

Financing and coordination strategies to support local actors in the MENA region: Towards more impactful and inclusive financing for peacebuilding and resilience

*Informal dialogue with local peacebuilders in the MENA region
Summary Note*

Peacebuilding work in the MENA region faces numerous challenges. This includes the need to define what peacebuilding means and what peacebuilding programming should look like in the MENA context and to develop practical ways to increase the quantity and quality of peacebuilding financing.

- *Meaning of peacebuilding:*

In the MENA region, peacebuilding is understood through the prism of its specific context: the term 'peace' is closely associated with the Middle Eastern peace process, rather than as an everyday aspiration of all people in the region. Due to the complexities of the Middle Eastern process, however, the conversations on peacebuilding needs are perceived as highly sensitive and are often avoided. The term 'peacebuilding' is therefore replaced by terms such as 'resilience' and 'development'. Further, peace grants make up only a small part of ODA provided by the donor community in the MENA region. Many civil society organisations are forced to follow donors' priorities and reframe their work as resilience or development. These findings suggest the need to raise awareness and build capacity in the field of peacebuilding and sustaining peace.

Local peacebuilders, at the same time, see great value in peacebuilding and sustaining peace as a broad agenda that encompasses strategic interventions to address all issues affecting peace and security of communities from human rights, to the promotion of democracy and the protection of the environment. Peacebuilding and sustaining peace are not only relevant in countries that suffer from wars and conflicts, they are relevant in every context.

Since the engagement in and learning on peacebuilding among local organisations is limited, the capacities of local organisations to compete for grants are insufficient. The donor community has rigid systems that are difficult to access without specific technical skills, language, resources, and access. Beyond a pure language barrier, donors expect local communities to articulate issues from the standpoint of convoluted jargon that local communities are often not accustomed to. In times when local organisations attempt to reach out, donors are purely inaccessible at the field level. Without local expertise, donors' approaches limit space for adaptation, promote short-termism, and rely on generic solutions. This enables international organisations and INGOs operating in the region to guide the direction of peacebuilding, with limited integration of local realities and limited relevance at the local level.

There is a recognition among local peacebuilders of the need to 1) improve the quality of their peacebuilding programming and proposals, 2) conduct needs assessment before developing proposals and planning, 3) do better impact analysis throughout all stages of projects,

understand what impact means and demonstrate their success stories, 4) maintain constant and continuous communication with donors (by sending reports and updates on previous and ongoing projects and involving donors in workshops and dialogues).

- *Recommendations:*

- All development actors involved in sustaining peace efforts in the MENA should more deliberately and more often use the language of peace to shift the mindset around what peace means for the region.
- Despite the prevalent global agreement on what peacebuilding tools and methodology are, local peacebuilders should guide the way to localise the peacebuilding narrative in the Middle East to the specifics of the region.
- International partners should provide tools and resources (including in organisational capacity, advocacy skills, program development and fundraising) that enable local actors to effectively realise their own ideas and ensure the sustainability of their work.
 - Donors should support core funding and institutional development. This will allow local organisations to hire consultants to help boost their capacities.
 - The donor community can support networks and coalitions that promote joint learning (including learning by doing), share access, build on their individual strengths, avoid repetition of efforts, and divide tasks among themselves.
- While local organisations must understand and relate their work to established peacebuilding contexts, international partners must attempt to listen and engage beyond jargon and peacebuilding terminology.
- Wider outreach work is needed by the donors in the countries they operate in to ensure that they are more accessible to CSOs and groups doing the work in their respective communities (not only capital-based organisations).

- *Context-specific approach to peacebuilding financing:*

Donors' understanding of diverse operational contexts across the region is lacking, resulting in unrealistic expectations. There is a lack of trust in local organisations that stems from the history of oppression. To plan strategic approaches, donors often rely on reports produced by international organisations based on field visits due to 1) ineffective or non-existent national monitoring mechanisms (i.e., early warning) and 2) lack of trust in existing (often perceived as unscientific) local knowledge. Local organisations perceive the approaches of many donors and intermediaries as the 'third wave of oppression' as local actors face the need to adjust to the expectations of others. Further, civil society organisations are working under extremely difficult conditions (i.e., occupation, ongoing changes in conflict dynamics) and cannot be as productive as those working in more supportive environments. As a result, existing programming is often rooted in generic methodologies developed without consulting with local communities or having an in-depth understanding of local realities. Impactful peacebuilding action lies in the capacity of local organisations to have legitimacy and access on the ground. Donors cannot improve the impact of their investments without local actors, but they should not continue INGOs to exploit local knowledge and let local actors define their own methodologies of assessments and engagement.

- *Recommendations:*
 - The donor community should tailor their approaches to the needs of the country(-ies) in which they work. Grants and projects must be compatible with the country, the country's culture and customs.
 - One practice that could be adopted by the donors is the consultation with local stakeholders in the process of developing strategic approaches, grant schemes and evaluations (via surveys, needs assessments, and meaningful consultations with a feedback loop). Donors could explore regional peacebuilding networks and coalitions as a 'one-stop shop' for accessing intersectional and comprehensive localised context analysis.
 - Another practice is participatory grantmaking. This could include 1) creating advisory bodies for managing the funds to increase trust between donors and communities, and 2) co-designing the theory of change, vision, and financing mechanisms.
 - The donor community should increase its context-specific expertise by hiring local staff.
 - The donor community must provide strategic advice throughout the length of the project and allow for adaptation, but not interfere in the implementation.

- *Flexible Financing and Adaptive Peacebuilding:*

As the context in the MENA region consistently changes, flexible financing mechanisms, adaptability to changing contexts, and availability of emergency funding windows are required. Many organisations have to flee conflict and then have difficulties accessing resources from outside of their countries while needing to address the implications of displacement on their operations and adjust their programming. When flexibility is allowed, donors require a lot of paperwork that adds additional burden on organisations' operations and does not allow time and space for strategic adaptation.

- *Recommendations:*
 - The donor community should review its processes to allow for more flexibility to enable adaptive programming.
 - Local peacebuilders need additional support to understand the ways to obtain financial support in restrictive settings.

- *Accessibility of funding:*

Donors set a lot of restrictions on who can access resources. Organisations that cannot register or open bank accounts due to restrictive national laws cannot access funding and have to rely on their networks to obtain resources. In Palestine, donors put forth checklists that prevent them from allocating money to organisations led by people affiliated with martyrs & prisoners. This makes it almost impossible for most Palestinians to access funding, as there is almost no family member with no martyr. The occupation also controls Palestinian bank accounts.

Typically, civil society in urban areas has better chances to secure resources than those in rural areas. As a result, capital- and urban-based organisations are funded to implement projects in rural areas, instead of making these resources available to grassroots organisations.

Most funding available for peacebuilding is short-term. This puts pressure on local organisations to get as many micro-grants as possible, creating high pressure on local organisations to deal with reporting. It can also lead to corruption and manipulation of funding; many local organisations exploit the grants provided to them.

- *Recommendations:*

- The donor community must decentralise funding to make it more available to rural-based organisations while providing the required support to ensure that they are able to access resources.
- The donor community should review its processes to allow for less restrictive eligibility criteria.

- *Building solidarity:*

Local peacebuilders assume that funding always comes with a political agenda. Following the October 2023 escalation between Israel and Gaza, local organisations are extremely suspicious of international partners and started exploring innovative financing mechanisms and funding streams that started emerging locally in Palestine to avoid getting resources from many Western donors.

- *Recommendations:*

- Local communities must explore new donors and new funding modalities (i.e., private sector, other governments, municipalities, social enterprise, e-philanthropy).