

TRANSFORMING PARTNERSHIPS IN INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

A practical guide for civil society,
donors, INGOs and intermediaries

peacedirect.org September 2023



ABOUT PEACE DIRECT

Peace Direct is an international NGO working in partnership with local people to end violence, shifting power and resources to help them build sustainable peace. **In trying to shift power and resources in the system in favour of local efforts, we have encountered significant resistance**, with excuses ranging from:

- Local actors can't be trusted
- They lack capacity
- Local civil society doesn't exist in this region
- The risk of fraud/ funds going into the wrong hands is too great
- Local groups can't meet our strict compliance requirements
- Local groups aren't effective

The root of much of this resistance lies in overt and structural racism, which was barely acknowledged by those in the system.



A GLOBAL CONVERSATION

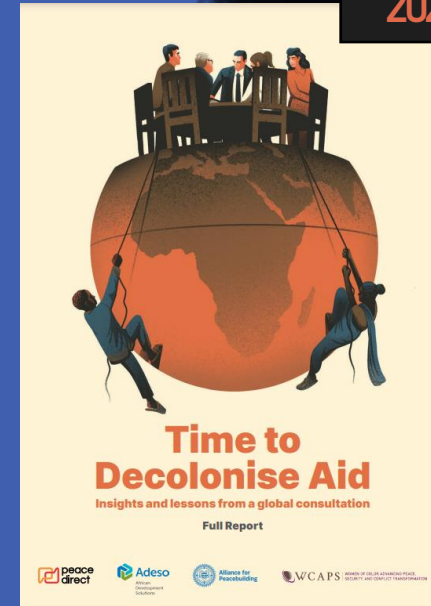
We decided to foster a global conversation about the challenges facing local practitioners across the peacebuilding, humanitarian and development sectors.

- 4 consultations
- 700+ local practitioners shared insights and experiences

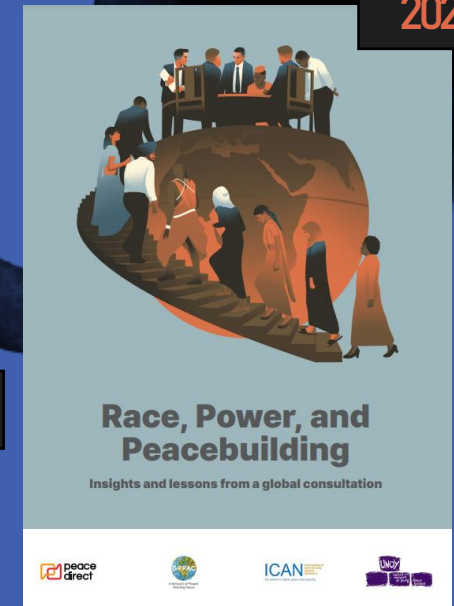
The research highlighted the structural racism and neocolonialism underpinning the sectors. Our first two reports exposed the need for systems change.

Transforming Partnerships makes clear the path.

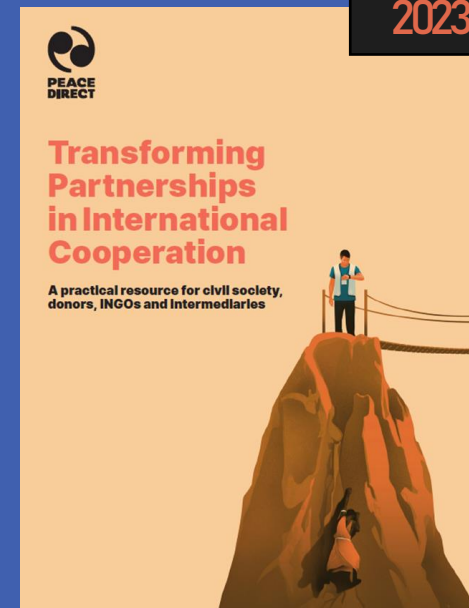
2021



2022



2023



TRANSFORMING PARTNERSHIPS

TIME FOR ACTION

Although our first two reports led to conversations and commitments, systems have been slow to change.

Some organisations said they didn't have enough clarity to take real action.

We decided to develop operational guides to make it clear what steps could be taken to transform the sector. We're starting with partnerships – the heart of all our work.



Clear, practical guide



Explores the problems with current partnerships, and the Global North's reluctance to change



Provides comprehensive recommendations to transform every aspect of partnerships between entities in the Global South and North



DEFINING PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLES

“a trusted, collaborative process in which actors with a shared vision and shared goals journey together in humility, openness, transparency, inclusiveness and equity towards meeting their shared goals.”

- Godwin Yidana



THE FOUR VALUES



Trust

“For any partnership to be successful, there has to be mutual trust.” -Alich Ogbu



Humility

“Humility and courage are needed by all.” - John Coonrod



Respect

“There are partnerships between international and local actors that are ‘decolonised’. These are partnerships where international actors give latitude to local actors to define priorities according to real local needs, and who recognise their expertise on the local, and agree to establish a partnership based on mutual respect.” - Eric Ndayikengurutse (translated from the original French)



Mutuality and reciprocity

Mutual respect for all is the principal thing. A partnership without mutual trust cannot stand.” - Dennis Ekwere

WHERE DID PARTNERSHIPS GO WRONG?



1. A PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

“The concept of ‘partner’ is one of the most misused concepts in international development, because so many partnerships in this field are still built on inequality.”
- Marijke Priester

The problem:

the **lack of a definition or description** of what partnerships are, and in particular ‘equitable partnerships’, which is a term most often used in donor and INGO statements.

Its impact:

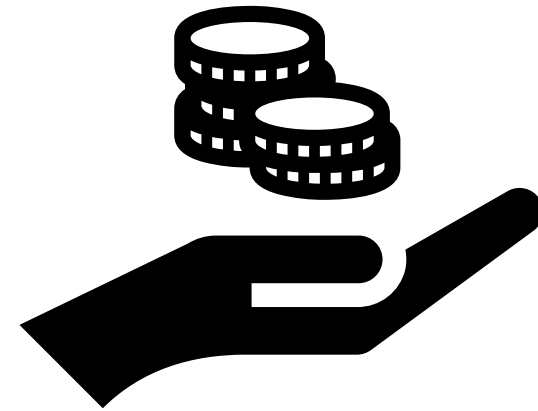
The lack of a definition has led many participants to believe **what Global North actors really want is a sub-contractor** to implement a project or programme designed by those outside the context.



2 TRANSACTIONAL AND TECHNICAL VS TRANSFORMATIONAL

*“Most aid organisations that I have dealt with are often more focused on programmatic inputs and outputs. They focus a lot on **results and not the journey**. Whereas most local actors in development and peacebuilding tend to focus more on the journey and **long-term effects rather than quick fixes**.”*

- Godwin Yidana



3. RACISM AND NEO-COLONIALISM



Time to Decolonise Aid

Insights and lessons from a global consultation

Full Report

Global North actors have **deeply held neo-colonial attitudes and approaches**, which largely go unacknowledged, as outlined in *Time to Decolonise Aid*.

- *“For too long ‘internationals’ have assumed that they have something ‘invaluable’ to bring to the table and that without them (us) everything would work differently (sometimes used as a euphemism to refer to inefficiently). Not only are those assumptions racist, but they are based on ideas and perceptions that are deeply rooted in colonialist and patriarchal mindsets, which unfortunately permeate the sector to this day.” - Sara Torrelles Vives*



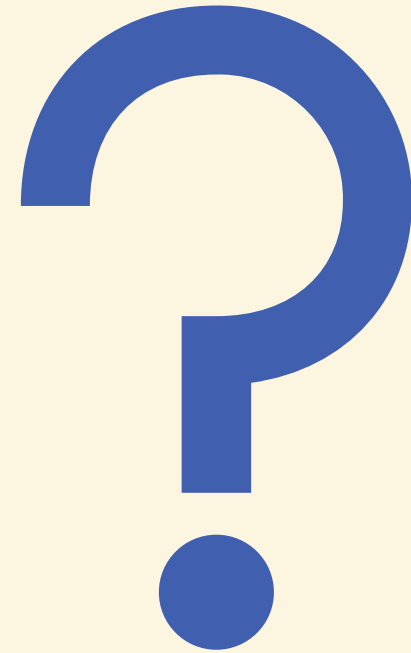
4. POWER: THE HIDDEN DIMENSION IN PARTNERSHIPS

*“I don’t think partnership really exists (or rarely to be fair) in the world of aid as one is giving [...] and another is receiving whatever is offered, therefore they are not equal. One has much more power than the other, **and with power might come conditions, imposed demands and sometimes abuse or exploitation.**”*

- Sawssan Abou-Zahr



WHY HAVE GLOBAL
NORTH ORGANISATIONS
BEEN RELUCTANT TO
TALK ABOUT THEIR
POWER?



1. TO MAINTAIN POWER

“I think it’s all skewed to maintain the power of larger middleman INGOs. There are no equal partnerships when it comes to local and global partners. This partnership conversation is geared towards suppressing local partners to the context as opposed to allowing them to access international platforms out of the fear of disrupting the status quo.”

(Anonymous participant)



2 WILFUL IGNORANCE

Global North actors are wilfully ignorant of the neo-colonial attitudes that they hold and that perpetuate stereotypes about the ‘capacity’ of local communities and actors, who are still perceived as in need of ‘saving’. As Christiane Essombe explained, this perception:

“Ultimately reinforces the narrative according in which aid and salvation can only come either from the West, westernised folks or a westernisation of systems and processes.”



3. INGOs CANNOT IMAGINE A WORLD WITHOUT THEM



Global North actors to perpetuate the myth that they need to continue to exert a dominant role in the sector in order to continue to save lives.

But, as Sawssan Abou-Zahr highlighted in our consultation:

*“Local actors know the needs of their communities best; they should be heard, and more importantly respected. **They don’t need to be rescued by international superheroes, they just need a space to perform and advocate their rights.**”*



4. GLOBAL NORTH ACTORS LACK THE SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE TO TALK ABOUT POWER

In a sector where Global North actors are only slowly coming to terms with the harm they may have caused in the pursuit of ‘doing good’, reflecting on how power is held and maintained, consciously and unconsciously, appears to be a very difficult process for many organisations.



BUILDING BLOCKS OF EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS



Roof tiles

The multiple practical expressions of a partnership

Walls

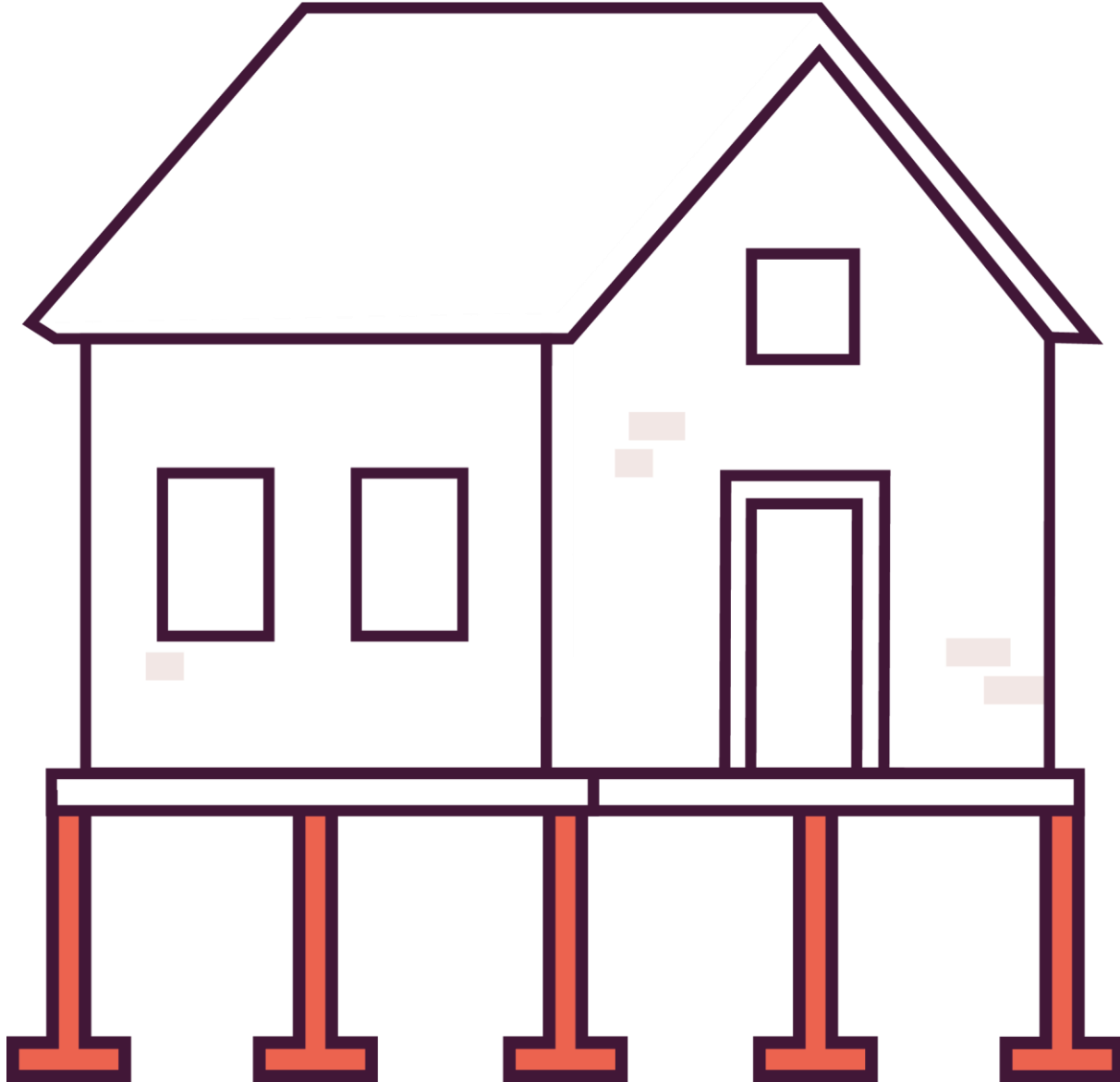
Trust, humility, respect and mutuality/reciprocity

Mortar

Communication and language

Foundations

Mindsets and worldviews



1. MINDSETS AND WORLDMEANS

*“What could they
bring? Simply new
mindsets and some
transparency and
modesty.”*

Sawssan Abou-Zahr



2 FOUR VALUES

The four values must be reflected in the means and ways in which partnerships are implemented, and in how we communicate and live the partnership.



3. COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE

“International actors need to listen, and be flexible, in order to shape their way of seeing.”

- Cherifa Kheddar



4. THE MULTIPLE PRACTICAL EXPRESSIONS OF A PARTNERSHIP

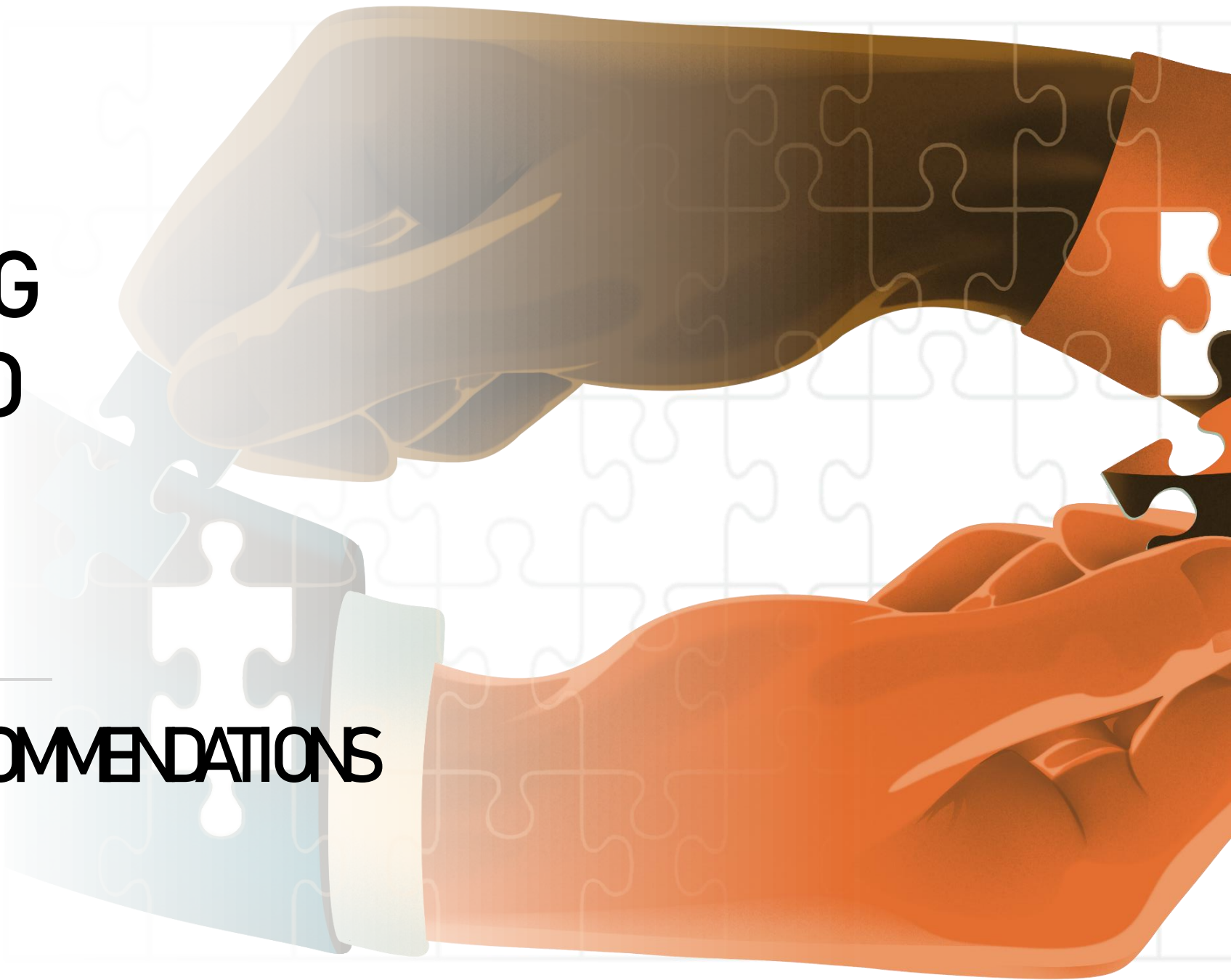
The final structural change relates to the different ways that partnerships are conceived, implemented and mediated through different practices.





OPERATIONALISING DECOLONISED AND EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS

ATASTER OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS



MINDSETS & WORLDVIEWS

GN

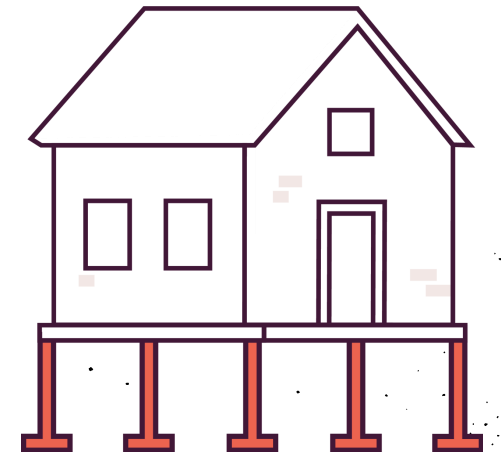
Explore how structural racism and neo-colonial attitudes may continue to shape your organisation's ways of working by conducting an independent review or audit of your organisational culture through a racial equity lens.

TOGETHER

Explore together, through a facilitated conversation, differences and similarities in ideologies and motivations underpinning concepts such as 'development'.

GS

Explore and critically reflect on how structural racism and neo-colonial attitudes may have been internalised by your staff and may continue to shape your ways of working, as well as how you view your community.



VISION, PURPOSE AND GOAL SETTING

GN

Consider how and when you share your vision, purpose and goals with your partners. Invite partners to share theirs first, to avoid your goals influencing theirs.

GS

Define what you mean by partnership, and critically assess why you want to establish partnerships with Global North organisations.

TOGETHER

Invite partners/prospective partners to share their partnership principles, values and behaviours, and agree on how to put these into practice in your partnership.



COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE

GN

Practice active listening in conversations with your partners, paying close attention to what they may not be telling you.

GS

Recognise the risks of adopting donor language that perpetuates neo-colonial attitudes and removes local agency to secure funding (e.g., referring to communities as ‘beneficiaries’)..

TOGETHER

Establish reciprocal feedback loops with your partner to reflect on the partnership, cultivating an environment where feedback is valued and encouraged.



PRACTICE BUDGETING

GN

Recognise how budget discussions are often the most obvious manifestation of Global North control over their partners. Invite partners to call out such behaviours if they observe this, and train staff to be alert to the ways that this might show up in their work.

GS

Construct the budget in ways that allow maximum flexibility, for example aggregating similar activities together. This approach enables greater adaptability and freedom for you to adjust the specifics of activities as needed.

TOGETHER

Regularly share updates on your fundraising efforts, to build a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities that both parties face.



FUNDING AS A PROXY FOR POWER AND TRUST

1. **Fund directly**, and not through Global North intermediaries.
2. Provide **unrestricted funding** as a true demonstration of your trust in the partnership.
3. If unrestricted funding is not possible, provide **flexible funding** to enable your partner to adapt to changes in the context.
4. Provide multi-year funding, thereby helping your partner to avoid ‘feast or famine’ funding cycles and enabling them to plan long-term.
5. **Co-design programmes** with your partners and be prepared to change your assumptions and plans if they don’t align with your partners’ needs.
6. **Modify your risk appetite** to enable you to experiment with different funding mechanisms for local actors.
7. Work with other donors to **establish country-based pooled funds earmarked for local actors**, thereby coordinating efforts and sharing risk.
8. **Change your reporting requirements and formats** so that local actors can report in their language and in different ways; such as video, oral reporting or WhatsApp recorded messages.
9. **Provide non-financial support** through convening, networking, and advocacy opportunities.
10. Support local organisations to generate **their own income**.



Using this list, Peace Direct launched a public survey on social media to gauge practitioner views on how to prioritise funding to local CSOs in the Global South. Nearly 325 practitioners responded, with the top four recommendations highlighted here.

Priority 1: Fund local CSOs directly instead of relying on intermediaries from the Global North to disburse grants in partnerships.

Priority 2: Provide unrestricted funding that allows local actors to utilise funds according to their specific needs and priorities.

Priority 3: Provide multi-year funding to provide stability for local actors and enable them to implement long-term initiatives that are more sustainable.

Priority 4: Provide more flexible funding for local actors.



THANK YOU



For more information on our
work please visit our website:

peacedirect.org