



When Crisis Is the Norm: What Can the Multilateral System Learn from Local Practices and Approaches?

Summary Note, 9 December 2025

Background:

When crisis is your everyday reality, you do not work in silos. Crisis becomes the norm, and survival depends on joining up responses. In many conflict-affected communities, local peacebuilders don't start their mornings deciding whether today calls for peacebuilding, development, humanitarian aid, or human rights work, but by responding to whatever crisis has erupted overnight. When violence escalates, food insecurity is the norm, when displacement increases yet again, or when authorities impose new restrictions on civic space, there is no single "siloe" response that fits the situation. Local actors innovate out of necessity, showing what a whole-of-system approach looks like in practice.

Local actors move fluidly across peacebuilding, humanitarian aid, development, and human rights, because their communities require nothing less. They often practice "whole-of-system" approaches through pragmatic integration (combining tools from different fields in single interventions), strategic division of labour (coordinating different roles among organisations), broad coalitions, and "multiple hats" work that bridges the different sectors. They also link their daily work to broader struggles that can cause conflict in the first place, such as injustice, distrust between communities, and institutions that fail or exclude people. This means their work is not only reactive to violent conflict, but also preventative. They innovate out of necessity, coordinating across sectors, adapting constantly, and finding creative ways to keep people safe and services running in unpredictable environments. In doing so, they embody what a whole-of-system approach looks like in practice.

Yet at the global level, peacebuilding often remains siloe from humanitarian and human rights work. Peacebuilding is largely anchored in New York through the UN Peacebuilding Architecture (PBC, PBF, PBSO), while humanitarian aid and human rights efforts are concentrated in Geneva, with development actors spanning both. This institutional geography often reinforces silos that local actors cannot afford in their day-to-day work.

Key takeaways from the discussion include:

Silos exist at the top ("10,000 feet"), not on the ground. While local actors operate across peacebuilding, humanitarian, development, and human rights in fluid, integrated ways, donor structures often remain siloe "at 10,000 feet." For example, the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations primarily focus on emergency response and not prevention efforts. This siloe approach is expected to persist at least until 2027, when the new Multiannual Financial Framework of the European Union will be adopted.

These high-level silos are reinforced by funding models that do not incentivise collaboration or integration. Peacebuilding, human rights, humanitarian, and development work are often funded separately, with limited support for integrated approaches or joint programming. Donors tend to prioritise funding activities over enhancing coordination and supporting relationship-building and joint analysis that make integrated work possible. This is particularly concerning for small and local organisations, as well as for international NGOs, which are often forced to adapt or relabel their work to fit these high-level silos simply to access funding, leaving little space to prioritise genuine integration or sustained collaboration across sectors, even when this reflects how their work actually operates on the ground.

Collaboration works best when it is relational. Effective integrated work depends less on tools or frameworks and more on trust, shared risk, and clarity about complementary roles. Genuine relationships among local actors are the backbone of successful coordination, and they must be able to move across roles as contexts shift without being penalised by rigid systems.

Working across silos requires sustained communication among diverse actors, both vertically, between different levels of the system, such as local organisations, national authorities, and donor governments, and horizontally between peer organisations operating at the same level. This requires mechanisms such as networks, coalitions, and alliances, which must be deliberately built and maintained across communities and sectors. They rely on shared goals, solidarity, and a willingness to share the risks, creating a safer environment for collaboration.

Focusing on women and youth provides a lens to address multiple interconnected challenges, including economic and educational gaps, rights realisation, and social exclusion, while highlighting that integration must be context-specific. There is no one-size-fits-all approach; locally tailored strategies are essential for effective whole-of-system work.

Effective integrated approaches require systems thinking. Addressing complex, interconnected challenges and implementing both systemic and systematic interventions demands an understanding of how different actors, sectors, and issues interact across the whole system.

Stop simply labelling organisations as “resilient”, because doing so can inadvertently reduce support for them. Instead, donors should explore how to fund resilience. For example, access to justice is a key factor that makes societies more resilient to conflict.

The following recommendations emerged from the discussion:

- **Local peacebuilders should unpack Article 21 (the right to participate in public affairs)** of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) in their context as a way to bridge peacebuilding and humanitarian work. Their focus should be on inclusive, meaningful and safe participation
- **Diverse actors can use the right to defend human rights,** as articulated in the UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental

Freedoms ([A/RES/53/144](#)), as a starting point to bring people together who do this broadly, including local peacebuilders

- **Donors and multilateral actors should explicitly fund and design programmes to support the “in-between” elements that enable integrated locally-led work:** relationships, safe convening spaces, joint analysis, and flexibility for actors to shift roles as contexts change. These activities should be treated as strategic development, not overhead, to allow truly integrated approaches to flourish.
 - This requires a shared framework across sectors and a willingness for donors and multilateral actors to accept some of the political and bureaucratic risk themselves, rather than transferring it entirely to local partners. Large actors, including the UN, should act as partners, not competitors, when they are not directly funding a programme.
- **Donors should critically explore what “resilience” means in practice** and invest in the factors that genuinely enable organisations to adapt, sustain their work, and operate safely.
- **All international programmes should include clear exit strategies, not only peace operations or missions,** to ensure local ownership, continuity, and sustainability beyond the life of external funding.

Note: This Summary Note presents key takeaways from the dialogue and does not represent the official position or views of the UN.