



Fostering Peaceful Communities

WHAT ROLE CAN PHILANTHROPY PLAY?

Cover artwork by Ayan A (ayanbythesea.com)

The artwork accompanying this paper was first used in the report 'Foregrounding Social Movement Voices, Popular Organizing and Philanthropic Funding in Asia and the Pacific', published June 2023 by Thousand Currents and PSJP. The art work is a portrayal of the complex, trust based relationships that movements share with some of the donors that support them. The design and images also seek to portray that in the creative space that is people's movements, everyone is a weaver and they improvise as they adapt and evolve to ever shifting socio political realities.

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INTRODUCTION

Across the world, from Colombia to Indonesia, Northern Ireland to Uganda, local peacebuilders are the backbone of communities enduring protracted conflict. As the first—and often only—responders in crises, they provide vital support, healing, and resilience. Even after peace treaties are signed, their work continues to rebuild and unite divided societies. These peacebuilders include activists, service providers, community leaders, youth and women’s groups, faith leaders, and everyday citizens from all walks of life dedicated to sustaining hope in even the darkest times.

Today, the world faces an unprecedented number of violent conflicts, with 2 billion people—one-quarter of the global population—living in conflict-affected areas¹. Supporting and sustaining local peacebuilders is urgent as they navigate the compounded impacts of colonial legacies, social and political polarisation, democratic erosion, resource exploitation, authoritarianism, climate crisis, external geopolitical pressures, and corporate power. Together, these forces deepen vulnerabilities, fuel displacement, and amplify insecurity on a global scale.

Building lasting peace in today’s complex, volatile context requires intersectional, community-centred approaches to conflict prevention and transformation. Success depends on the agency, relationships, local knowledge, and resources of those directly affected—people deeply connected to and shaped by their communities. This work is challenging and requires sustained resourcing and patience, essential for true social cohesion.

Professional peacebuilding often favours international, top-down approaches over locally-led initiatives, yet these methods frequently fall short. UN and Northern-led peace efforts have struggled to create lasting peace, with many conflicts in Africa recurring within five years². These attempts have been linked to state-building, counterinsurgency, the war on terrorism, and the promotion of democracy. The systemic failures in Iraq, Afghanistan, Haiti, and failure to achieve reconciliation in the Balkans, despite a cessation of hostilities, as well as the establishment of authoritarianism in post-genocide Rwanda, highlight these shortcomings. Until recently, the silence from the international community in response to reported war crimes in Gaza further underscores the systemic problems.

Local peacebuilders play a crucial role in fostering sustainable, community-led peace, yet they often face isolation, limited visibility, and scarce funding. A recent survey³ on philanthropic efforts in conflict transformation highlights this funding gap, showing that while local NGOs and community groups bear much of the work, they receive minimal support. When funding is available, it often neglects the

¹With highest number of violent conflicts since Second World War, United Nations must rethink efforts to achieve, sustain peace, speakers tell Security Council | Meetings coverage and press releases. (2023, January 26). <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15184.doc.htm#:~:text=Six%20out%20of%20seven%20people,places%20affected%20by%20such%20conflict>

²Igba and Adebajo. (2024, June 7). Beating African Swords into Ploughshares: From Military Security to Human Security - Shaping the Future of Africa. <https://trustafrica.org/publication/beating-african-swords-into-ploughshares-from-military-security-to-human-security/>

³Knight, B. (2024, April 23). The emerging story of philanthropy and peace. <https://www.alliancemagazine.org/analysis/emerging-story-of-philanthropy-and-peace/>

holistic needs of conflict-affected communities. In contrast, we know that military budgets around the world continue to swell and the arms trade, which exacerbates conflicts, proliferates.

Global philanthropy is attempting to transform itself and its approach, with growing calls for decolonisation, localisation, power-shifting, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) strategies, and trust-based philanthropy. Yet a gap remains between these ideals and actual practice; most funding for Africa, for instance, still flows through institutions outside the continent. Dominated by Global North perspectives, institutional philanthropy often overlooks other giving models rooted in mutuality, care, and healing.

Funding for local peace efforts sits within this broader context of an unequal power dynamic between the Global North and Global South. This paper is among many attempts to shift the narratives and highlight a different paradigm for global philanthropy, positioning it as a true partner in solidarity with local experts to support their agency in peacebuilding. It synthesises insights from a session held at the 5th African Philanthropy Conference in Victoria Falls on July 31, 2024, organized by the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF), the Unyoke Foundation, Trust Africa, and Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace (PSJP).

Four participants, Robinah Rubimbwa, Coalition for Action on 1325 (COACT); Simon Marot Touloung, African Youth Action Network (AYAN); Nomfundo Walaza, Unyoke Foundation; and Beatrice Boakye-Yiadom, AWDF, shared their experience and reflections on the intersection of community-based peacebuilding and philanthropy. This was followed by an open dialogue, allowing participants to share perspectives. In this paper we have drawn out three learnings from the dialogue.

1. The importance of a contextual understanding of "local peacebuilding."
2. Effective philanthropic support that respects local peacebuilders' perspectives, complexity and the frontline's leading role.
3. Shifts needed in global philanthropy to better support the work of fostering peaceful communities.

These insights contribute to an evolving understanding of community-based peacebuilding and philanthropy grounded in *Ubuntu*—"I am because you are."

This paper is shared amidst ongoing crises in Gaza, Lebanon, Sudan, the DRC, Ethiopia, Cameroon, and other African nations, Ukraine and many other places in the world where conflict continues to exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, and threaten human life and social cohesion in our societies. While community-based peacebuilding is crucial, the partners publishing the paper recognise that a just and holistic peace also requires international accountability, inclusive ceasefire efforts, and commitment from global peace and security systems.

UNDERSTANDING LOCAL PEACEBUILDING

We sought to unpack and broaden the definition of local peacebuilding, emphasising its deep ties to context. For example, efforts addressing food security in South Sudan are peacebuilding, as they prevent militia recruitment among hungry young people. Environmental justice initiatives in areas where resource scarcity drives conflict, or operating a malaria clinic in a war zone are also forms of peacebuilding. To support local peacebuilders effectively and respect their agency, we must understand their work's intersectional and multidimensional nature.

The discussion highlighted the work of COACT, a coalition of women's organisations advancing peace and security for Ugandan women and girls by localising the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. COACT's approach is to convene diverse community stakeholders, including district authorities, women leaders, faith and traditional leaders, and youth, to discuss pressing local concerns. Community peacebuilding is inseparable from addressing the intersecting issues affecting communities and must start from diverse, personal definitions of peace. Issues range from land conflicts, water scarcity, food insecurity, and poor social services to crumbling education, broken infrastructure, and youth unemployment. Through engagements, community members highlight family income struggles, gender-based violence, intimate partner abuse, and substance misuse. At the same time, local leaders cite inadequate resources to meet their budget and planning needs. It's a wide array of challenges.

To COACT, peace means starting where communities are. When COACT asked women what peace means, responses varied as widely as their concerns.

'If I can find the money to pay school fees for my daughter so she can stay in school that would be peace for me.'

'If I were sure that if we went to the health centre we would get medicine to make me better then I would be at peace.'

'I work long hours and I get tired. If I can lie down and rest without anyone frowning or complaining that would be peace for me'.

'My two sons don't get along. If only they could get along and stop this constant attack on each other, that is peace for me.'

'If I could sit at the table with my husband and we plan for our family together. For me, that would be peace.'

And the 13 year old girl who said, 'for me peace is if i leave home in the morning, walk to school, study, I return home in the evening without any man disturbing me.'

COACT's work centres on community visions of peace by empowering women, supporting local organising, and developing action plans for Women, Peace, and Security. For Robinah, who leads COACT, "Peacebuilding is the ordinary things people do to live together," and COACT works to address Uganda's structural violence and resource scarcity to prevent conflict. This approach, in a nation deeply affected by violence since 1962, sees the relationship between structural violence caused by governance challenges and resource scarcity and the need to address such issues to avert

or provide an alternative to violence. In a situation where women have been disproportionately affected by structural violence and conflict, it is an approach that puts women at the centre of defining peace and building it together with them.

UNDERSTANDING THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE WORK

COACT's approach highlights that local peacebuilding is deeply rooted in context, shaped by place and individual experience. The dialogue emphasised the essential role of community-based peacebuilders—often overlooked in a system favouring top-down approaches—unpacking their unique responsiveness and commitment. Robinah noted that *“almost every peacebuilder has a story,”* sharing her journey, which began during the 1981 uprising against Apollo Milton Obote's government, to illustrate the personal motivations driving local peacebuilders.

“I'm always reminded of this particular day, in 1981. I had to run out of Uganda because my husband had run out of Uganda. Our crime was that my husband had voted for a different political party. I had a little girl who was one year and 11 months old. She was my eldest. And I was carrying a five-month-old baby boy. So as soon as friends knew that my husband was wanted, one of them picked him up from our home and took him to the airport and so he flew out. I stayed home with the babies. And then, after five months of having my home frequently visited and searched by security agencies, I had to leave because it was going to be like that every day. And I left, carrying a suitcase, holding a little girl who was one year and 11-months-old, and carrying my five-month-old. I was 26. I was 26! I remember my cousin dropping me off at the border with Kenya and saying good luck. And you know, the border between Uganda and Kenya is quite a distance for a child of one year and 11 months to walk. And I couldn't carry her because the spare hand was carrying a suitcase. The other one was holding this baby. My daughter, the brave girl that she is, walked and ran and then, at some point, sat down and cried. Then we both started crying. This is my background, and I decided and I believe that no woman should have to go through this. I still see that. So this is what drives my work.”

Robinah Rubimbwa, COACT

Simon Marot Touloung echoed Robinah's focus on the power of personal stories in local peacebuilding. Born in Wang-geah, South Sudan, Simon now lives as a refugee in Uganda. He leads the African Youth Action Network (AYAN), a social enterprise promoting peacebuilding and economic empowerment for refugee youth.

“I was just nine years old when I went to Uganda in 2000 with a family of seven. We were all boys. I was the youngest in the family. I didn't know where we were going. I just thought I will follow my brothers and so I left my mother back home. In Uganda, we started a new life and were given a name, a registration, an identification card and we also received food at the end of every month. So that's where we were, where

I wound up for the last 20 years where I have been as a young displaced person from South Sudan. In 2015 after the conflict in our country, South Sudan, we sat together as young people and said, 'What do we do now that the war is continuing? We should be the last people like this.' So we came together and we formed a network called the Africa Youth Action Network in Uganda. We wanted to bring young people together so that they can actually preach peace among themselves in Uganda and also when they go back to South Sudan. So when they first got into the system we called them 'peace ambassadors'. But we were starting this without any knowledge. We didn't know what peacebuilding was. We didn't know what are the tools we can use. We didn't even have any training as young people. That's where we found ourselves. But we said, 'no let us just bring peace, let us just bring young people together. Let us train them, let us work with them. Let us make sure that they form relationships and bonds that are very important and very instrumental.'

We did this not knowing that the communities where we actually come from have put this fight and war mentality into us. So when you are a peacebuilder in your community, in fact, you are just alone. I was just alone. My community, they don't understand what I am doing. For them, I should be like a man going to fight in conflict, back home in South Sudan, so why am I putting this peacebuilding message? In 2016, I remember I was sending messages to young people in my community to organise a peace rally. And people were saying 'man why are you sending me these peace messages? It's war time, why are you not fighting?' One young lady said, 'If I was a man like you, I would be fighting right now.'

You don't know where to go for support, you are struggling with this. You have these challenges that are happening in our own community and we really wanted things to change but then there is nowhere to go for support. And then also there is just too much pressure. Because now you are a peacebuilder, you are in an NGO space so you are expected to write good reports, take photos, also talk about the impact that you are actually creating in your community. But how can you say you are creating impact when people are still fighting. There is a football match in Rhino Camp and then they end up fighting, killing five people. So then you question yourself, 'am I even creating impact in my community? Am I even doing the right thing? Is this working in particular in my own community?' So you have all these questions, and then you have nowhere to actually be able to have the company or have someone to actually support you."

Simon Marot Touloung, AYAN

ACCOMPANYING LOCAL PEACEBUILDERS

Robinah and Simon’s stories foreground the vital role of those directly impacted by conflict in driving change within their communities.

Simon’s story highlights the complexities peacebuilders face daily, navigating trauma, divisions, and mistrust. Building peace in such contexts is filled with ambiguity, resistance, and setbacks. Resourcing this work requires moving beyond the short-term, issue-focused project mentality often found in philanthropy, which assumes control over change trajectories. As John Paul Lederach notes, this mentality privileges uniqueness while overlooking the broader complexities at play⁴.

The Unyoke Foundation and the African Women’s Development Fund (AWDF) embrace the complexity of peacebuilding by moving away from a project mentality and adopting an approach of ‘accompaniment’—walking alongside local peacebuilders. This holistic support helps peacebuilders navigate daily challenges, innovate, and break cycles of violence. For Nomfundo, it’s about creating conditions that allow peacebuilders to “take off the yoke.”

“I think we’ve been yoked so much. We’ve been yoked by organisations that give us money. We’ve been yoked by the work that we do. We’ve been yoked by the relationships of competitiveness that have been engendered by those who give us money. We’ve been yoked by many things within, including the fact that we live in societies where our lives are not ours. They are borrowed lives that we have to deal with.”

Nomfundo Walaza, Unyoke Foundation

This resonated with Beatrice Boakye-Yiadom and AWDF’s approach that “doing this work is hard, but doing it alone is harder.” While accompaniment processes can take different forms, they inherently centre care and solidarity for peacebuilders, activists and frontline actors.

TIME TO REST: Unyoke and AWDF accompaniment provide local peacebuilders with time to rest. When Chris Spies, co-founder of Unyoke, asked peacebuilders what support they needed, rest was a top priority.

“I just need an opportunity to rest, breathe, and connect with myself so that I can show up in my community authentically. Not as a person who has all of these ideas from trainings and workshops, but a person who really connects to what is being called for by their own people.”

Peacebuilder

⁴ Making a Difference: Putting Peacebuilding in Context (2024, February)
<https://youtu.be/W1vE4QD0fM8?feature=shared>

The Unyoke Foundation offers annual reflective retreats for peacebuilders, while AWDF organises a "Flourish retreat" for frontline activists to rest, unwind, and prioritise health, with psychologists and other support available. As Nomfundo explained, this focus on rest is a strategic response to the complexities of the work, central to the approaches of AWDF and Unyoke Foundation.

"In actual fact we do the work when we take time to care for ourselves, because you can then go to the community and people can see that you are one person. Taking time out, resting, recovering, reconnecting with peers, or fellow practitioners is the only way this work can be sustained over long periods of time. Often people talk about mental health support and what needs to be done about it, but that often comes at the end when people are already yoked and very, very tired. We can't do it afterwards. We need to be accompanying people as they do the work so that they can heal as they move forward."

Nomfundo Walaza, Unyoke Foundation

OPPORTUNITY TO BE HEARD: A key aspect of Unyoke Foundation's retreats is providing peacebuilders with the opportunity to share their stories and be heard.

"Can you imagine if all this morning was used for storytelling and only two people were able to tell their stories, and they were held by a community of fellow peace builders who walk the path with them."

Nomfundo Walaza, Unyoke Foundation

For Nomfundo, offering spaces for peacebuilders to unyoke and reflect in a safe environment with peers allows them to be seen, heard, and appreciated. The value and importance of this, to stave off burnout is often missed by those leading organisations. At Unyoke Foundation, sharing stories is a powerful tool in transformative peacebuilding.

"The intergenerational transmission of trauma needs the generations to come together to talk about what hurts. Personal transformation and fully reckoning with who we are is as important as doing the work."

Nomfundo Walaza, Unyoke Foundation

BUILDING CONNECTIONS: AWDF and the Unyoke Foundation focus on building and strengthening connections between movements and other peacebuilders. Nomfundo highlighted the importance of nurturing these connections during Unyoke Foundation's retreats.

"...that deeper healing comes from the connections we make across race, gender class, religion, age differences, when we can connect the dots as to how to fully understand and appreciate our common struggles and the human needs to connect. One of the things that I can't forget is just centring the whole notion of *Ubuntu*. That's what our work is based on '*umntu ngumntu ngabantu*', meaning a person is a person through other

people. When we can connect as people together. We're able to do so much more.”

Nomfundo Walaza, Unyoke Foundation

AWDF emphasised building solid relationships with partners to understand the context and provide effective support. They use their 'convening power' to bring partners together to learn, amplify voices, and share knowledge.

Simon, a participant in a retreat hosted by Unyoke, attests to the liberating impact of support that fosters connections in a field often marked by separation and competition.

“Unyoke Foundation gave us the time to actually connect with the young people that are working in the same areas. At first you want to be seen as someone who is succeeding, because you want to be the best version so that you can attract funding and so you end up competing with the other groups and the other young people who are also peacebuilders. So instead of that we are now saying, you know what, let us work together and collaborate.”

Simon Marot Touloung, AYAN

FUNDING WELLBEING AND CARE: For AWDF, an important aspect of their accompaniment process is ensuring the grants are flexible enough for the partners to take care of their well-being.

“Because without them being well they cannot do that very important work that we all know they have to do. And so in our grants making, we allow 50% of the resources to be used as the partner deems fit. They can allocate that to salaries as Simon was talking about if that is what you want to do. The partner can allocate that for a retreat for the team, for the staff or get somebody to come in to provide psychosocial support for the team.”

Beatrice Boakye-Yiadom, ADWF

FUNDING BEYOND THEMATIC SEPARATIONS: AWDF’s philanthropic approach dissolves thematic areas in grantmaking, responding to the needs of activists and movements as they articulate them. Beatrice explained this shift as a direct response to the challenges outlined by Robinah.

“The issues that confront women in the communities, they are not in silos. The issues are very well connected. For example, so somebody who is affected by let's say, climate change is also thinking about safety and security. That person is thinking about economic empowerment, that person is thinking about food and water. And so, in our current grant-seeking, we have no themes. It's for the partners to come to us and say ‘this is needed in our community’. And we say ‘you know better. Here are the resources, go ahead’.”

Beatrice Boakye-Yiadom, AWDF

AWDF focuses on long-term, flexible funding, minimising bureaucracy, and recognising the role of "non-traditional actors" in social change. They provide support to those who may lack the resources or structures to meet traditional grant requirements. This approach marks a radical shift in philanthropy, emphasising the importance of supporting those closest to the communities, as Nomfundo stated, *"Money alone won't shift anything"*. It challenges the project mentality in philanthropy, with Simon highlighting the transformative impact of being supported as a *'human being' rather than a 'project.'*

"At first we were just treated as projects. It's like, oh, these are refugees, a statistic, 1.5 million refugees that are in Uganda. They need food, they need this... but no one really wants to even hear what are these refugees doing to make sure that there is peace back home? What are they doing to ensure that they are even settled well? What are they doing to make sure that their children have a future. But Unyoke came and said 'you know what, you are enough. Be with us. Let us work together. We want to hear from you.' And I think this should be the lens of all philanthropies in Africa. Don't look at the project, look at the human being behind this project. We should not look at the projects and the success stories they are creating. You can reach a thousand people, but when you don't even treat them as human beings at first then there is no impact that you are creating in the communities that you are working in."

Simon Marot Touloung, AYAN

SHIFTS NEEDED IN PHILANTHROPY

To better support local peacebuilders, philanthropy must shift to recognise their critical role and provide the necessary resources for sustaining their work in conflict-affected communities. Real change has been limited despite calls for changes in philanthropic practices, such as direct support for local actors, removing bureaucratic barriers, covering overhead costs, and offering long-term, flexible funding. This shift requires more than just adjustments in language; philanthropy must undergo a deep mindset change, challenging the assumptions that shape current practices. Only then can it truly support community-based peacebuilding efforts.

“It allows us to look through a different lens that we all have trauma, different types of trauma. It could be related to food security, it could be related to violence, it could be related to having to flee your home. It could be related to so many different things.”

Participant

“Log frames don't fully measure the impact it has on individuals. Log frames are not going to work because this takes time. It's about building relationships and staying together and understanding that healing.”

Participant

Philanthropy's traditional impact measurement, which focuses on tracing inputs to outputs and predetermined outcomes, is unsuitable for peacebuilding work's complex and dynamic realities.

“There are challenges that people experience within the field that they even could never have planned for. A couple of weeks ago in Nigeria there was trouble with some LGBTQ activists, for example. One minute they were reading their emails, the next minute, they were grabbing their passports and running. Those kinds of shifts are not things that people can prepare for.”

Participant

Stories that capture people's subjective experiences and recognise the human beings behind the work are critical to this work. For instance, inter-community relationships, such as a friendship between members of the Dinka and Nuer communities in South Sudan are significant wins in the context of a divided society.

“If a Dinka boy is going to come to me and say, ‘I'm very happy that about having a friend who is a Nuer. I never even thought that I will have a Nuer friend in my life.’ Is that an impact?”

Simon Marot Touloung, AYAN

Traditional reporting methods in philanthropy and peacebuilding often fail to capture the subjective human experience of change, meaning such transformations are not considered "impact" by existing measurement frameworks.

Two key mindset shifts in philanthropy emerged from the session:

UNDERSTANDING PEACE BEYOND CONFLICT: Peace is not just the absence of war but encompasses what allows individuals and communities to feel secure. Philanthropy must expand its definition of peace, recognising the interconnectedness of health, safety, and livelihood issues. AWDF's approach of removing thematic areas in grantmaking highlights the importance of addressing the multiple facets of life that shape peace. Peacebuilding must consider the subjective experience of trauma. For proper understanding and support, philanthropy should focus on what enables communities to heal, acknowledging the personal and collective impacts of conflict and trauma.

REDEFINE IMPACT: An expanded understanding of peace leads to a redefinition of impact in peacebuilding. The discussion highlighted a key challenge: the disconnect between the on-the-ground realities of peacebuilding and the donor-driven focus on measurable outcomes. Traditional impact measurement often fails to capture social change processes' complexity and long-term nature.

CONCLUSION

The complexities of peacebuilding demand that philanthropy move beyond conventional metrics and traditional funding models, recognising the urgent need to centre local voices and the diverse realities of communities affected by conflict. Local peacebuilders are not simply implementers of projects, they are the backbone of resilient societies, working with limited resources to foster healing, solidarity, and hope amidst challenges unimaginable to those distant from conflict zones.

Yet, for philanthropy to truly support these efforts, a paradigm shift is needed to acknowledge the intersecting challenges local peacebuilders face and to question and redefine impact. Supporting peace requires philanthropy to fund the human side of resilience, to trust local expertise, and to make space for long-term, flexible, and relational funding approaches.

We invite the philanthropic community to reflect deeply on the assumptions underlying their practices, challenging norms that may inadvertently inhibit rather than support peace. As we move forward, let us commit to solidarity and movement building, prioritise care and healing, and amplify the voices of those who bear the weight of sustaining peace on the frontlines. Only through such transformative partnerships can philanthropy play its full role in creating peaceful, empowered communities worldwide.

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The Africa Women’s Development Fund (AWDF) is a feminist fund that resources, nurtures and supports African women’s rights organizations and feminist movements to sustain themselves.

The African Youth Action Network (AYAN) is a youth-led organization working with refugee communities and Internally Displaced Persons in Uganda and South Sudan.

Coalition for Action on 1325 (CoACT) is an Alliance of 45 member organizations in Uganda that works on the localization of the implementation of Women, Peace and Security Agenda.

PSJP is a programme hosted by Global Dialogues, UK, that works to support the field of philanthropy to become more effective as an agent of progressive social change.

Unyoke Foundation is an independent, African based, global resource organization that specializes in the inter-generational accompaniment of peacebuilders

