

Shifting power and changing practice to support locally led peace building

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Building sustainable peace requires both a greater awareness of the dynamics of localised conflict and a willingness on the part of external actors to cede control to local actors.

The majority of the world's refugees are driven from their homes by conflict, often finding that the dynamics and underlying tensions from the conflict they are fleeing are transplanted into their new surroundings. More than half of all refugees come from three countries (Syria, Afghanistan and South Sudan), and most of the world's refugees are consistently hosted by 15 countries, the majority of whom share borders with the countries refugees are fleeing. In addition to geographic proximity, these countries often share ethnic or religious ties, as well as broader political, economic and social links. In many instances, private or political interests in the host country also have a stake in the conflict next door.

These dynamics are often reflected in relations between refugee and host communities at a local and regional level, which in turn can be used to reinforce certain political narratives. The interplay between these dynamics, exacerbated by the strain placed on both refugee and host communities in situations of protracted displacement, can increase the risk of tensions within refugee communities and between refugee and host populations.

In this context, development and humanitarian assistance can have an instrumental role in either effectively addressing root causes or exacerbating tensions. Peace-building efforts led by South Sudanese refugees in Uganda offer opportunities to reflect on challenges faced and good practice, on how peace-building and conflict prevention outcomes can be integrated across humanitarian and development programming, and on how the support of external actors can better enable locally led, sustained efforts. Many of the ideas discussed can be adapted to other contexts of displacement.

Going beyond the rhetoric

The concepts of Do No Harm and conflict sensitivity are often reduced to rhetorical devices. The concepts are frequently cited in project proposals, programme documents and logframes but are rarely translated into practical terms and taken to their logical conclusion in terms of the programmatic and operational adjustments required. Given the inherent nature of development/humanitarian assistance – which preferences the transfer of resources, influence and access to certain groups over others – there is no perfect conflict-sensitive intervention. However, much more can be done to grapple with these dilemmas than is currently standard practice. The lack of practical attention paid to these concepts is especially marked in humanitarian response, in part due to the sheer difficulty of balancing the complexity of conflict-affected contexts with the imperative to deliver assistance as soon as possible.

The impetus to respond to humanitarian needs means that the importance of understanding conflict dynamics as they relate to both the refugee and host community populations is either underplayed or overlooked. In Uganda, this has led to a haphazard and counterproductive approach towards addressing tensions among the South Sudanese refugee community. At first, decisions about the geographic location of refugee settlements were blind to ethnic fault lines reflected in the country's civil war. When localised violence broke out in some refugee settlements, refugees were subsequently geographically divided along community lines. Over time, this has served to harden and perpetuate community tensions. While it is critical to recognise differences between communities and act to prevent or mitigate possible violence, it is also important to

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comprehend the potential of humanitarian assistance to serve as a bridge to bring communities together and to contribute to increasing social cohesion. Such goals need to be built into programme design, and cannot simply be assumed or seen as an afterthought.

The Better Aid in Conflict initiative in South Sudan has developed a useful guiding framework called the Spectrum of Ambition.¹ This framework starts with the minimalist injunction to 'avoid harm', as required by the Fragile States Principles of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee. It progresses to the goal of contributing to peace and stability within existing operational and policy frameworks and commitments (but without any change to a programme's primary objective). And it ends with the aspiration – as outlined in SDG 16 – to directly and deliberately address drivers of conflict (where all programmes have conflict reduction as their primary objective).

A number of studies have demonstrated how humanitarian assistance to South Sudanese refugees living in northern Uganda has reinforced conflict dynamics between different elements of Ugandan society, exacerbating perceptions around inequality and the centre–periphery divide.² These tensions are then reflected in how parts of the host community leverage the refugee population in order to attract aid and preferential treatment from the central government. This increases the marginalisation and uncertainty refugees feel, which in turn compound the conflict dynamics within refugee communities themselves.

Given the nature of conflict in South Sudan, there are also both latent and manifest conflicts between refugees, often derived from real or perceived associations with the conflict parties inside South Sudan. While varying across refugee settlements in Uganda, the presence of such tensions has meant that seemingly innocuous events or disputes have quickly escalated, leading to wider unrest and/or violence and in some cases to deaths. In this context, it is critical that development and humanitarian actors have a nuanced understanding of the hyper-localised dynamics within a refugee settlement, or within a certain area of a settlement, including knowledge of how these dynamics relate to those in the wider South Sudanese conflict, and how they evolve depending on the circumstances of the refugee settlement. This must be the starting point for any assistance, not just for those efforts seeking to contribute to conflict prevention and peace building.

Unfortunately, as in many contexts, humanitarian assistance to the South Sudanese refugee population in Uganda is often blind to these dynamics. In episodes where international humanitarian actors have



A refugee from South Sudan in northern Uganda wears a T-shirt which reads: Peace, Truth, Fairness.

sought to respond to conflict within refugee communities, they have often taken the approach of separating groups, rather than seeking to bring them together to address the underlying issues triggering tension or misunderstanding. Over time, this has only served to calcify these fractures. On the other hand, efforts to bring refugees from different communities together through education or livelihoods activities are all too often based on the assumption that interaction alone will lead to peace-building outcomes. In some instances, if interventions are not appropriately designed or if the process is rushed, interaction – contact – can actually exacerbate conflict. This also overlooks the need to build trust between groups beforehand, and the need to facilitate the deepening of interactions and exchange after project activities have been concluded.

Letting local actors lead

Efforts to address root causes can only be effective and sustained if they are led by local actors from the community affected by conflict. Such efforts also require a gradual and sequenced approach beginning with engaging with communities to understand their own perceptions of conflict and, importantly, to map existing capacities, approaches or platforms for resolving disputes or conflict within the community. While external actors such as UN agencies, international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other donors can provide useful support, they can equally – if support is not provided in an appropriate manner – undermine and hinder the dynamism and flexibility required to advance peace-building efforts. Community-level peacebuilders, by contrast, possess legitimacy, entry points and networks that cannot be matched by external actors, even those development or humanitarian actors which have a long history of presence or engagement with a particular community.

The various locally led conflict prevention and peace building efforts among the South Sudanese refugee community in Uganda demonstrate the impact that can be achieved when external actors take a ‘back seat’.

Examples include: engaging with leaders from different communities to enhance mediation and non-violent resolution of conflicts within and between communities; supporting youth and women to serve as mediators or ‘conflict managers’ in their communities; engaging through education, shared cultural practices or sport; and creating community forums to increase awareness of peace processes.

From one perspective, the range of activities supported could appear haphazard and unstrategic but it is precisely when local peacebuilders have the freedom to identify actions which are appropriate and likely to generate community engagement that they are more likely to contribute to positive peace-building outcomes. External actors can play important roles but they should increasingly be accompanying, rather than directing, and be open to an iterative process which embraces the messiness of reality – open to learning from both ‘success’ and ‘failure’.

Another factor either enabling or constraining locally led peace-building efforts is the policy environment in a given setting. Uganda is widely recognised as perhaps the most generous refugee host country, with refugees enjoying a wide range of rights granting access to livelihoods, education and protection. This includes the right to register a community-based organisation (CBO), seen as a key step in line with global policy calls to enable refugee-led responses. While this is important for facilitating refugee-led organisations to access funding from development and humanitarian donors, it poses a conundrum in relation to community-led conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts. Incentives to become a registered CBO/NGO may ultimately undermine capacity to engage in dynamic, fluid ways that go beyond the confines of an organisation reliant on funding for specific projects.

While the ‘NGO-isation’ of civic activism is a trend that is unlikely to wane, there are ways that external actors can provide support more conducive to truly locally led peace building. One way is through supporting networks and movements of refugees and others engaged in peacebuilding at community level, and supporting platforms

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(rather than organisations) which connect actors across community lines. In the context of the South Sudanese refugee community in Uganda, providing grants to refugee-led peace-building initiatives has been a valuable way of empowering community-led efforts to address root causes. In Rhino settlement, support to locally led peace-building initiatives helped not only to resolve deadly violence between Dinka and Nuer which erupted in June 2018 but also to ensure ongoing dialogue and reflection in the community in the aftermath. Rather than having predetermined outcomes and logframes, open-ended approaches based on broad milestones allow for iterative adjustments to be made, and for unforeseen opportunities to be seized.

It can be hard to ‘unlearn’ institutional practices, and it is harder still to shift community perceptions attached to an organisation’s ‘brand’ and standard ways of working. In this way, both problems and solutions risk becoming ‘projectised’ – self-contained, short-term and piecemeal. This is particularly problematic when addressing root causes, with the World Bank and others

suggesting that it takes at least two decades to transform patterns of conflict.³ Short-term projects may indeed be counterproductive, given the community expectations raised and the unsustainable positioning or ‘NGO-isation’ of peace activists. While such practices should be avoided, there are others that should be encouraged. This includes providing sustained, predictable yet not predetermined support, including through pooled funding to individuals and movements that cuts across organisational lines, empowers community-led decision making and action, and reinforces capacities and practices that can be sustained over time. This is a long-term challenge that requires sustained, iterative and long-term engagement to put locally led efforts in the driving seat.

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1. p5 <http://bit.ly/CSRF-toolkit-2017>

2. See for example European Union (2018) *Contested Refuge: The Political Economy and Conflict Dynamics in Uganda’s Bidibidi Refugee Settlements*, p5 <http://bit.ly/EU-ContestedRefuge-2018>

3. See World Bank/United Nations (2018) *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*
www.pathwaysforpeace.org