

Why legitimacy matters to NGO peacebuilding

Oliver Walton

Donor support for national NGOs engaged in peacebuilding can backfire: association with international 'interference' can damage NGOs' reputations and fuel political opposition. Drawing on findings from Sri Lanka, this brief suggests how donors could develop more politically aware, flexible relations with NGOs to help maintain NGO legitimacy and promote locally appropriate peacebuilding strategies.



An NGO-led peace meditation in Sri Lanka © O. Walton

Key messages

- NGOs can play an important role in implementing donor peacebuilding strategies – particularly in creating 'hybrid' approaches to peacebuilding by adapting international strategies to local contexts.
- In the process, however, NGOs often face opposition from political groups seeking to preserve the status quo. Such opposition can undermine NGOs' local legitimacy and reduce the impact of their work.
- International peacebuilders could enhance the effectiveness of their partnerships with NGOs by paying more attention to the ways in which NGOs gain domestic approval.
- Donors could give NGOs greater space and flexibility to develop hybrid approaches to peacebuilding that are more attuned to the concerns of critical political groups.

Local political actors often challenge or renegotiate international peacebuilding interventions. Recent research has emphasised the need for hybrid approaches to peacebuilding that reconcile local and liberal international versions of peace. NGOs have typically played a significant role in generating such approaches by adapting international strategies to local contexts.

NGOs can mediate between international and local norms because of their legitimacy with both international and local actors. However, NGOs' legitimacy in the eyes

of local people – the general perception that NGOs' actions are desirable or appropriate within that society (Suchman, 1995) – can be undermined by their association with international donors. An intermediary role that contributes to hybrid peacebuilding can therefore be difficult to maintain, and can involve uncomfortable trade-offs.

NGO support for donors' peacebuilding strategies

NGOs have often supported international donors' peacebuilding efforts. They have helped to: implement reconstruction

programmes and co-existence and reconciliation activities (such as community exchange programmes, or peace awareness training); conduct research to support policy-based solutions to conflict; develop conflict early-warning systems; and directly support mediation efforts. In some contexts NGOs have also fostered popular support for peace processes through media campaigns or by organising rallies.

Opposition from political groups

Peacebuilding interventions can provoke opposition from political groups seeking to maintain the status quo. Nationalist political groups often criticise NGOs as a means of promoting their own political agendas. International and local peacebuilders are particularly likely to face political opposition during periods of transition – as a peace process falters or after a change of government.

'The extent to which NGOs' activities are perceived as appropriate by local people affects the outcomes of NGOs' and donors' strategies to build peace.'

Risks of NGO partnership with international donors

In many conflict-affected regions, donors find it easiest to implement their strategies by working closely with elite, professionalised NGOs based in capital cities. However, this close association can reduce NGOs' local legitimacy. It can fuel criticism from NGOs' political opponents, appearing to support claims that NGOs are out of touch with local realities and that they are being used by donors to undermine state sovereignty. In Sri Lanka during the politically volatile period of 2006–2008, for example, NGOs' association with an internationally-backed peace process damaged their reputations and contributed to a broader backlash against international intervention.

NGO efforts to reconcile international and local peacebuilding agendas

Greater awareness among donors of the political and organisational risks faced by NGOs could make donor-NGO partnerships more effective. In managing these risks while seeking to reconcile international and local peacebuilding agendas:

- NGOs may need to make trade-offs – such as between minimising opposition from domestic critics and satisfying international funders.
- NGOs' room for manoeuvre is determined largely by their access to funding and their relationships with donors or powerful domestic political figures.
- Different NGOs are likely to renegotiate international peacebuilding agendas in different ways, and these contrasting approaches can compete with one another.

Implications for donors

The extent to which NGOs' activities are perceived as appropriate by local people affects the outcomes of NGOs' and donors' strategies to build peace. Donors could therefore:

- Pay greater attention to the ways in which NGOs gain domestic approval in the particular context and to how their own involvement might affect that process. This would require more in-depth political analysis to increase understanding of and responsiveness to changing political dynamics.
- Give NGOs greater space and flexibility to generate hybrid approaches to peacebuilding that are more attuned to nationalist concerns. This would involve acknowledging that NGOs might need to alter their objectives as political circumstances change.
- Cultivate more open relationships with NGOs to enable a more flexible approach to NGO support.
- Develop tailored strategies for working with different NGOs. NGOs' strategies for managing their legitimacy in changing contexts are constrained by their particular organisational histories, values and alliances.



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Learn more

- Walton, O., 2012, 'Peace Building Without Using the Word "Peace": National NGOs' Reputational Management Strategies During a Peace-to-War Transition in Sri Lanka', *Critical Asian Studies*, 44:3, 363–390
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- Walton, O., 2008, 'Conflict, Peacebuilding and NGO Legitimacy: National NGOs in Sri Lanka', *Conflict, Security and Development*, 8:1, 133–167

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Suchman, M., 1995, 'Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches', *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 20, 374–5

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