NGOs and civil society actors lacked the necessary financial and technical capacity to promote local peacebuilding, which is why conflict prevailed (Autesserre 2010). In Nepal, donors used their dominant position to establish client peacebuilding organizations to implement their own agenda in the country post-conflict (Chalmers 2010).

In general, peacebuilding interventions informed by the second local turn have struggled to convert insights about the ambiguity of the local into a new approach to peacebuilding. A recognition that internationally driven projects often lead to hybrid orders, shaped by locals’ resistance to parts of the donor agenda, has not been easily translated into deliberate attempts to foster hybrid outcomes through project design, which have tended to privilege some local actors—mostly elite, urban civil society—over others (Paffenholz 2015; Bargués-Pedreny and Randazzo 2018; Schirch 2022).

Some scholars, especially from aid-receiving countries, argue that a more radical transformative approach is required (e.g., Mignolo 2009; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015; Zondi 2017; Randazzo 2021). Decolonial approaches to development and peacebuilding have been around for

decades—indeed, the first localization debates (referenced above) took place in the language of decolonization. More recently, there has been a wave of interest in decolonization as a critical lens on peacebuilding. In terms of practical reform, some decolonial theorists propose cutting humanitarian and development INGOs out at the national level, through concerted action by Southern states and radically reversing the current system in the form of a restorative approach rather than an internationally owned localization (Boateng 2021). Others propose restructuring the relationship around a reparations model that emphasizes the culpability of former colonial states in the underdevelopment of the global periphery (Klein and Fouksman 2022).

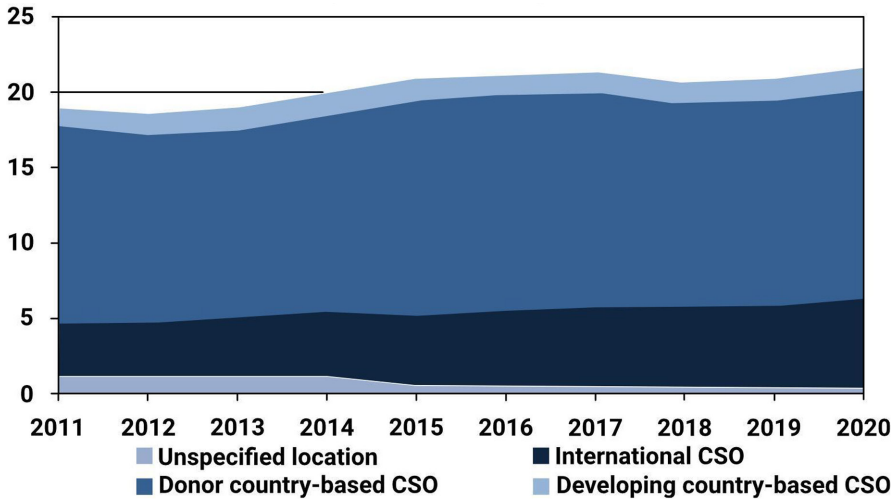
More recently, peacebuilding organizations and a few scholars have begun to orient themselves toward the localization debates in humanitarianism and development. In combination with the more recent iteration of the decolonization debate, this can be seen as the beginning of a third local turn in peacebuilding, one that combines the overall system criticism with practical questions about how to overcome the implementation gap. Although this debate encompasses earlier local turns, it also has a slightly different focus as it orients itself toward the localization debate in humanitarian aid and development.

In the humanitarian and development sectors, localization generally refers to the distribution of funding to different non-international actors in the form of direct aid delivery to local organizations (i.e., without passing through an international entity). Alternatively, localization is sometimes defined in terms of the internal operations of governmental and nongovernmental organizations that fund and implement programs. This involves questions of how knowledge is constructed; how staff are recruited, promoted, and trained; how norms are interpreted and applied; and how decisions are taken. In an environment of scarcity, reforms to increase the percentage of local staff in management roles, equalize pay for equal work, and deemphasize generalist skills in favor of those capabilities required to understand and engage with locals, would all impose costs on those who benefit from the status quo. These definitions of localization are conceptually distinct (funding vs. operations), but not incompatible. Another (sub-)angle of the operational localization debate is so-called remote management, defined as the withdrawal of international managers from the site of service delivery as a temporary measure, usually in response to inaccessibility due to insecurity or other circumstances (e.g., COVID). This originally temporary planned measure (Donini and Maxwell 2013) has entered the operational localization debate as another possible option to localize further when introduced as a permanent feature.

As noted, the humanitarian and development localization agenda is treated generally as beginning in the 1990s. Since then, the norm has meandered through dozens of guidelines, declarations, and plans for action, gradually attracting stronger statements of support and occasionally even concrete commitments (see Table [One](#)), which have led to only very modest reforms (Pyles [2017](#); Elkahlout and Elgibali [2020](#); Pincock, Betts, and Easton-Calabria [2021](#); Khan and Kontinen [2022](#)). In 1996, the OECD identified localization as the core pillar of a more efficient aid system (Mateos and Solà-Martín [2022](#)). Since then, the international donor community has endorsed several frameworks that reinforce the importance of local ownership and express donors' intention to enhance the influence of receiving governments, communities, and NGOs over international aid relationships. The 2020 Grand Bargain contains an explicit commitment to render humanitarian action "as local as possible and as international as necessary" (Barakat and Milton [2020](#); Mohamed-Saleem [2020](#): 180). Despite these commitments, the share of assistance made available to local and national nongovernmental organizations barely has moved in years.

The OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) can be viewed as generally representative of donor funding. In 2020, OECD DAC members sent 14.1 percent of their annual total bilateral official development assistance (ODA) directly to or through CSOs, and these figures barely have moved in a decade. Funding "to" CSOs refers to core contributions and contributions to programs. Funding "through" CSOs refers to funds earmarked for implementing donor-initiated projects (OECD DAC [2022](#)). Not surprisingly, "funding to" makes up a much smaller share of ODA than "funding through" CSOs—in 2020, funding to CSOs from OECD official development assistance was US\$3 billion, while funding through CSOs was US\$18 billion (14 percent and 82 percent of the total, respectively) (OECD DAC [2022](#)). There is considerable variation in the extent of channeling funding to CSOs across individual member states, with larger donors funding more of their own programs, and smaller donors devoting more funding to and through CSOs. In 2020, France, Germany, and Iceland sent <10 percent of their total bilateral development assistance to and through CSOs. The corresponding figures for Czechia and the Republic of Ireland were 36 percent and 41 percent, respectively. The vast majority of that funding is channeled through donor country-based CSOs (see Figure [One](#)). The share of *peacebuilding* funding to and through CSOs largely mirrors the general trend. In 2021, DAC donors allocated 22.5 percent of peacebuilding funds to and through CSOs (as opposed to 14 percent overall).²

Figure One
ODA Allocations to and through CSOs by Type of CSO USD
Billion, 2020 Constant Prices



Source: OECD DAC 2022: 7

Given the strong international normative commitments to localization, the limited progress on implementing the localization agenda in the peacebuilding field is puzzling. The subsequent section proposes a list of obstacles identified in the literature that may explain the discrepancy between international pledges to localize and current peacebuilding practices. We use the discussion of the obstacles as a foundation to explore effective mitigation strategies.

Localization Practices: Obstacles and Alternative Approaches

From the perspective of donor states, development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding assistance create power over the states and populations of the Global South. These unequal power relations perpetuate former colonial relationships of dependency and extraction. This claim is both empirically well documented (in the persistent effects of colonial laws, institutions, etc., see e.g., Robinson and Acemoglu 2012) and has been deeply theorized by the likes of Kwame Nkrumah (1965), Frantz Fanon (1968), Anibal Quijano (2000a), Ramón Grosfoguel (2007), Walter Dignolo (2009), and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013).

Quijano (2000a, 2000b) and Ndlovu-Gashteni (2013) describe a variety of entrenched colonial “matrices of power” that have survived the end of de jure colonialism. Power and control remain the defining feature of the Northern–Southern relationship (Grosfoguel 2007). This reinforces the Euro-American-centric, Christian-centric, patriarchal, capitalist, heteronormative, and racially hierarchized global order that was established during colonialism (Grosfoguel 2011; Ndlovu-Gashteni 2015). Northern dominance and control also continue to shape the peacebuilding, development, and humanitarian fields. Here, unequal structural power manifests in dismissive attitudes toward the capabilities, knowledge, resilience, and ethics of “local” development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding actors who are construed as weak, helpless, traumatized, and irrational (Donais 2009; Kluczewska and Kreikemeyer 2022).

Progressing the localization agenda hinges upon the fundamental reworking of these persistent power asymmetries between the Global North and the Global South, but also within the latter. This challenge obviously seems unfeasible and too overwhelming to be achieved in one go. However, it can be broken down into several activities and measures, which, in combination, enhance local agency in peacebuilding. Understanding the tangible obstacles to localization that are related directly to the patterns of power and control outlined above denotes a promising entry point in this regard. The following discussion elaborates on this task. It presents several obstacles to localization and identifies concrete measures to address them.

Exclusion of Southern Knowledge Requires Decolonized Knowledge Production

The production of peacebuilding knowledge mimics other forms of colonial relationship, insofar as local researchers do the data collection and are mentioned in the acknowledgment, while international researchers set the agenda, publish, and receive the credit (see also Manji 2011; Restrepo 2018; Mwambari 2021).³ There is also a persistent tendency among Northern peacebuilding actors to regard local peacebuilding knowledge as inferior (Mac Ginty 2012; Bargués-Pedreny and Randazzo 2018; Piquard 2022).⁴

There are two important drivers of the Northern-dominated knowledge production. On the one hand, Southern researchers often lack the necessary social and financial mobility to contribute to the ongoing academic research debates (Julian, Bliesemann de Guevara, and Redhead 2019; Haastrup and Hagen 2021). On the other hand, Northern researchers have been unwilling to compromise on their overarching objective to produce generalizable conclusions on peacebuilding

interventions that apply beyond the local, preferring to use “tools” and other portable categories to understand the local rather than draw on local actors’ indigenous knowledge systems and expertise (Manji 2011; Ezeanya-Esiobu 2017; Tema 2020).

Northern academic contributions also foreground the agency of international interveners. This explains the lack of systematic examinations of what peacebuilding initiatives *without* external interference could look like (Autesserre 2017; Bargués-Pedreny and Randazzo 2018). Similarly, investigations into the impact and effectiveness of peacebuilding operations also continue to exclude researchers from the Global South (Autesserre 2017; Haastrup and Hagen 2021; Johnson et al. 2022).

Southern think tanks and experts have pushed for indigenous research methodologies and strategies that embrace local knowledge and expertise in order to rectify persisting power biases in the peacebuilding field (e.g., Manji 2011; Peace Direct 2021). Weerawardhana (2018) argues that Northern knowledge production processes have been unable to identify and address the underlying causes of conflict. Autesserre arrives at a similar conclusion for the DRC (Autesserre 2010). Her analysis reveals that international actors who operated in the DRC in the 2000s misperceived the importance of local drivers of continuous armed violence. This misperception caused international actors to rely on elections as a peacebuilding tool, which did little to stabilize the country. Locals, on the other hand, are better placed to understand why conflict erupted in the first place and what could be done to mitigate it (Al-Sakkaf 2011; Ezeanya-Esiobu 2017; Ori 2017; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2018; Weerawardhana 2018). As the Nigerian academic and researcher Michael Onyebuchi Eze (2021) puts it: African countries have their own solutions, which must be incorporated in the decision-making process.

There exist several pathways toward rectifying the Northern-biased knowledge production system on peacebuilding. Weerawardhana (2018) argues that decolonizing peacebuilding is a prerequisite for harnessing local knowledge (see also Schirch 2022). This requires acknowledging that colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary peacebuilding initiatives and marginalize local voices. The continuous application of the term “capacity building” by Northern actors serves as an apt example (Peace Direct 2021).

Embracing new research designs in peacebuilding academia will also help to promote and strengthen the role of Southern knowledge in peacebuilding academia. For example, it could mean a different understanding of what “good” data mean (Millar 2018; Julian et al. 2019). Embracing new research designs could also change the

relationship of the dominant Northern (well-funded) researcher that commissions data collection to local researchers who merely get an acknowledgment, instead of joint or Southern-only agency. Establishing platforms for regular exchanges between actors and practitioners from the Global North and the Global South would be helpful in this regard (see Mohamed-Saleem 2020). Northern actors could use these frequent exchanges to learn local languages and expand their knowledge of local dynamics as well as their cultural empathy (see Pyles 2017). At the same time, they could share their research knowledge with partners. Ideally, this would result in vibrant exchanges on how to adapt existing research strategies, knowledge, and peacebuilding tools to specific country contexts.

Specific funding criteria that require joint peacebuilding initiatives could be a supplementary approach to pave the way toward a frequent exchange between local and international actors. Extending the time period that staff members of international peacebuilding organizations are sent to the field might also be conducive to the development of in-depth relationships between local and external actors. In the past, the frequent turnover of external staff has prevented such relationships (see Ejdus 2017).

A more transformative approach can be seen in the work of private foundations. For example, the Open Society Foundations network connects think tanks in Africa, with the goal of developing African research agendas that contribute to addressing African challenges by African scholars as well as global challenges from an African perspective. International actors also have undertaken several initiatives to mitigate the biased knowledge production system. For example, DFID and Sida set up the “Strengthening Research Knowledge Systems Program” and funded it for five years. This program promoted the global visibility of locally produced research. Hundreds of journal articles were set up to give thousands of Southern researchers the opportunity to publish their research. At the same time, the program improved Southern researchers’ access to global knowledge (INASP 2018).

A Cumbersome Funding System Must Become Flexible Institutionally Owned Local Funding

Southern practitioners and experts have identified major flaws in the funding system, which perpetuate colonial structures and marginalize the agency of local organizations (e.g., Manji 2011; Eze 2021; Peace Direct 2021). A relatively small number of international actors continues to control funding streams for peacebuilding and remains the most critical source of funding for most local peacebuilders (Autesserre 2017).

Kenyan activist and scholar Firoz Manji (2011) sees the flawed development and humanitarian funding system as a form of neocolonialism that impedes emancipation and self-determination in the Global South. He argues that Northern actors use development aid to control the economies and politics of the Global South, marginalizing local knowledge and perpetuating inequality and exploitation.

Their strong dependence on external donors incentivizes local peacebuilders and development practitioners to tailor their practices, missions, and activities to what they think international actors want to hear (Cohen 2014; Peace Direct 2021). This contributes to the ongoing marginalization of local actors and deprives them of any opportunity to implement their own visions and ideas (Sen 1999; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2018). Researchers and practitioners have observed such dynamics in a variety of country contexts, including Bangladesh, Kenya, and Sri Lanka.

There are additional funding-related issues that undermine local peacebuilding efforts. Firstly, international peacebuilding funding is oriented toward short-term interventions (Eze 2021). Donors often exert significant pressure to generate measurable results in the shortest time frame possible. The resulting time pressure often leads to international actors excluding local voices when designing peacebuilding interventions (Cohen 2014; Ejodus 2017; Millar 2018; Katoka and Kwon 2021). Eze (2021) adds that these short-term solutions also struggle to tackle the underlying causes of poverty and conflict.

Secondly, the constant need to apply for new funding costs local actors precious resources and prevents them from actual peacebuilding. Thirdly, funding is often earmarked for specific projects. The often predetermined scope of projects stifles local actors' creativity when it comes to new peacebuilding practices and limits their flexibility to implement peacebuilding practices that they deem most suitable for the local context (GPPAC and Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation 2021).

Finally, ODA funding for peacebuilding activities is limited, particularly for local, women, and youth peacebuilders (GPPAC and Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation 2021). The scarcity of peacebuilding funding creates intense competition among local peacebuilders—but also between local and international peacebuilders—for external financial support (Paffenholz 2011; Cohen 2014; Kluczevska 2019; Lee 2020). This competition for funding undermines the efforts of local actors to join forces and develop dense networks of peacebuilders on the ground that could mitigate the dependence on external actors in the long run. This results in a patchy landscape of local peacebuilding actors who are dependent on external funding.

Senegalese activist and founder of *Femmes Africa Solidarité*, Bineta Diop (2012), stresses that women's peacebuilding organizations

and local peacebuilders may only thrive when they have access to external funding. International actors will therefore have to show courage and commitment to rectify the flawed funding system and support strong local peacebuilding. This involves enhancing the accountability capacities of local actors and giving them more liberty in designing and implementing peacebuilding initiatives (Barakat and Milton 2020). To this end, it is important to build trust between local and international actors to mitigate the prevalent skepticism toward the skills of local actors (Cohen 2014; Ori 2017; Peace Direct 2021; Khan and Kontinen 2022).

Access to flexible, long-term institutional funding would help to mitigate the competition for financial support among local actors, curtail the prevalence of short-term, project-based funding (see Kluczewska 2019), and guarantee local actors planning security. Institutional funding would also allow local actors to develop and implement activities that reflect their knowledge and thinking about peacebuilding. Several private foundations and very few countries—often small country donors like Switzerland, Norway, and Ireland—provide local organizations with institutional funding in support of their mission and not a specific donor project.

International actors such as INGOs could also contemplate cutting ties with donors to give local actors more wiggle room to design peacebuilding interventions. However, such a move would require significant courage as international actors themselves would risk their guaranteed access to funding (Cohen 2014). The Swiss-registered and globally operating think-and-do tank where the authors work, Inclusive Peace, provides local actors with advice and comparative evidence to enable them to drive and navigate political change processes. We aim to practice a decolonized approach to partnerships. For example, in order to ensure equal partnerships, Inclusive Peace does not directly fund any of our partners, which allows partners to assess the value of Inclusive Peace's work independent of funding dependencies. To attain funding for supporting partners, Inclusive Peace's donors mostly vet the relevance of our work together with our partners.

Setting up direct funding relationships between Northern donors and local actors is another way to revamp existing funding practices. Direct funding relationships would significantly increase local actors' power over how to use funds. Such relationships would also give local actors the opportunity to interact with donors directly and to indicate the peacebuilding interventions that they need and their ideas for meeting those needs. It is worth noting that such direct funding flows already exist. A few bilateral donors—and in particular private foundations—give direct support to local actors. However, the majority of funding flows still go through internationals.

The establishment of more direct funding relationships would require international actors to abandon their current intermediary role. This would certainly mean a reduction in their leverage over peacebuilding interventions. However, international actors could seek their own independent funding to enable them to play the accompanying role. Thus, both the local and the international actors would get separate funding. Joint funding decisions are an alternative entry point to rework current funding practices. As part of this format, a diverse set of local and international actors convenes to discuss jointly the use of funds on the ground. Since joint funding decisions offer local and international actors the opportunity to collaborate on eye level, this seems to be the preferable scenario.

More generally, international actors will have to engage in innovative and creative thinking in order to address the institutional obstacles to direct funding partnerships with local actors outlined above. Reducing the bureaucratic hurdles currently existing in the global funding system is a first step toward direct relations between Northern donors and local actors.

Risk-Averse Accountability and Funding Mechanisms Replaced with Risk Positivity

Funding from international actors comes with strict accountability requirements, with which local actors often struggle to comply (see e.g., Cohen 2014). The German Civil Peace Service (CPS) is a case in point. The CPS has been designed to support local peacebuilding organizations. Following the provisions included in the German Federal Budget Code, the donor of the CPS, that is, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, asks local auditors for original vouchers. Collecting the original vouchers and receiving approval for them is a cumbersome task for local auditors. Moreover, the regulatory framework that defines all procedures related to financial administration is complex and not necessarily apparent to all parties involved. The same is true for opaque administrative procedures beyond those related to financial administration (Paffenholz et al. 2011).

Northern donors prefer to keep tight oversight of the funds they disseminate and only fund counterparts on the ground whom they trust, that is, sophisticated elite organizations (Cohen 2014; Duckworth 2016; Elkhahlout and Elgibali 2020). The risk aversion of Northern donors has incentivized them to exclude local partners from financial administration activities around peacebuilding interventions in some countries (Paffenholz et al. 2011). Moreover, many Northern countries have enacted funding laws that bar domestic organizations from making any direct transfers to organizations based in specific countries with whom a strong relationship is lacking (Gibbons and

Otiaku-Boadu 2021). Southern practitioners have attributed Northern risk aversion to a profound lack of trust in their capacities (Karbo 2012; Peace Direct 2021).

As noted, local partners often struggle to understand and comply with Northern donors' complex and strict accountability criteria. Exploring new ways to design accountability mechanisms in collaboration with local partners will strengthen the latter's ownership in peacebuilding interventions. Ideally, the designing phase would allow for consultations with local peacebuilding actors and state administrations on the mutual commitments and obligations of the new accountability regime. Training sessions targeting a broader audience of local peacebuilding actors and staff members of state authorities could accelerate the implementation of the efficient, alternative accountability mechanisms. This will arguably enhance Northern donors' trust in local partners. A vibrant literature on innovative ways to strengthen downward accountability in the humanitarian sector offers valuable entry points in this regard (see e.g., Hilhorst et al. 2021).

The potential misapplication of strict but vague anti-terrorism finance laws poses an additional threat to funding streams from the Global North to the Global South (Crimm 2008). Bennett et al. (2015) mention the case of Uzbekistan to illustrate how authoritarian regimes around the world have used anti-terrorism laws to arrest various civil society actors. The arbitrary arrests of civil society actors deter Northern donors from funding local organizations without thorough, resource-intensive background checks. This turns existing anti-terrorism finance laws into a tool of elite resistance to local peacebuilding initiatives.⁵ Reviewing and adjusting the legal framework for funding relationships with local actors in the Global South could help to mitigate funding barriers.

Technocratic Peacebuilding Replaced with Creative and Participatory Programming and Monitoring

Donors and international actors have sought to maximize the efficiency of peacebuilding initiatives. Roger Mac Ginty (2012) describes this focus on efficiency as the "technocratic turn in peacebuilding" (see also Paffenholz et al. 2010). This technocratic turn promotes homogenized tools and language for conflict analysis as well as uniform technical knowledge that international peacebuilders apply in all contexts. Accordingly, organizations and practitioners from the Global North have developed several peacebuilding handbooks (Mac Ginty 2012). These handbooks contain uniform tools and best practices that guide peacebuilding interventions irrespective of any context specificities. Paffenholz et al. (2010) note that donors have been eager to support

the professionalization of peacebuilding with financial and technical support.

Redefining the role of international actors in the peacebuilding field is a prerequisite for further advancement of the localization agenda. This mainly calls for international actors to abandon their dominance when it comes to agenda setting and research, funding, and monitoring activities, and to embrace a new role as accompanying partners to local actors. Accompanying partnerships will see local and international actors making joint decisions about funding, research activities, and the use of peacebuilding tools and monitoring mechanisms. Participatory decision-making—enabling local actors to influence peacebuilding and humanitarian interventions—will strengthen perceptions of ownership and fair treatment among local actors. International actors also need to allow for a more direct funding relationship between Northern donors and local actors, and confine themselves to advising the latter on how to use the funds they receive.

This recommendation uses the language of “participation,” but as Schomerus (2023) recently has shown, local actors’ participation in donors’ service provision initiatives does not automatically enhance local agency. Rather, local actors will only develop feelings of ownership, dignity, and fair treatment when they experience their inclusion as meaningful, that is, when they have access to resources and are able to influence decision-making processes.

Digital communication tools are a potential pillar of a more robust and sophisticated monitoring system, one that includes local partners and intervention beneficiaries. Mobile phones, social media platforms, and computer-based interview systems give local beneficiaries the opportunity to share frequent updates and provide in-depth information about how a specific intervention is coming along (Hilhorst et al. 2021). Online tools also allow the collating of qualitative, in-depth feedback on project interventions that are implemented in an insecure environment.

Wherever the security situation is more conducive to physical meetings, community gatherings offer another platform for collecting information on interventions. Billboards, posters, and focus group discussions are other tools for collecting information (Hilhorst et al. 2021). The insights gained in these direct exchanges with local partners and project beneficiaries can then feed into an overarching qualitative monitoring system.

Researchers have proposed other strategies to develop robust and inclusive monitoring mechanisms. Mac Ginty and Firchow (2014) have led the Everyday Peace Indicators Project. This initiative uses surveys

to retrieve information about peace and change on the ground directly from local actors. The data collection procedure is scientifically rigid. Local people assemble to develop a set of survey questions and indicators that they find most meaningful when it comes to monitoring peace in their immediate environment. The resulting set of indicators thus reflects local language and local ways of thinking about peace and change.

The Action Evaluation methodology also pursues a participatory approach to monitoring and evaluation (Friedman and Rothman 2015) and is applicable to a variety of fields, including conflict resolution, education, the economy, and the environment. Local actors play the key role in Action Evaluation and define for themselves the meaning of success and the indicators of achieving it. This monitoring and evaluation practice also includes the development of interventions for realizing the goals of local actors and fosters coherence among local stakeholders.

Working toward a Local Environment that is Conducive to Implementing the Localization Agenda

The obstacles discussed above center on persistent patterns of Northern dominance and power. However, Northern scholars and practitioners have pointed to several *local* factors that donor states and Northern INGOs describe as unconducive to localization. The literature highlights three factors in particular. Firstly, local peacebuilding may rely on coercive and exclusionary practices that conflict with the notion of consensus as an international guiding principle for peacebuilding (see e.g., Funk 2012). Potentially divisive peacebuilding practices that reinforce ethnic cleavages can impede donors' efforts to enhance local ownership in peacebuilding (see Džuverović 2021). Secondly, bad governance and malfunctioning state institutions complicate the work of local peacebuilding actors in contexts such as Sierra Leone and Somalia (Karbo 2012; Barter and Sumlut 2022). Corruption is a major obstacle in this regard. It erodes the trust of local communities in their national government and undermines the necessary collaboration between national and local actors in localizing peacebuilding initiatives. Thirdly, local peacebuilding is an inherently dangerous undertaking that comes with severe security risks (Schenkenberg 2016). This is particularly true for women peacebuilders (Anderlini 2020; Holmes, Anderlini, and Schamber 2020). It follows that establishing an effective and context-sensitive protection regime is a prerequisite for the ability of local peacebuilders to move around freely and do their work, and thereby take the lead on peacebuilding activities (Elkahlout and Elgibali 2020).

Enhancing local ownership of peacebuilding also requires the approval of national governments and local elites, who are in turn eager to secure international resources to stabilize their rule and enrich themselves (Barnett and Zürcher 2009; Paffenholz 2015). National and local elites prohibit or interfere with peacebuilding activities that could threaten their power (Schenkenberg 2016; Barakat and Milton 2020; see also Goodwin and Ager 2021). Legislation to constrain civil society, corruption, and deliberate underfunding of potentially supportive institutional entities are only some strategies to marginalize local peacebuilding initiatives (Cammack 2007). The Guatemalan peace process in the 1990s and the Kenyan peace process since 2007 demonstrate how national and local elite resistance can override the results of local contributions to peace initiatives (Paffenholz 2015). In both countries, national and local elites rejected and openly campaigned against the peace agreements that local civil society actors had used to address the underlying causes of conflict and violence. Generally speaking, members of the elite are more likely to interfere with any form of political change in cases where they feel pressured by external actors or the public to agree to change. Elite resistance to peace agreement implementation in Eritrea, Fiji, and Togo demonstrates this pattern (Paffenholz et al. 2016).

Creating a conducive environment for local actors to assume leadership on peacebuilding activities requires a multifaceted approach. For example, interacting with local peacebuilding practitioners and scholars would grant Northern actors access to valuable information on the type and nature of different local peacebuilding practices. The resulting overview and understanding of the diversity of local approaches to peacebuilding activities will help donors and Northern-based INGOs to identify those local peacebuilding initiatives they wish to support and promote, even in the presence of potentially divisive local peacebuilding activities. With regard to protection, it will be important to mitigate threats and risks that local peacebuilders encounter both online and offline. Recent research points to several entry points for creating a robust protection regime for women peacebuilders, including helping peacebuilders to navigate the digital space, increasing public awareness of the dangerous work of peacebuilders, and fostering solidarity networks and collaboration among peacebuilders to promote mutual assistance and knowledge sharing. Without adequate security measures in place, local actors will be unable to play a more decisive role in peacebuilding interventions (Holmes et al. 2020; Poppelreuter 2022).

Finally, comparative research on peace and political transition processes indicates several opportunities to mitigate elite resistance against localization efforts (Hirblinger et al. 2019). These entry points obviously

only apply to those international and national actors who have a genuine interest in promoting meaningful localization. One promising strategy is for international civil society or state actors to negotiate with local elites and local peacebuilders on ways to increase the latter's leverage. Agreeing on a mutually acceptable framework that increases local peacebuilders' leverage while guaranteeing local elites continuous access to resources and influence could hedge against elite resistance to localization further down the road. Conditional funding or development aid are tools that the international community could consider employing as positive incentives for local elites to seek a fair compromise in these exchanges. Establishing monitoring mechanisms to assess local elites' compliance with the agreement could strengthen the prospects of long-term change. If national elites are reluctant to discuss the issue of localization, advocacy campaigns that seek to enhance public support for a more influential local peacebuilding sector could increase the pressure on elites and the costs of continued resistance.

Conclusion

This article has used secondary literature as well as publicly available contributions from Southern practitioners on localization and peacebuilding to identify obstacles that drive the persistent discrepancy between international commitments to localization and the lack of tangible progress in implementing the localization agenda. The obstacles presented center on the issue of persistent power asymmetries between the Global North and the Global South, which originate from the colonial period, as well as Southern elite resistance to enhanced local ownership. There is also a general lack of creativity in implementing a more transformative agenda.

Drawing on the localization debates in the fields of humanitarianism and development aid, the article has reflected on concrete entry points for mitigating the identified obstacles to localization in the peacebuilding field. We have argued that the localization agenda in peacebuilding (though ambiguous) is leading to a third local turn in peacebuilding. This third local turn would combine an attention to overarching power inequalities with a practical decolonization approach. The overarching objective of this conversation is to identify practical changes in the here-and-now of peacebuilding—on the condition that the focus on practical everyday operational changes is not used as an excuse to reject a more radical agenda and thus yet another approach to making peacebuilding more technical.

Alternatives for how to strike this delicate balance already exist in various dimensions that are directly related to peacebuilding activities. For example, the Open Society Foundations has enforced a staffing system that gives local actors full decision-making power while guaranteeing

them competitive salaries when compared to their Northern counterparts. The majority of funding continues to flow through internationals. However, some donors and private foundations have established direct funding relationships with local actors. Institutional rather than project-based funding as provided by private foundations and small-country donors like Switzerland, Norway, and Ireland also has helped to increase local actors' planning security. Regarding local knowledge production, private foundations like the Open Society Foundations have created spaces for African think tanks and African scholars to work jointly on research agendas and analyses that are tailored to local needs. Inclusive monitoring mechanisms like the Everyday Peace Indicators Project illustrate one approach to capture and establish local language and local ways of thinking about peace and change.

Overall, to make these and other alternatives mainstream, there is a need for a collective effort of Southern and Northern think tanks, like-minded donors, experts, researchers, and media outlets to exchange good practices and develop concrete suggestions for how to rectify persistent power imbalances in peacebuilding. Revamping peacebuilding practices will require profound behavioral and institutional changes, and hence time. International actors' levels of courage and creativity and their commitment to embrace their new role as accompanying partners for their local counterparts—who will yield increasing control over what actions to pursue and how to allocate funds—ultimately will determine the prospects of localization efforts in the peacebuilding sector.

NOTES

1. There is a distinct vocabulary of localization in humanitarianism that describes the process by which international norms are “localized” in their application in specific contexts, usually in the states of the global South. This topic is beyond the scope of this article (see e.g., Docherty, Mathieu, and Ralph 2020).

2. “Peacebuilding” assistance is defined as Sector: 15220 civilian peacebuilding and conflict resolution per the categories available on OECD.stat. See <https://stats.oecd.org/> (accessed 10/03/2023).

3. Dr. David Mwambari from the African Leadership Centre in London made a similar argument during the ID and Innovation Seminar on African Development, Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution in 2021. Schirch (2022) equally stresses the importance of local ownership and a more inclusive and equitable approach to peacebuilding and development.

4. This dismissive attitude also reinforces perceptions among international actors that their micromanagement of peacebuilding interventions is required for peace to materialize on the ground (Autesserre 2017; Ejodus 2017; Bargués-Pedreny and Randazzo 2018).

5. The risk of supporting terrorist organizations that hide behind allegedly serious local organizations further discourages Northern donors from establishing funding relationships with local partners. This is particularly true in conflict-affected countries such as Yemen.

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