Local Leadership in Peace Processes: findings from the second global online consultation

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Introduction

Most peace processes held at the national level focus primarily on the allocation of positions, power and resources in the central government. The new political order that emerges from these deals rarely recognizes existing authorities and processes held at the grassroots level and fails to represent the needs of local communities.[1] As a result, peace processes are often drawn out and only partially implemented, undermining the long-term prospects for a sustainable peace.

At the heart of this problem is the greater issue of legitimacy. The leadership that partakes in these processes is often concentrated on traditional political and military elite who wield power and authority in wartime and are therefore considered the key actors needed to end conflict and build peace. However, research has shown that while these influential actors are skilful at creating conflict, they are far less skilled at ending it.[2] Many of these actors are self-serving, can be out of touch with local realities, and their decisions are influenced more by complex socio-political and economic structures[3] than their commitment to peace. By focusing solely on these national actors, peace processes risk rewarding violent behaviour, and this can create a leadership void and a lack of accountability, which diminishes their credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the local population.

More recently, there has been a growing consensus[4] among the international peacebuilding community that the inclusion of local stakeholders is necessary to strengthen the local ownership of formal peace processes at the national level. This has focussed primarily on ensuring their engagement in negotiation and mediation efforts, as well as playing an active part in implementing the outcomes of peace agreements. In practice, however, their inclusion has often been tokenistic and met with resistance, relegating them to secondary support roles and therefore undermining their meaningful participation and ownership of the peace process.

With this issue in mind, Principles for Peace and Peace Direct held a global online consultation in June 2021 with peacebuilding practitioners to discuss the broader issue of local ownership in peace processes. A key insight from this consultation highlighted the need for a fundamental shift in how peace processes are structured – one that encourages local responsibility and accountability by placing local leadership at the centre. What this means in practice, however, is not clear and requires further discussion.

To this end, a follow-up consultation was held in October 2021 to define, classify, and interrogate the concept of local leadership in the context of peace processes. The insights from this consultation are discussed in this report.

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1   See Menkhaus 2014
2   See Peake, Gormley-Heenan and Fitzduff 2004
3   See Meehan 2018
4   See Cuhadar 2020

Methodology

The findings of this report are based on discussions which were held during an online consultation that took place on Platform4Dialogue (P4D) from 13-14 October 2021. Nearly 160 participants from 44 countries were invited to contribute to a series of online, text-based discussions, exploring what local leadership means to them, how to identify the right individuals/groups, how to integrate them in a multi-track approach and what role international actors should play in this process.

During the consultation, participants responded to questions that were posted in each discussion thread, as well as to points which were raised by other participants and facilitators over the course of the consultation. For contributions deemed sensitive, participants were given the opportunity to post anonymously. Quotes from participants are illustrative of the perspectives raised during the consultation, and a small number of quotes include minor edits for clarity and readability. All participant quotes within this report were given explicit consent to be publicly quoted.

The following sections of this report discuss the main points raised by participants, and where possible, offer an analysis of these perspectives in view of current debates within academia and practice. Readers should view the issues discussed in this report not as a representative or exhaustive sample of all relevant issues on the subject, but as a reflection of the perspectives of participants and the issues they chose to discuss during the consultation.

Findings

I. Defining Local Leadership in the Context of Peace Processes

Leadership is an ambiguous and intangible concept. While most people have a general idea of what a leader might look like and what they are supposed to do, determining what underpins leadership and how it should be employed is less clear and subject to debate. At the start of the consultation, participants were therefore asked to define and unpack the concept of local leadership, including its key characteristics and how to identify them in the context of peace processes.

> *Leadership is complex and those in charge are not always in control. On the other hand, leadership is not a rank, it's a responsibility.*
>
> **– Dishane Senaratne**

Key defining characteristics

When discussing the concept of "local leadership", participants tended to equate it with the *ability to influence* local communities toward a collective goal and/or vision, providing general direction and guidance, and resolving their differences. As noted by Mohamed Konare, "a leader is an influential person, a driver of change capable of mobilizing and federating the various actors around a common interest and of giving momentum to the [peace] process in order to achieve the desired objective" (translated from the original French). Similarly, Dr. Rashid Raji attested that "a transformational leader sees the goodness in people and galvanizes them towards peaceable means, usually through a vision of peace and a destination. S/he has the *skills* to translate his/her vision into action". Sokfa John further explained that a leader can "directly or indirectly guide a community or group towards achieving *clarity*", implying that a leader plays an active role in distilling a common vision that brings the community together, adding that a local leader is "able to give the community a sense of direction and ensure that members feel that they are part of the peace process together, irrespective of their differences and opinions, or approaches/visions to peace."

In contrast, some participants placed greater emphasis on a leader's *direct experience* in peacebuilding and conflict resolution work. For instance, Saeeda Diep, Lumenge Lubangu and Nouran Mahran connected a leader's influence within a community with their experience in leading conflict resolution efforts locally, while Sylvère Nsengiyuma added that a leader is "a mediator, facilitator and/or adjudicator in community conflicts. S/he is also an educator, model and advisor of peace", while Tenimpagba Yonli saw local leadership more generally as "being a reference point in the field of peace promotion" (translated from the original French). Significantly, some participants like Marius Ruhanamirindi cautioned against so-called peace leaders who lack previous experience in conflict prevention and conflict resolution.

Linked to this, many participants agreed that local leadership needs to have a *strong understanding of the local context*, including the root causes of violence, the obstacles to peace as well as the resources and external change agents needed to resolve conflict. Thera Boubacar noted that leadership is "a transformative capacity that identifies injustice and violence in order to facilitate a more inclusive, holistic development within communities. [...] It requires a thorough understanding of the local context as well as the issues that need

to be addressed" (translated from the original French). More broadly for participants, local leaders are ones who have a longstanding attachment to the area and are recognised by the community in question. Marie Lamensch noted that local leaders "know the ins and outs of their communities, they tend to know what works more than anyone, and they know who to include in peace discussions or who and what tends to act as a spoiler".

Other notable characteristics highlighted by participants is that leadership involves *collaboration*, *learning* and *sharing* with community members. Gloria Hingoma emphasised their ability to harness efforts for collaboration and partnership within a community, while Akinjise Daniel and Sokfa John attested that leaders are open and flexible, committed to learning from experience and adjusting their actions accordingly. Furthermore, Mahwish Bakht saw local leadership as one that "ignites skills in a community", while Bothwell Mussett Chitengu regarded local leaders as "role models who have the ability to capacitate and empower the people they lead to cultivate a positive peace". Reflecting on this, Vivien Ebere Abara concluded, "leadership means having the ability to develop people and help others reach their full potential".

The importance of legitimacy and responsibility

The characteristics listed above are all part and parcel of the *legitimacy* that underpins local leadership. Through their shared values, skills and knowledge, commitments to peace and community welfare, and their ideology of service toward their fellow citizens, local leaders are those who have the *trust*, *respect* and *support* of their communities. Pascal Djeumeued explained that a key element to identify local leadership is "their legitimacy recognized by the community or a given group. Because of his/her commitment to peace, many recognise their charisma and are willing to commit to following him/her or his/her advice" (translated from the original French). As such, they are perceived as being truly *representative* of local communities, including *championing* their inclusion and enabling constructive forms of local *agency*. Encapsulating this position, Sokfa John noted that "local leadership is an *instrument* or *channel* through which local values, visions, and concerns are incorporated into peace processes, thereby increasing the chances that community members will take ownership and responsibility for peace processes''.

With this in mind, several participants emphasised that local leadership has a *responsibility to serve* local communities, focussed primarily on improving the welfare of the community they represent. Gloria Hingoma, Akinjise Daniel, Zack Gaya and Pascal Djeumegued all alluded to the principles of servant leadership, arguing that local leaders must place everyone above themselves and be in service to their needs, with Pascal noting "s/he is not self-interested and is able to give him/herself to the cause of peace". Tenimpagba Yonli further tapped at the heart of this ideology, attesting that a local leader is "willing to sacrifice for the common good and work in a voluntary capacity".

In turn, participants agreed that local leaders are *accountable* for their role in peace processes. Al-Mahroof Muhammad further argued that leadership involves "accepting responsibility for failure", while Bothwell Mussett Chitengu further attested that a leader "has to directly carry the burden to promote peace and take it upon him/herself to accept the blame when violence breaks out and be committed to end the violence". Sokfa John explained that local leaders need to engage in a process of "self-examination where one evaluates themselves and to ensure that their actions and choices, no matter how small, do not contribute to violent conflict".

Nouran Mahran further explained that a leader is not only "accountable to one's self but also to the people that are part of the process even if they do not have an 'leading' position with the process itself". This commitment also includes speaking for and serving all members of their community, including marginalised voices. David Porter characterised leadership as "being willing to walk in the path of those who suffer most." Sylvère Nsengiyuma echoed that sentiment, stating that "a local leader in peace processes is one who cares about the vulnerable people and protests those at risk."

Identifying local leaders

When it comes to identifying local leaders, most participants emphasised the importance of looking beyond conventional expectations. Many participants highlighted how the diversity of local leadership is often hampered by traditional ideas of leadership. Sokfa John explained: "It is common for peace processes and popular imagination to see peacebuilding primarily as the domain of religious and traditional leaders, older people of wealth and high status. Surely, they play important roles in peace processes and have achieved much. However, the expectation that responsibility is primarily or exclusively theirs sometimes stalls or even undermines peace processes. [...] Conventional expectations and ideas of leadership

sometimes exclude and make it difficult for people who are skilled and innovative to shape the peace process". Steven Leach further added, "the prompt asks us to consider leadership within the context of conventional expectations, and it is those expectations that often define leaders as masculine, older, and political, which becomes self-reinforcing". Participants also argued that this rule should apply to local leaders who participate in peace processes, with Marie Lamensch stating, "a prerequisite of participation as a leader should be to accept inclusivity, diversity and to be ready to listen to voices they may not agree with or are not used to listening to. Local leaders, as with other participants, should agree to guiding principles''.

On that note, participants largely agreed on a number of key stakeholder groups whose leadership should be included in peace processes due to their close links with local communities, namely civil society actors, traditional conflict mediators, religious authorities, academics and educational leaders, as well as women-led, youth-led and disability groups and associations. On the other hand, participants often disagreed about how to engage traditional and customary chiefs, partly due to their perceived susceptibility to political influences from peace spoilers, but nonetheless they recognised their importance as leaders in their communities and as key actors in peace processes. More generally, participants agreed that local armed leaders, businessmen and local politicians should have a much more limited role in peace processes because they often prioritise financial and political gains over their commitment to peace.

Notwithstanding, participants recognised that all stakeholder groups need to be included in some capacity because they all have a role to play in the peace process. Sandra Dindi cautioned against their exclusion, claiming that "the danger of overlooking some leaders raises tensions among rival communities who view their leaders as supreme, further escalating a situation. This leads to temporary peace treaties that only boil over to unending conflict".

More concretely, participants suggested a few approaches to identify local leadership. This included organising consultations with local communities, tapping into existing peace and development committees and civil society networks, as well as conducting a stakeholder analysis in a given context to determine who are the right leaders to engage and at what time. Steven Leach elaborated: "The decisions on who is a stakeholder must be made locally for there to be credibility, and yet external actors have a critical role in asking who has yet to be invited to the process. External actors can also introduce tools that may increase equity of participation, and yet there must be buy-in from the local community - this can often be achieved through mapping exercises that help local communities visually see what they already know".

II. Connecting Local Leadership to Formal Peace Processes

Increasingly complex interpretations of peacebuilding have been accompanied by the growth of multi-track approaches to peace processes, wherein mediation efforts at the national level are accompanied by community-based peace initiatives. These are seen as complementary, intended to link up local peace initiatives to formal peace negotiations and ensure local participation in the broader peace process. In reality, these linkages have been spurious and haphazardly made, and often fail to deliver visible results.[1] Participants were therefore asked to determine how local leaders can be better integrated to the formal peace process and what role international actors can play to support it.

Local leadership's added value

Throughout the consultation, participants highlighted a number of ways that local leaders contribute to the larger peace process:

Firstly, local leaders have the ability to tap into complex local ecosystems, especially when local access and buy-in are difficult to come by. Marie Lamensch explained that "these ecosystems are made of different local actors with different interests, networks and backgrounds. Local leaders tend to know what local ecosystems are made of". With this unique insight, local leaders are effectively able to see connections between different stakeholder groups and how local peace initiatives can connect with one another toward a greater goal.

Secondly, local leaders can collect important information and insights to inform the formal peace process. Sawssan Abou Zahr explained that "local leaders bring fresh insights about how the situation is at the grassroots level, including insecurities, fears and hopes. These insights are crucial for the success of the peace process", while an anonymous participant noted that local leaders can provide "real-time information on the actors, the environment and on the peace process at the local level".

Lastly, local leaders can play a key intermediary role due to their positioning, connecting the peace process downstream and linking up the local level with the formal process. Lumenge Lubangu said that local leaders "play the intermediary role in peace processes given their strategic position within local communities'', while Sokfa John

> *"Local leadership should not be used as a rubber stamp of the [peace] process but should be involved in all decision-making mechanisms for the sustainability of the process".*
>
> *– Joshua Ayoo*

claimed that they can be "the bridge between the sometimes aloof [external] approach and the real and material concerns of communities''. This is a crucial step because it can mitigate against shallow and fragile processes that fail to relate to local communities. Sofka concluded, "[local leaders] can help translate higher level mediation/negotiations to the communities and help ensure that communities are carried along in the peace process".

Challenges to their integration

In principle, the multi-track approach is intended to benefit the inclusion of local leaders, but in practice the process has historically faced significant operational challenges. Many participants noted that these shortcomings have been clearly linked to elite resistance, but some also saw it as an issue of sequencing and perceptions of local actors. Pascal Djeumegued noted that local leaders are often given implementing roles once key decisions are made, and that it is "necessary to deconstruct this way of doing things and to integrate local actors in this process and the decision-making sphere". Pife Muliro added that, "despite the common assumption that linking initiatives within and across levels of society create beneficial outcomes, little attention is paid to how to create linkages in practice and to some extent, local leaders are not really considered. Their voices are not actually heard at a high level".

On a similar note, Dr. Prince Charles Dickson alluded to the paternalism that limits this integration: "Here lies the bitter truth, in many cases until recently local leaders were not exactly part of the multi-track approach in real terms. Theoretically, yes, but in practice it was not often the case. At some point, they just *become objects* in a peace process, which ordinarily should have them at the

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1   See Buchanan 2020

heart of solutions in the peace process". Reflecting on this, Sobhi Mohanty highlighted the adverse effect this has on local leadership: "I have seen for example, that even in the case of local leaders who are immensely respected within communities and work towards mobilising communities around dialogues, when they are consistently not given resources or formal legitimacy, their influence slowly goes down, because local communities know that they don't have the political power to protect them, or to actually bring about peace, even if they have the social legitimacy".

Approaches for better integration

Responding to the challenges of integration, participants first emphasised the importance of engaging in co-design and strategy workshops where local leaders can help define peace strategies and develop information gathering mechanisms to feedback to the wider peace process. Moise Mwaba talked about establishing a 'joint technical committee' to work on peace strategies together, while Freddy Zibika said that "it would be better if together we first defined strategies and methods of intervention that are comprehensive in order to improve our peace interventions and our performance".

Tied to this, participants noted that establishing reciprocal feedback loops at different levels can help inform and progress the peace process. To that end, they called for better vertical linkages between local leaders and international actors at the national level, as well as better horizontal linkages between sub-national actors to facilitate the process at the local level and ensure it is feeding into the wider peace process. Ashima Kaul explained that "local leadership is so caught up in the local dynamics that they are unable to see the larger/bigger picture. It is extremely important therefore to create linkages between local and global processes and build a vertical and horizontal network for influencers to generate the right impact at all levels". Pife Muliro further noted that "it is important to consider clearly what the purpose of fostering a particular linkage is, and look at how to do it", but added that effective linkages can "create positive impacts, such as effective information-sharing, consensus-building and increased ownership".

The role of international actors

> *International actors must and should be involved [in peace processes]. What we do not seem to have an agreement on is the level of their involvement, and how exactly, especially given the fact that the old method has shown that it is no longer working.*
>
> *– Dr. Prince Charles Dickson*

As with the previous consultation, many participants reiterated the added value that international actors bring to local stakeholders taking part in a peace process, from providing technical, logistical and advocacy support, to bringing an additional level of legitimacy to a process as third parties. For instance, Arnold Batundi explained that international actors can bring "experiences from elsewhere, strengthen capacities in terms of training, support actions for peace financially and materially, and accompany advocacy actions at all levels", while George Nsikakabasi noted that international actors can help identify links and strengthen existing peace systems. Flora Bossey concluded that "the support with best practices and rich experiences brought to the table by international actors cannot be emphasised enough".

However, participants often disagreed on their point of entry and the length of their involvement in peace processes. Bothwell Mussett Chitengu argued that international actors "should be in the initial stages, to know the proper entry points and to legitimize the process in consultation with local actors. They should then take a passive role but should completely pull out when the local have been fully empowered". Gustav Ebai disagreed with this, explaining that international actors should not enter too early in order to "let local actors to really position themselves well, so they would know which partner to work with for real results". Zack Oluoch went further than this and argued that international actors should only be involved in "mediation and negotiations on a short-term basis and at the highest level" only once the process is underway. In turn, Jean Mbarukokiza countered this by stating that they should be involved in the process from the beginning to the end and even after, claiming "experience shows that when they come during the process they are always disconnected from the initial situation, and when they come afterwards, they may be supporting resolutions that have been poorly made and this falls on their heads".

Despite their disagreements, participants emphasised that a guiding principle is that international actors first need to be invited by local stakeholders before engaging with them. Morella Aranda Guzman exclaimed, "international actors must be solicited, desired and invited by the natives of the peace process. They cannot be *imposed*" (translated from the original Spanish). Sawssan Abou Zahr added: "By definition, I believe that local leadership is local and well rooted in its own specific context. If it is imposed, it should not be called leadership. Perhaps it would be some kind of sponsorship or guidance, but not leadership."

Notwithstanding, participants argued that international actors can act as arbiters of inclusivity, by enhancing the visibility of local leaders and protecting them during the peace processes. Steven Leach explained that it is "incumbent upon the international actors to insist on civil society engagement in a way that accesses local leadership. External actors should make their engagement dependent upon such conditions, or they should not engage".

Conclusion

As demonstrated throughout the report, local leadership can play a critical role in contributing to the local ownership of peace processes. Local leaders are adept at tapping into complex local ecosystems to identify the root causes of violence locally and connect the right resources and change agents at the local level needed to support the peace process. Moreover, they can act as an important bridge across different tracks of the peace process, providing real-time information on local conflict and peace dynamics and linking it upstream to inform the wider peace process. They can also translate high-level negotiations and mediation efforts to local communities and ensure that they feel connected to the process itself.

Perhaps most significantly, local leaders' participation in a formal peace process brings much-needed legitimacy to the peace process, as local communities feel that they are being represented and can therefore identify more with the process itself. Unlike political and military elites at the national level, local leaders derive their authority from the communities themselves, and are therefore responsible to uphold their values and principles. This level of local accountability makes local leaders key instruments to operationalise local ownership within the wider peace process.

Yet, at the same time, efforts to integrate local leaders into formal peace processes have been mired by issues of prioritisation and elite resistance. As a result, local leaders are often relegated to secondary 'implementer' roles and, as a result, their broader inclusion is uneven and at times tokenistic. This not only minimises the significant role that they play within their communities, but it also has the adverse effect of reducing their influence locally, thus undermining the long-term sustainability of the peace process overall.

In turn, there need to be renewed attempts to strengthen their integration within the wider peace process. Genuine inclusivity requires proactive engagement with local leaders from the start of a peace process, including in mediation efforts and in deciding how to design and implement activities within the peace process at the local level. This entails a fundamental shift in how peace processes are negotiated and implemented. Below are recommendations to support the integration of leadership within peace processes:

1. **Proactively engage local leadership from the start of a peace process and across all stages:** Local leaders should not be considered only after the major decisions of a peace process are already made. They need to be actively involved in the process from the onset, where they can actively inform the process and ensure that mediators and the relevant parties are not out of touch with local realities. They can also support early sensitisation efforts with local communities and receive feedback on how the process is being received locally. International actors should also act as arbiters to bypass elite resistance and ensure their meaningful participation, making sure that international support to the process is contingent on this condition.

2. **Look beyond conventional expectations of leadership to ensure that the right local leaders are embedded in the peace process:** The diversity of local leadership is as important as their representation in a peace process. This requires looking beyond traditional ideas of leadership to consider local leaders from more marginalised communities and groups, such as women, youth and people with disabilities. Such leaders often use innovative peacebuilding approaches that can positively shape the wider peace process. Many of these can be identified via stakeholder analyses and tapping into local peace committees and civil society networks.

3. **Establish reciprocal information and feedback loops between international, national and local leaders:** It is vital that local leaders are engaged in equitable partnerships with the leadership at all levels. This requires moving away from extractive and paternalistic practices where international and national level actors dictate to local leaders how to engage with the peace process during the implementation phase. Local leaders should be in a position to provide candid feedback on national-level processes and how it affects their work and the communities they represent.

4. **Support the development of vertical and horizontal linkages at all levels:** Multi-track approaches to peace processes often face major coordination challenges between peacebuilding actors across different levels. It is important to establish joint coordination mechanisms to co-design peace initiatives across the levels, including looking at how they feed into one another. Likewise, additional support is needed to build linkages between local leaders to avoid gatekeeping and/or duplication of efforts.

5. **Provide long-term support to locally-led peace initiatives**: While local leaders are in a relatively strong position to actively support peace processes, they still require external financial and material support to strengthen their capacities and increase the likelihood that the peace process is supported locally in the long-term.

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A new path to lasting peace

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