



A PATHWAY TO **PEACE**

An **Engagement Framework**
for the Next Evolution of
Peacebuilding

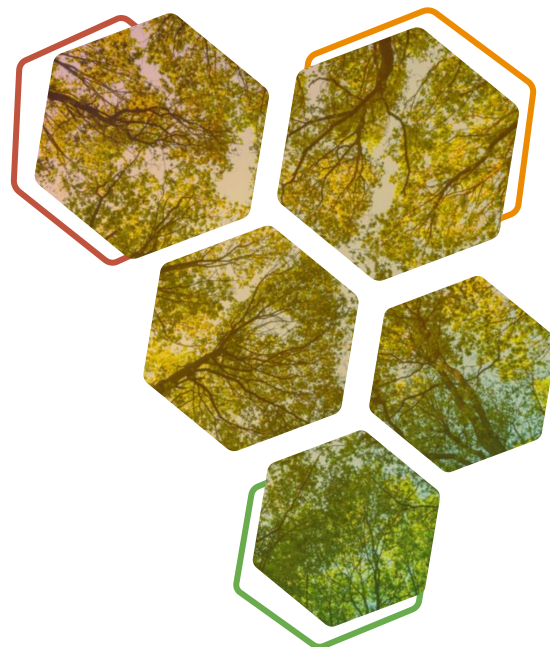


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Pathway to Peace: An Engagement Framework for the Next Evolution of Peacebuilders is a framework for visionaries and decision-makers dedicated to creating new ways of working together to achieve peace.

THIS FRAMEWORK WAS CREATED BY:



135
Proximate
Peacebuilders



ACROSS
37
countries



FROM
A global **survey & focus groups**

Proximate peacebuilders believe that peacebuilding is political and requires persistent action. They believe that peacebuilding has been siloed for far too long in the development and humanitarian spaces. Meanwhile, nonviolent social movements have not been recognized for creating the political climate in which peace can take hold.

This moment in history presents an opportunity to rebuild a more just system that will be sustained by long-term and trust-based relationships. Proximate peacebuilders and allies believe that mutual accountability will lead to more systemic and effective change. Implementation of the framework will need to be contextualized and may look different in different geographical areas. Proximate peacebuilders acknowledge that implementation of the framework may be challenging at first, but with time, new ways of cooperation will be formed. Proximate peacebuilders, activists, and allies proposed the following vision, guiding principles, and implementation standards.

VISION STATEMENT

WHAT WE'RE WORKING TOWARD



A system where peacebuilding is a locally led and context-specific endeavour that is rooted in community agency. It is sustained by creating long-term collaborative partnerships and coalitions rooted in mutual accountability. The goal is to build a more just and inclusive world.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

WHAT GUIDES THE WORK

Peacebuilding is an endeavor that is **culturally and contextually grounded**.



Decision-making processes are inclusive and aim to foster long-term and durable partnerships.



Relationships and partnerships between various actors are bound by shared values of mutual respect, trust, and openness.



Resources are distributed based on the responsibility of implementation, and peacebuilders are accountable to communities and donors on programmatic processes and results.



Learning and the creation of knowledge involves the exchange of lived experiences and practices between peacebuilders, international actors, funders, and communities.



RECOMMENDATIONS

HOW WE ACHIEVE OUR VISION

Build peace in tandem with broader struggles of systemic oppression to ensure a lasting peace.

Integrate the pursuit of peace across sectors, movements, and coalitions.

Support people and their communities in leading collaborative relationships and resolving conflict through culturally grounded, care-based, and non-violent mechanisms.

Create partnerships that are rooted in power-sharing dynamics and built on collective and mutual interests.

Invest in peacebuilding as a long-term process, grounded in patience, trust-building, and sustained commitment.

SETTING EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FRAMEWORK

The recommendations reflect a forward-looking approach that goes beyond immediate solutions. These may take five to ten years to implement. They will require all stakeholders and peacebuilders across different levels to work together to improve the foreign aid system. Successful implementation of the framework will demand a steadfast commitment from all peacebuilders, activists, and allies, regardless of location or position of influence. This framework is grounded in the understanding that all actors are needed to take action and work together to build peace.

We invite you to engage in the framework and to explore the recommendations organized by stakeholder, including bilateral donors, philanthropies, international non-governmental organizations, and proximate peacebuilders.

KEY TERMS¹

THE WORDS BEHIND OUR WORK

MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY: The condition of funders and nonprofits holding one another responsible for their actions, commitments, and decisions, and being willing to communicate with transparency when changes or shifts may occur that affect the other. In trust-based philanthropy, mutual accountability is reinforced by a shared sense of responsibility to the communities being served.

PEACEBUILDING: The action and processes taken by people, across the system, that help create the conditions for enduring peace.

PROXIMATE PEACEBUILDERS: Refer to those who are closest and most impacted by conflict - extending beyond professional and institutional actors to the everyday individuals across industries, experiences, and context who take agency over conflicts in their own lives and communities.

INTRODUCTION

CONTEXT

Peacebuilding is at a decisive moment as rising inequality, weakened aid, and eroded trust create conditions for new cycles of violence, undermining long-term peace efforts.

North American and European governments are moving away from implementing and funding human security agendas. Instead, governments are securing their borders and national interests by increasing military budgets. In the past five years, conflict levels have almost doubled.² Recent negotiated agreements are transactional, short-term, and fail to address the root causes of conflicts.³ Multilateral organizations and international law mechanisms are unable to adapt rapidly to cope with the interconnected challenges of today's world. People are confronting the realities of growing poverty, increasing inequality, and the effects of climate change. All while extractive economies produce massive wealth for a handful of individuals, and as funding for social change wanes.

The drastic funding cuts to foreign aid by North American and European governments have countered momentum towards building peace processes at the structural and community levels. They have reduced trust between communities and proximate peacebuilders interested in preventing violent conflict, addressing injustices, and rebuilding healthy societies.⁴ Power voids and increasing humanitarian needs are likely to exacerbate existing poverty and inequities. Unresolved intercommunal conflicts, combined with economic instability, can generate grievances that increase one's susceptibility to narratives portraying violence as an acceptable means of conflict resolution. Across several geographies, proximate peacebuilders have noted the rise of authoritarianism, shrinking civil society, and increased polarization. Uncertainty at both global and local levels, has fueled a rise in polarization and isolationism. The enabling conditions for worsening conflict are well underway.

In July 2025, Humanity United led a global survey to consult proximate peacebuilders and other actors about power dynamics, the funding landscape, and recommendations for the future. Peacebuilders noted the overall lack of funding and support to foster peace at this critical moment. As of July 2025, at least 14 organizations reported that they were out of funds.⁵ Survey results show that 44% of participants anticipate not having funds remaining by December 2025.⁶

In this bleak landscape, there are opportunities for hope. Across geographies and under immense pressures, people continue to organize.⁷ They are joining movements. They are working towards resolving local conflicts, building bridges, and advocating for peaceful violence.⁸ Today, more than ever, conflict is analyzed through multiple lenses that reveal the interconnectedness and impact of racism, authoritarianism, colonialism, and capitalism. People are creating a shared vision of peace, safety, and security that can serve as a unifying force in times of uncertainty.

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*If Peacebuilding is to meet this moment, it must become **more courageous, more grounded, and more honest** about the systems it operates within.”*

- PHILANTHROPIC ORGANIZATION, KENYA



WHY IS PEACEBUILDING IMPORTANT?

Poverty is increasingly concentrated in fragile and conflict-affected regions. Within the next decade, it is estimated that 400 million people living in extreme poverty will be located in conflict-affected regions.⁹ Severe conflict can reduce GDP per capita by as much as 15% within five years.¹⁰ The costs of war are reflected not only in human suffering but also in physical destruction. Peacebuilding continues to be a cost-effective endeavour that saves lives. The prevention of war and conflict through non-violent means supports the growth of GDP and avoids massive, forced migration. For every USD\$1 spent on conflict prevention, USD\$103 are saved in humanitarian and security costs.¹¹ The Institute for Economics and Peace argues that when there is an increase in peace, it can lead to substantial economic improvement and resources can be used towards activities that yield higher returns and increase GDP.¹²

A new framework offers a chance to rebuild aid on the foundation of trust, agency, and community expertise. The foreign aid system could achieve far greater impact than it does today. Historically, power imbalances and limited access to long-term financial resources prevented those closest to the conflict from playing a significant role in creating durable solutions. Communities' needs and local leadership were often not heard. Bureaucratic and technical language, combined with static measurement approaches, excluded those most affected by conflict from important dialogue and accountability processes. Information passed on through oral traditions, storytelling, and in local languages was not captured or sufficiently valued. Local dynamics were not fully understood, and assumptions were sometimes incorrectly developed. This made peacebuilding less effective.

Proximate peacebuilders and activists did not have the decision-making authority to design peacebuilding activities, determine work plans, control budgets, or actively engage in evaluation and learning processes. And yet, they had the responsibility to implement activities and maintain relationships with communities, often at a great personal risk and under precarious working conditions.

The recent push to implement a localization agenda (2015–2025) marked a call for a gradual shift in the foreign aid paradigm. Progress was made in defining key concepts such as localization, locally led development, and inclusivity. It enabled INGOs and their partners to test models and imagine new potential ways of working.¹³ It created space for conversations within organizations and began some organizational shifts. However, the localization agenda was constrained by limited definitions of accountability.¹⁴

Relationships were bound by contractual agreements that demanded upward accountability processes and relied on intermediaries to mitigate risk for bilateral and multilateral donors. These limitations did not support a system that would legitimately shift power, give voice to communities affected by conflict, and enable sustainable ownership.¹⁵

This moment presents an opportunity to rebuild a more effective foreign aid system, one that is sustained by long-term, trust-based relationships rooted in community agency and expertise.

Through a collaborative process, proximate peacebuilders from conflict-affected countries defined priorities for the next decade of Peacebuilding. During a key moment in the localization agenda, in October 2024, Humanity United sought to (1) engage meaningfully and intentionally with peacebuilding practitioners, (2) create spaces for candid dialogue on technical aspects of peacebuilding and international collaboration, and (3) support the creation of a new Engagement Framework for the Peacebuilding Sector.

Humanity United brought together 9 proximate peacebuilders from 6 conflict-affected countries to form a Steering Committee to lead the creation of the Framework. The Steering Committee members were nominated by network organizations and Humanity United staff. They were sought out for their leadership in implementing peacebuilding activities. The Steering Committee created a research framework, and validated research questions and findings. They prioritized the recommendations. More than 135 proximate peacebuilders and partners were also consulted through a series of six two-hour thematic focus group discussions, a global survey, and key informant interviews. In addition, two roundtables lasting two hours with intermediary 16 INGOs were held.

All individuals who were part of the process were asked about their vision for the future. Assumptions were made that states would continue to exist, and some bilateral governments would fund foreign aid. Proximate peacebuilders and activists articulated current challenges they faced in implementing peacebuilding initiatives. All participants were asked to make recommendations that were aspirational but also implementable in the next five to ten years to improve the future for peacebuilding.

This Engagement framework is for decision-makers and organizations that believe in the power of democracy and people-to-people engagement. It is for peacebuilders currently pivoting and reflecting deeply on their role within the aid system. This includes policymakers, governments and those who provide funding to human security, democracy, and people-to-people engagement. It is for all actors and allies that are working to transform the foreign aid system and the way in which we work together to achieve peace.

Humanity United believes that this is a rare moment to reenvision our global relationships and create new ways of working together. This is a bottom-up framework that seeks new relationships while centering those closest to conflict. It captures the collective wisdom of proximate peacebuilders and activists, and documents their proposed pathways for a more inclusive, adaptive, responsive, and mutually accountable system of Peacebuilding partnerships. It is aspirational in vision yet grounded in practical recommendations.

TENSIONS & DYNAMICS



Transforming the aid system requires not only honoring the promise of peacebuilding but also critically examining the ways it falls short and, at times, perpetuates harm.

While peacebuilding as an activity has existed for millennia, the modern Peacebuilding sector as described in this report, was anchored within the international aid system following the end of the Cold War. As a sector, Peacebuilding is committed to creating the conditions for peace through non-violent means. While peacebuilding represents a moral and ethical pursuit, it is embedded within a broader context of inequity and imbalance. A genuine commitment to the potential of peacebuilding, therefore, demands a precise and constructive critique. Proximate peacebuilders identified key tensions that hinder peacebuilding from achieving lasting change.

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*You cannot speak about peace in an empty stomach. You cannot speak about peace when you see that the people who are the perpetrators are living good lives. This becomes a push factor towards crime and conflict. There is a really important relationship between peace and justice. And something that the West often fails to do in funding these programs is acknowledge that **you can't have peace without justice.**”*

- INTERMEDIARY (INGO), NIGERIA



Persistent lack of explicit acknowledgement that international actors benefit from conflict and inequality, thereby perpetuating an unjust global system. For decades, many well-meaning individuals, organizations, and states have failed to recognize how they institutionally and personally profit from ongoing instability, conflict, and systemic inequality. By prioritizing resources for English-speaking registered groups, resourcing structures have also exacerbated community divisions and created tension. Financial accountability processes often focus on burn rates, as opposed to where funds are spent, and whether funds are used in the most effective way.

While critiques of the international sector and global system have long existed, they have only recently begun to gain broader attention. By refusing to confront how international partners are complicit in and benefit from these dynamics, efforts aimed at systemic change and addressing root causes are rarely prioritized, and when they are, they often remain on the margins of proposed solutions.

Peace and conflict are not singular, time-bound, or static concepts, yet peace programs expect linear and predictable results. Peace is not a fixed state but a dynamic process that evolves as societies move along a continuous journey. However, most peacebuilding programs articulate linear outcomes, defined by theories of change (ToCs), and measured in quantifiable and standardized indicators. Programs are evaluated against pre-determined external criteria without a full understanding of how the complexity and context evolve. Externally funded evaluations prioritize donor-driven questions and accountability over formative learning-focused processes.

Conflict affects entire communities in different ways, yet peace programming does not have sufficient flexibility to adapt. In conflict-prone areas, traumatic events do not just happen to individuals; instead, they happen to entire communities and nations. Communities do not identify the extent of their own trauma even when healing is needed. People are often navigating both visible and invisible loss. They may be living in contexts where violence is prevalent and normalized, even in the absence of violent active conflict. Peacebuilding and trauma-healing programs are often too short and shift with the fleeting and dynamic priorities of donors. Furthermore, they often do not give program implementers the autonomy to shift programming based on the changing nature of conflict and trauma. The limited healing and wellbeing work supported by donors is often centered on Western models, rather than incorporating local traditions. For communities in conflict to co-exist, profound and authentic repair is necessary to ensure healing processes.

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*We have a lot of the society affected by the conflicts. And the main taboo is that we are all impacted by these trauma. But there could be some level of **differences in the, degree of how we are impacted by mental health trauma and mental health issues.***”

- COMMUNITY-BASED OR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION, YEMEN



In the quest to professionalize, peacebuilders have focused on building a sector that has alienated potential allies. The Peacebuilding sector has professionalized and adopted terminology to describe methodologies and approaches, creating overly complex barriers to entry. The technocratic language of INGOs and multilaterals does not resonate, translate easily, or transfer meaningfully across cultures or contexts. These terms create barriers to engagement and empathy.

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*The reality is that in Sudan dynamics of **conflict is intertwined** with political betrayals, family displacement, religious narratives, and unresolved grievances. **Using outsiders' frameworks risks alienating communities.***

- LOCAL NATIONAL PEACEBUILDING ORGANIZATION, SUDAN



Conflict and peace analyses, which are at the core of designing peace initiatives, miss important information. Most analysis is conducted with minimal input from affected people, local civil society, or perpetrators of violence. Even when communities are included and acknowledged, their analysis and world views rarely influence the data collection, analysis, or proposed solutions. Community-led macro-level conflict analyses are rare, and this results in gaps in the understanding of subnational dynamics. The lack of diverse perspectives also contributes to knowledge gaps. As a result, some peace initiatives are inherently flawed from conception because of incomplete analysis. Instead, a multi-level approach is needed to identify the appropriate entry point to create meaningful change.

Proximate peacebuilders often have local knowledge but lack sufficient funds and opportunities to implement solutions. Local organizations, particularly in the nonprofit and social impact sectors, often face significant barriers in their efforts to strengthen and scale their operations. Three major gaps that limit their effectiveness are a lack of resources for training, the absence of direct donor engagement opportunities, and insufficient programmatic funding. They are often unable to register their organization due to bureaucratic or political hurdles. Proximate peacebuilders also face complex, compliance-driven grantmaking, administrative, and reporting requirements. Moreover, when proximate peacebuilders are successful in enabling conflict transformation at a community level, they have few mechanisms available to scale to the national level.

Accountability efforts established after conflict often fall short of victims' expectations.

Truth and reconciliation processes are commonly introduced, and while they may support healing, they rarely ensure real accountability. They can be designed with a focus on societal elites, instead of those most impacted by conflict. Perpetrators of crimes often remain free. Proximate peacebuilders have noted that the safety of victims, peacebuilders, human rights defenders, and activists is not guaranteed by the state. In addition, reparations to communities are seldom used as mechanisms to deter future violence or to deliver justice and accountability.

Taking into consideration these tensions and dynamics, proximate peacebuilders created a vision, guiding principles, and recommendations to reenvision our global relationships, and create new ways of working together.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE



Our vision is a system where peacebuilding is a locally led and context-specific endeavour that is rooted in community agency. It is sustained by creating long-term collaborative partnerships and coalitions rooted in mutual accountability. The goal is to build a more just and inclusive world.

Proximate peacebuilders envision a new system where power is truly shared and mutual accountability stands at the core of relationships, decision-making, ownership, and resources. A future where communities are leading their own path towards healing and justice.

“*Localization is not only about shifting resources, authority, and time to local civil society. It also means we open our systems to scrutiny, own our choices, and answer for the results/impact we promise. Trust is a two way street. Real impact comes when donors and grantees practice mutual accountability, together and to the communities we serve.*”

- GLOBAL TRANSNATIONAL NETWORK ORGANIZATION, PAKISTAN



GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The following guiding principles outline the core approaches that shape effective, inclusive, and sustainable peacebuilding. They emphasize peacebuilding as an evolving process rooted in culture, context, and collaboration. Together, these principles provide a framework for locally led, accountable, and long-term efforts to foster durable peace.



Peacebuilding is an endeavor that is **culturally and contextually grounded**.

Peacebuilding evolves so that it adjusts to today's world and dynamics. Cultures and traditional healing practices are respected. New voices are included. Models are not imposed or adapted to the local context; instead, innovation is led by and through community members. Locally led solutions are scaled nationally to produce wider systemic changes. Sustainability of results is at the core of implementation as community needs and cultures are centered.



Decision-making processes are inclusive and aim to foster long-term and durable partnerships.

Peace requires all actors to actively contribute. Those most proximate to the conflict and solutions are leading in design, implementation, and continuous learning. They are accountable to communities. Victims of conflict, women, youth, people with disabilities, and Indigenous Peoples' voices are centered. Local and national governments are also accountable to all their constituents. The importance of including perpetrators of conflict in dialogue process and peacebuilding activities was also highlighted by proximate peacebuilders.



Relationships and partnerships between various actors are bound by shared values of mutual respect, trust, and openness.

Active listening and valuing each other's points of view are standard practices. There is no dominance, imposition of ideas, or urgent requests without considering the impact on others. Partnerships are transformational, and cross-sectoral coalitions are built to implement a new vision for a shared future. While relationships and partnerships are long-lasting, they also evolve and remain flexible. Peacebuilders and implementors work in partnership with communities affected by conflict and support them to implement peace.



Resources are distributed based on the responsibility of implementation, and peacebuilders are accountable to communities and donors on programmatic processes and results.

Resources include financial and non-financial support, such as mentorship, training, and access to alternative funding models. Partners work together towards long-term financial sustainability. There is information sharing on revenue generation strategies, where locally developed income-generating ideas are presented and shared on a global platform. There is mutual accountability between partners and transparency in budget allocation. Implementers report on progress towards results and articulate actions they took to be accountable to donors and communities. All actors work towards simplifying compliance requirements.



Learning and the creation of knowledge involves the exchange of lived experiences and practices between peacebuilders, international actors, funders, and communities.

There is continuous learning and reflection on all peacebuilding processes and practices. There is mutual accountability and transparency between partners on progress towards results and budget allocation. Results are measured through participatory processes to ensure learning. Actors speak openly about what strategies and tactics worked and those that did not work. Actors acknowledge contributing factors and unintended consequences. Methods used for learning are appropriate given contextual conditions and use of learning products.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES THROUGH THE LENS OF PEACEBUILDING

The visual below shows the guiding principles through the lens of peacebuilding recommendations and suggested actions. It highlights how these principles connect within an ecosystem of peacebuilding, showing the collective pathways for all actors to contribute to lasting peace.





A PATHWAY FOR A NEW VISION

Proximate peacebuilders suggested the following recommendations to be operationalized in the next five to ten years. These recommendations are geared toward bilateral donors, philanthropy, intermediaries, and proximate peacebuilders. They are interdependent; a transformed Peacebuilding ecosystem will require collaboration at all levels.

The implementation of these recommendations is impacted by and dependent on current power structures. As such, this section is organized in a top-down structure and focused on recommendations that will enable multiple changes to occur. To be successful, each actor must reflect on their power, role, and sphere of influence. They must consider where and how they can cede power so other actors can be decision-makers. This internal reflection may mean that some actors need to use their power more effectively, while others may reconsider their role in the system. Each recommendation corresponds to one or more of the guiding principles.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ALL ACTORS PURSUING PEACE



Build peace in tandem with broader struggles of systemic oppression to ensure lasting peace.

CULTURAL/CONTEXTUAL

Peace cannot be achieved in isolation from other forms of justice. Peacebuilding has often operated in a silo. It has tried to remain neutral and impartial, when it is inherently political. Peacebuilding must operate at the intersection of peace with social, economic, racial, gender, environmental, and other relevant forms of justice. It must confront and seek to dismantle systemic oppression, including colonial legacies, patriarchy, militarism, and capitalism, as part of the fuel of conflict and instability. For there to be healthy societies, peace initiatives must address systemic root causes of conflict and injustice, and focus on building new processes that are fair, transparent, inclusive, and participatory.



Integrate the pursuit of peace across sectors, movements, and coalitions.

CULTURAL/CONTEXTUAL

Peace requires constant action, and Peacebuilding must move outside the comfort of its own sector and be strategically integrated across all endeavors that create more just and inclusive societies. Social movements are a part of the broader struggle and more deeply interwoven with peacebuilding than the sector gives credit. The reluctance by peacebuilders to embrace movements and broader coalitions is the desire by some to remain neutral, whereby movements are political. Peacebuilding needs to be acknowledged and celebrated as a cross-cutting critical skill that is an essential step to begin tackling today's interconnected global challenges. In a polarized world, more spaces need to be created to listen and dialogue. The integration of peacebuilding needs to move beyond the implementation of conflict sensitivity by centering communities' definition of peace. This holistic approach can help ensure that peace is not limited to conflict resolution, but also embedded in the structural, social, and economic fabric of societies.



Support people and their communities in leading transformational relationships and resolving conflict through culturally grounded, care-based, and non-violent mechanisms.

DECISION MAKING

Peacebuilding programs are most often designed by bilateral donors based on conflict assessments that may not include the perspectives of local communities affected by conflict. Local communities, activists, movements, and those affected by conflict are best placed to understand the context and be drivers of change. While some mentorship and engagement may be needed by external actors, initiatives that are inextricably tied to grassroots support will create more meaningful and lasting change. Support the creation of sustainable and transparent channels and feedback mechanisms to ensure that the voices of those nearest to conflicts directly inform decision-making processes.



Create partnerships that are rooted in power-sharing dynamics and built on collective and mutual interests.

RELATIONSHIPS

Partners have often perpetuated colonial power structures through which Global North partners retain resources, decision-making, and ownership. All partners must prioritize deep listening and speaking with honesty. They must share their interests explicitly and reflect on their role in perpetuating unequal power dynamics. All actors should have access to the same information. Recognition and credit sharing is essential among the partners. Support efforts to build the trust that is needed to accompany complex processes.

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*Local peacebuilders should not be treated as implementor. Local peacebuilders have an increased work load with different complicated formats and reporting modalities. Instead, **local peacebuilders should be treated as equal partners**. Achievement should be shared equally.”*

- COMMUNITY BASED OR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION, NEPAL



Invest in peacebuilding as a long-term process, grounded in patience, trust-building, and sustained commitment.

RESOURCES

Peacebuilding programs are often short and underfunded yet have grandiose ambitions that are frequently unattainable. The short donor cycles create false expectations among communities, and people lose trust in proximate peacebuilders after the project ends. Flexible, direct, and sustainable support that enables adaptation, innovation, and sustainability is required to dismantle systemic oppression. Viable and rapid protection mechanisms are needed for those seeking peacebuilding, human rights, and a just world, particularly in contested or violent spaces.



Embrace and recognize the inherently political nature of peacebuilding work, including its inseparable relationship to non-violent activism, to create the conditions for authentic learning.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Non-violent social movements often represent the marginalized voice of the grassroots and are important stakeholders in building healthy systems. Peacebuilding terminology has excluded key stakeholders and allies. Robust and transformational learning practices requires understanding the role that collective action plays in peacebuilding. Learn from social and labor movements' strategies and support cross-sectoral work that creates the enabling conditions for peace.

BILATERAL DONOR RECOMMENDATIONS



Be honest and upfront about your governments' role and national interest in the outcome of a conflict or geographical areas.

CULTURAL/CONTEXTUAL

Foreign governments are not neutral parties to conflicts and may be involved in armed conflict to advance their own economic, ideological, and political national interests. In many instances, bilateral donors have provided arms to one actor, while simultaneously funding governance or peace initiatives. They also are inconsistent in complying with human rights conventions and international law. In today's world, these dynamics are evident to all actors, including proximate peacebuilders that often deal with the contradictions of having to implement grants funded by the same governments that directly or indirectly supported violence or armed conflict.

“ I am not sure that foreign governments can ever be effective funders of local peacebuilding organizations. All foreign governments will act in their national self-interest, and unless they can recognize that true and lasting peace in the countries they fund is part of that national interest, they will always have misaligned priorities with local actors.”

- LOCAL NATIONAL PEACEBUILDING ORGANIZATION, ZIMBABWE



Provide safety and greater decision-making authority to proximate peacebuilders and communities.

DECISION MAKING

Proximate peacebuilders, human rights defenders, and allies lack safety and protection. Bilateral governments can incentivize national governments to strengthen accountability processes that enable the safety of activists and peacebuilders. Create mechanisms that enable proximate peacebuilders, coalitions, and networks to come together to design and implement programs that center communities and give them agency and control over day-to-day management. Create processes that support proximate peacebuilders to have greater control over the creation and allocation of budgets to meet these needs.



Shift from contractual and transactional- based relationships to collaborative, participatory, and trust-based partnership models.¹⁶

RELATIONSHIPS

Bilateral governments create contractual agreements that aim to reduce their risk by increasing the level of administrative and programmatic compliance. As a result, resources and time are spent on meeting contract requirements as opposed to implementing programs. These requirements exclude local peacebuilders that may not be able to meet compliance thresholds even when their programmatic approach is of high quality. Risk mitigation and compliance protocols demanded by donors, such as detailed attendance lists with personal information, can put peacebuilders and participants at risk. A more nuanced accompaniment model is to fund proximate peacebuilders directly.¹⁷ Intermediary INGOs need more incentives to work with proximate peacebuilders and across sectors. In fragile and conflict-affected states, ensure that all humanitarian and development funds include a conflict analysis and a peacebuilding component.



Reinstate and increase long-term and flexible funding to peacebuilding, democracy, and human rights programs.

RESOURCES

Bilateral donors across North America and Europe have drastically reduced funding for programs that support non-violent movements, human rights, and peaceful conflict resolutions. It is necessary to continue to provide long-term, predictable, direct, and flexible funding streams to actors seeking to create meaningful change non-violently.



Simplify funding requirements so that smaller grassroots organizations can access opportunities directly.

RESOURCES

Shift funding modalities with INGOs to ensure that a larger percentage of funds is transferred directly to partners that are implementing activities. Consider the operational realities of each context and align grant opportunity requirements accordingly. For example, in some countries, proximate peacebuilders are unable to register as organizations and therefore are unable to comply with registration requirements. Be creative in the types of grants mechanisms (flexible and long-term) that can support the creation of trust-based partnerships needed in peacebuilding efforts. Ensure that proximate peacebuilders' operations (including offices, communications, transportation, and overhead) are covered at equal or greater levels than those in INGOs.



Co-create a culture of high standards and mutual accountability.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Co-create partnership guidelines that are mindful and understand different rhythms and notions of time, trust, and adaptability. Redefine how compliance is measured by shifting away from complex monitoring and evaluation systems that prioritize measuring outputs at the expense of implementing learning processes. Ensure that local actors spend energy and focus on implementing and delivering programs that have multiple feedback loops. Work internally within your own institutions to ensure that you are also accountable to peacebuilders, activists, and communities. This includes ensuring viable, timely, and long-term protection mechanisms for activists and victims of conflict. Program success must be measured and validated by community members and their ability to sustain results and institutional mechanisms.

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*Foreign government donors should prioritize direct and flexible funding to local peace building organizations, reducing reliance on intermediaries that can dilute impact. Simplifying grant application and reporting requirements **helps local actors focus more on program delivery than bureaucracy.** Donors must actively listen to and engage with local stakeholders in program design and evaluation*

- LOCAL NATIONAL PEACEBUILDING ORGANIZATION, ZIMBABWE



PHILANTHROPY RECOMMENDATIONS



Philanthropy is well positioned to be a relationship broker between actors in the system to promote culturally and contextually driven peacebuilding.

CULTURAL/CONTEXTUAL

Philanthropy has a key role to play in fostering greater horizontal cooperation among organizations, promoting the creation of social fabric and collective work, and reducing competition for resources. This, in turn, would also make it possible to share knowledge, achieve cost savings through collaboration, innovate jointly, and foster the creation of umbrella coalitions, instead of competition and divisions.



Commit to genuine power-sharing with proximate peacebuilders and avoid token inclusion.

DECISION MAKING

Grant-making processes should be more transparent and accessible to create more effective peacebuilding outcomes. Consider semi-permanent advisory structures of proximate peacebuilders to provide decision-making and strategic guidance on key aspects of strategy and grant-making practices to better reflect the realities of those most affected by conflict. Develop targeted outreach processes to find new grassroots partners with access to impacted communities.

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*Resources are important. Resources in the form of partnership and capacity building that are **based on what is needed at that exact moment**. And not based on what the donors want us to do.”*

- ACTIVIST, SRI LANKA





Continue to move toward a trust-based partnership model that is rooted in flexibility, responsiveness, and community-oriented programming.¹⁸

RELATIONSHIPS

Grantmakers should be transparent about their funding strategy, priorities, internal decision-making, and funding timelines. This allows for trust to grow, since both parties are clear on the priorities, the stakeholders, and the potential shifts in the relationship. Additionally, philanthropy should proactively organize discussions about power dynamics and source constructive criticism from grantee partners through variety of mechanisms (anonymous surveys, conversations with grantmakers, grantee roundtables, etc.). These spaces for feedback must prioritize grantee accessibility, such as offering feedback in multiple languages. Due to the severe power differential, philanthropy cannot assume that proximate organizations and actors will be forthcoming with their feedback. Trust based partnership, initiated by philanthropy, is the precondition for proximate actors to lead responsive and community-oriented programming, which leads to more durable solutions.

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*Commit to a **relationship centered approach** and see the foundation not as a provider but as a partner in the journey of peacebuilding and conflict transformation. Trust your partners, embrace risk, **attend with care to partners' wellbeing.***

- (ORGANIZATION TYPE NOT DISCLOSED), FRANCE



Invest in the infrastructure of peace by creating spaces for power-building, supporting South-to-South relationship building, and legitimizing non-violent actors.

RESOURCES

In the past, support to proximate peacebuilders has been primarily through programs. Yet, proximate peacebuilders need to increase their networks, learn from one another, acquire or upgrade their skills, and develop coalitions. Consider other forms of support, such as funding fellowships, convening, or learning partnerships that can help with mutual and cross-learning initiatives. If philanthropy is honest and transparent about their power in the system, then they can be a more effective player in convening authentic spaces for ideation, collusion, and partnership among proximate peacebuilders that lead to power building.



Provide long-term and sustainable resources or funding that enables proximate peacebuilders to gradually build the financial, institutional, and managerial capacities needed for true self-reliance.

RESOURCES

The long-term goal should be to provide General Operating Support (GoS) grants, which enables organizations the level of autonomy and agency to determine the best use of funds. However, if grantees have never received GoS support before, this can be overwhelming and confusing. Grantees report feeling the need to perform to opaque or obfuscated expectations. Beginning relationships at the place of trust and mutual transparency, such as well-detailed Project Grants, can build the shared depth and capacity for unrestricted funding in the future. Additionally, organizations need a pathway to strengthen their independence and resilience over time. Some organizations already have volunteer-based or pay for service models that support their growths. Other organizations are only beginning the process of financial independence.



Encourage locally-led peacebuilding by supporting local solutions and amplifying the work of proximate peacebuilders.

ACCOUNTABILITY

This requires sharing effective approaches, funding research, and promoting intersectional analysis to better understand complexity of local contexts. Historically, philanthropies operate in closed accountability structures with their Board of Directors and limited external transparency in their learning, operations, and decision making. This maintains flawed neo-colonial power structures and decision making. Supporting local solutions requires a shift in collaborative learning structures.

“

*Foundations need to move beyond token inclusion and genuinely shift power including funding, decision-making, and visibility to grassroots actors and marginalized communities. Many peacebuilding organizations struggle to sustain themselves because most funding is project-based. **Providing core and institutional support enables stability, strategic growth, and better crisis response.***”

- CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION, UGANDA





Use your role and positionality to advocate for and shape peace narratives while highlighting successful cases of your work.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Philanthropies must invest in shaping narratives that promote human security and empathy. Foundations have funded organizations discreetly. While this practice can maintain security and safety of organizations, successful work has been underreported. Philanthropy organizations have been reluctant to take overt political positions and engage in advocacy to transform the power dynamics of the system. Given their independent source of funds, foundations are well placed to leverage their positionality and advocate for peace narratives and support long-term, flexible, sustainable funding sources.

INTERMEDIARY ACTORS – INGO RECOMMENDATIONS



Diversify and recognize the multitude of approaches to peacebuilding, especially those from the Global South which are historically excluded.

CULTURAL/CONTEXTUAL

Acknowledge that societies and peoples have different concepts of peace, reconciliation, and healing, particularly in non-Western cultures. Learn, integrate, and celebrate this multitude of peacebuilding approaches.

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*“International NGOs [must] redefine their role from direct implementers to facilitators and supporters of local organizations, **focusing on knowledge and resource transfer rather than operational control**. They should work to transfer leadership to local entities, especially in the planning and decision-making stages, which enhances local ownership and increases program effectiveness.”*

- LOCAL NATIONAL PEACEBUILDING ORGANIZATION, EGYPT



Avoid replicating colonial power dynamics and imposing external agendas.

DECISION MAKING

Well-meaning intermediaries have often implemented external agendas and replicated power dynamics, allowing organizations in the Global North to have more power and decision-making authority than those in the conflict area. While country offices may be led by country nationals, key decisions, and board members sit primarily in the Global North. The role of intermediary actors requires more humility. They must learn more about contexts to avoid unintentionally undermining local leaders' authority, existing peace mechanisms, and healing traditions. When opportunities arise, they must question whose interest does the implementation of a certain project serve? Will the data collected be used meaningfully? Who will control the narrative of peace or stories of change? Will ownership and authorship be shared? Intermediaries must take the time to explore their own bias. They must acknowledge power dynamics, cede power, and leverage their privileges to create local, regional, and national change.



Shift organizational practices and culture to address power inequities.

DECISION MAKING

Update and revise hiring policies and practices to prioritize local knowledge and move away from hiring based solely on Western standardized credentials (academic achievement, professional influence, class privilege) that may exclude community leaders. Invest in youth and women's leadership at all levels of your organization. Ensure that your Board of Directors is representative of the areas of the world that the organization operates. Decentralize decision-making to ensure inclusion of those affected by conflict.



Shift towards a mentorship-based partnership model that shares responsibility equitably based on strengths and capacities.

RELATIONSHIPS

In the past, many intermediary actors have relied on proximate peacebuilders and their networks to implement key activities, often in hard-to-reach areas. While each partnership is unique, many proximate peacebuilders noted the power imbalance between partners. Proximate peacebuilders have a desire to lead and be recognized as strategic allies, and not simply as implementers. They must be included in all decisions, including designing projects, speaking with donors, and leading partnership coalitions. They seek mentorship-based partnerships and opportunities that require complimentary skills. Intermediaries are well placed to mobilize resources, and lead on financial management, compliance, and program monitoring. Intermediary actors should avoid transferring complex requirements onto proximate peacebuilders and instead collaborate to reform the foreign aid system.

“

*True partnership begins when local NGOs are no longer seen as subcontractors, but as **co-leaders of change.**”*

- LOCAL NATIONAL PEACEBUILDING ORGANIZATION, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO (DRC)



“

*Time to reinvent INGOs - even this idea of **being an intermediary feels very outdated in the current context**. INGOs working in this field should reinvent themselves as networks or platforms for great work, enabling people to do great work to build peace. Collectively, organizations that operate at the international level can create some collective political power, not just bringing voices upwards, but forging networks of people around common cause which can address global and transnational drivers of conflict.”*

- INTERMEDIARY ORGANIZATION (INGO), UNITED STATES



Use your power and privilege to mitigate risk for proximate peacebuilders and advocate for peace agendas with your own governments.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Intermediary actors must use their own power and influence to create advocacy strategies in consultation with national staff. Advocacy strategies must be executed globally to support holding governments accountable while fostering cultures of peace. Support learning and the creation of networked peacebuilders to build collective power and sharing of information. When proximate peacebuilders are at risk, work within your networks and contacts to seek safety solutions. Take political stands when human rights and international law are violated, regardless of who the perpetrator is. Peacebuilding is a political act that requires action.

“

*INGOs must prioritize more **equitable and collaborative relationships with local organizations**. It is essential to recognize them as strategic allies, not just implementers, and include their voices in decision-making.”*

- LOCAL NATIONAL PEACEBUILDING ORGANIZATION, COLOMBIA





Ensure that greater allocation of resources is provided to local organizations, including covering overhead costs.

RESOURCES

While proximate peacebuilders often have the responsibility to implement key activities and produce sustainable results, their organizations are often not adequately funded. Projects or programs often cover only implementation and partial salary costs. Create equitable policies and commit to fair resource allocation that supports the implementation of activities while funding proximate peacebuilders' organizations.

PEACEBUILDER RECOMMENDATIONS

Peacebuilders encompass a wide range of actors. These recommendations are relevant to peacebuilders at all levels of the system – grassroots, regional, national, and interstate. These are recommendations crafted by global peacebuilders for global peacebuilders. In the consultations, peacebuilders called for better horizontal and vertical weaving across systems. These linkages help foster collaboration, intersectionality, and power building, especially in a time when there is institutional divestment from peacebuilding.



Champion and build context and culturally appropriate responses that respond to local needs.

CULTURAL/CONTEXTUAL

Peacebuilding programs have often been designed by bilateral donors and articulated in calls for proposals. New initiatives must be holistic and build on existing community practices and actions taken by individuals and communities. Local creativity and ingenuity must be amplified. Communities affected by conflict must have a voice in all processes of design, implementation, and evaluation.



Connect peacebuilding to a community's definition of peace and safety, which may involve linking to prosperity and development.

CULTURAL/CONTEXTUAL

Poverty, unemployment, and lack of livelihood opportunities create the enabling conditions for conflict. Lack of significant change can lead individuals to join violent groups. Peacebuilding work can be connected and integrated with income generation activities, which can increase income securities and reinforce individual and community resilience. Understand what peace and security looks like for each community and work with a broad coalition to support communities to be safer. Build on existing methodologies for community indicator development and measurement.¹⁹



Be accountable to communities by designing processes where they lead decision-making and program direction.

DECISION MAKING

Establish meaningful, two-way feedback systems that inform continuous adaptation, while being attentive to community tensions and gender dynamics. Communicate transparently about program timelines and prioritize ownership and sustainability from the outset to ensure long-term impact.



Create inclusive spaces and processes for diverse voices to be heard and shape decision-making.

DECISION MAKING

Men continue to have disproportionate access to power in most societies. Women, youth, and survivors of conflict lack power and decision-making authority, and yet their voices are essential for long-term peace. Women and victims of violence often have a unique and needed perspective on what happens during and after a conflict, but these voices are often silenced. Marginalized populations, including those with disabilities and Indigenous Peoples, are often not included in processes or do not make final policy or conflict resolution decisions. Often, people need training and support to fully participate. Peacebuilders noticed a disconnect between ancestral communal practices and individualistic urban living conditions. This disconnect creates barriers for healing and processing trauma.



Donors should listen first. Communities know what tensions are going on and what makes the situation better and what makes it worse. Listen to the people, include grassroots movements, especially women, youth, and marginalized groups. It's not just a consultation; they are the ones who should take the decisions

- COMMUNITY-BASED OR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION, PALESTINE



Create broad coalitions of stakeholders and implementers that include non-traditional actors to increase impact

RELATIONSHIPS

To address root causes of conflict, peacebuilders need to seek cross-sectoral alliances, such as with the education, healthcare, and law sectors. These networks are essential to address legal structures or health inequities. They may also work towards supporting shifts in legislation and codification of equal rights of people living in the same geographical territory.



Prioritize peacebuilding programs that generate lasting, widespread impact rather than short-term gains.

RESOURCES

To support well-being and build peace, peacebuilders need to move away from short-term projects and invest in collective programming. This may mean integrating alternative long-term and flexible sources of funding or institutionalizing change through cross-sectoral partnerships.

“

*It is important to help (youth) **reconnecting with ancestral practices**, not only to try to bring or impose Western practices of conflict resolution. We bring to them information about other practices.”*

- INTERMEDIARY (INGO), GUATEMALA

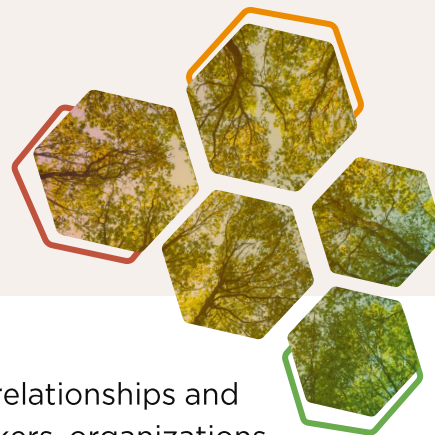


Share locally generated knowledge, ideas, and systems at the global level on a regular basis.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Peacebuilders are directly connected to their communities. They have a tremendous amount of experience and knowledge, which may be supportive to other peacebuilders across the globe. Information must be shared on a regular basis through accessible means. Peacebuilders are responsible for implementing a monitoring and learning process that documents progress and results. Rapid analysis can lead to effective decision-making and support the integration of new knowledge and learnings from other peacebuilders.

CONCLUSION



This Engagement Framework outlines pathways for shifting relationships and power dynamics. It offers recommendations for decision-makers, organizations, and peacebuilders. Its implementation will look different across stakeholders. For some, it may reinforce and strengthen existing practices, while for others, it will require a fundamental rethinking of how they engage with proximate peacebuilders and the international system. Some may even dismiss the framework as incompatible with their worldview or too disruptive to normative peacebuilding concepts that uphold neutrality and outdated notions of who is an ‘expert.’ Yet this resistance itself can serve as an important first step towards recognizing the need for change. After all, in today’s world, change is inevitable.

As a new foreign aid system takes shape, the responsibility lies with all actors to take accountability for their actions and work within their spheres of influence to support non-violent actors. Only through mutual accountability can peacebuilding become more widely applied and sustainable.

In the past, foundations have created reports and publications that are quickly shelved. Humanity United championed this listening process with the intent to continue a dialogue process and support partners seeking to implement a new vision of Peacebuilding in these changing times. As evident in its [2023 Peacebuilding Strategy](#) and by convening this process, we continue our commitment to creating spaces for dialogue that lead to action.

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A partnership where power is truly shared is an open book - everyone knows how the story begins, how it will evolve, and it's possible endings.

- DOMESTIC INTERMEDIARY ACTOR, INDONESIA



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A Pathway to Peace was developed with input from 135 proximate peacebuilders and allies who work every day to advance peace and social justice through non-violent means. Peacebuilders are committed to taking leadership, being loud and brave. They remain steadfast and continue to dismantle systemic oppression. We deeply appreciate their wisdom, tenacity, and unwavering commitment to peace.

We are especially grateful to the nine Steering Committee members from 6 countries: Colombia, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nepal, Sudan, and Pakistan. They dedicated nine months to thoughtful reflection and dialogue, even while navigating the shifting realities of the foreign aid system and enduring the challenges of active violent conflicts. Their leadership and dedication made this framework possible.

In keeping with Humanity United's commitment to security and to fostering an environment for open and honest dialogue, the framework intentionally does not include names of participating organizations or individuals. Direct quotes from participants may include geographical location to provide context for the statements.

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For questions about the Engagement Framework, please contact:

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To learn more about Humanity United's Peacebuilding work:

[Humanity United's Peacebuilding Strategy \(2023\)](#)



END NOTES



¹ Definitions of Mutual Accountability are derived from: Trust-Based Philanthropy Project. “Glossary of Terms and Phrases: Frequently used in Trust-Based Philanthropy.” Available [here](#). Accessed on September 09, 2025. Definitions of Proximate peacebuilder is derived from: Humanity United. “Peacebuilding Strategy: Resourcing Peace in a Landscape of Crisis.” September 2023. Available [here](#). Accessed on September 09, 2025.

² Raleigh, Clionadh and Katayoun Kishi. “Conflict Index.” ACLED. December 2024. Available [here](#). Accessed September 09, 2025.

³ Recent examples of transactional and short-term negotiated agreements include Israel-Gaza (2023-2025), Ukraine-Russia (2020-2025), Israel-Iran (2023-2025), and the Democratic Republic of Congo (2025).

⁴ Humanity United. “Survey Brief: Peacebuilding in Crisis.”. September 9, 2025. Available [here](#). Accessed on September 09, 2025.

⁵ The organizations include: 5 Community-based or Civil Society Organizations, 4 Local National Peacebuilding Organizations, 3 Activists, 1 INGO, and 1 (N.A). The countries where the organizations or activists are based include: The Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Sierra Leone, Thailand, Uganda, United Kingdom, United States, and Yemen.

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⁸ United Nations. “100 Women Win seats in Parliament and Local Councils, Among Other Peacebuilding Achievements in Sierra Leone.” April 2025. Available [here](#). Accessed on September 09, 2025.

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¹⁴ ICVA. “Equitable Partnerships and Localization. ‘Grab and Go’ Pocket Guide.” April 2025. Available [here](#). Accessed on September 09, 2025. and Barbelet, Veronique and Gemma Davies, Josie Flint, and Eleanor Davey. “Interrogating the evidence base on humanitarian localisation.” June 2021. Available [here](#). Accessed on September 09, 2025.

¹⁵ Sabina Robillard, Teddy Atim, Daniel Maxwell. “Localization: A “Landscape” Report. Boston, MA: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, 2021.” Available [here](#). Accessed on September 09, 2025. and Rana B. Khoury, Emily K.M. Scott. “Localization doesn’t shift power. It deepens international dominance”. The New Humanitarian. 23 July 2025. Available [here](#). Accessed on September 09, 2025

¹⁶ Trust-Based Philanthropy Project. “Glossary of Terms and Phrases: Frequently used in Trust-Based Philanthropy.” Available [here](#). Accessed on September 09, 2025.

¹⁷ Accompaniment model is defined by Humanity United as “a long-term, multi-year commitment to walking alongside partners in a way that reinforces the sufficiency, capacity, and power of their own approaches.” For more information see: Humanity United. “Our Approach.” Available [here](#). Accessed on September 09, 2025.

¹⁸ The Trust-Based Philanthropy Project has outlined six steps that philanthropies can take to develop trust-based partnerships. The six steps are (1) Give multi-year, unrestricted funding, (2) Do the homework, (3) Simplify and streamline paperwork, (4) Be transparent and responsive (5) Solicit and act on feedback, and (6) Offer support beyond the check. Trust-Based Philanthropy Project. “Six Practices of Grantmaking” Available [here](#). Accessed on September 09, 2025.

¹⁹ For examples of participatory measurement methods, see Everyday Peace Indicators methodology, such as indicator development in Afghanistan [here](#) or the [Inclusive Rigor Framework](#).