Life & Peace INSTITUTE

‘What’s the Password?’

Language and Exclusion in Global Peacebuilding

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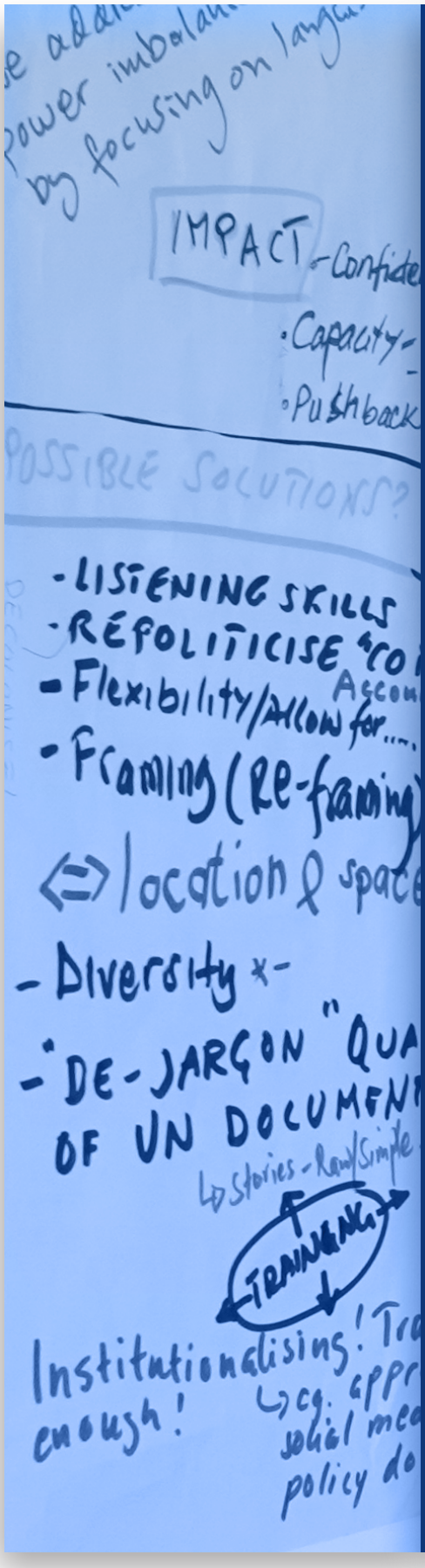

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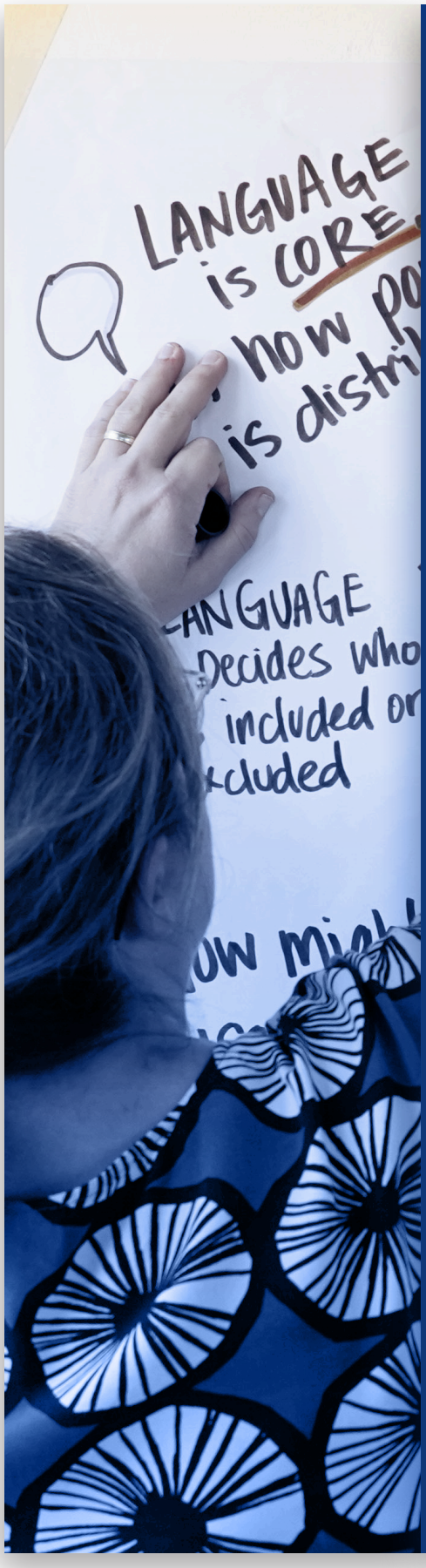


Executive Summary

Global peacebuilding discourses, and the language that constitutes them, shape how the sector defines itself, the problems it seeks to solve, and the sorts of actions taken to do so.

The language of the global peacebuilding system creates, sustains, and reflects power dynamics among actors within it. Jargon is learnt in order to engage in discussions on peacebuilding. It is articulated as a means of demonstrating credibility in spaces where decisions with global reach are made. In this way, language is an instrument of exclusion – whether intentional or unintentional. Further, peacebuilding discourses set the boundaries of global conversations on peace and conflict, what peacebuilding looks like, and the sorts of individuals who are seen as peacebuilders. The language of the trade also maintains the power of (global) actors, assigns roles to local peacebuilders, and seeks to depoliticise the deeply political processes involved in the pursuit of peace.

This analysis explores the ways in which language affects inclusive decision-making on peacebuilding, reducing opportunities for meaningful engagement between global decision makers on peace and conflict and local peace actors that lead the practice of peacebuilding in their own environments. It assesses the relationship between language, power, and agency in the peacebuilding sector: Who is using the language, with what aims, in which places, and in communication with which actors? In addition, this analysis highlights the ways in which global peacebuilding discourse might be changing, and the actors that are catalysing this change: Who is breaking with linguistic expectations and rules, and what does this mean for the relationships between global and local stakeholders on peace and conflict?

While the framing of this analysis is drawn from engagement in global discussions on peacebuilding in a variety of fora, data was primarily collected during the 2019 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development in New York, through participation and observation at various official sessions, thematic discussions, presentations, and side events.[1] The HLPF represents a site in which a wide range of members of the global peacebuilding community convene and where its discourse is spoken, developed, and performed. Jargon is ubiquitous in global discussions such as this – complex, technical, mechanical. It focuses on models and approaches more than people and principles. Learning this language is important in both accessing the spaces in which decisions are made, and in having an impact once granted entry.

While there is no universal discourse used by all at the HLPF, the term "local" and, crucially, the actors to which this term refers, are often absent from discussions. Further, implicit relationships of power are present in the way one set of actors talks to and about another, with terms such as "international" referring largely to those in the global north, and "national" (and to a lesser extent, "local") to individuals and groups in the global south. Local actors in this space are asked to speak of their context, of experiences and memories. Global stakeholders, meanwhile, discuss thematic priorities, analyse trends, and consider resources.

The language used in this space depends, to an extent, on the terms of the meeting in which it is spoken, and who else is in the room. During official sessions held at UN headquarters, formality is critical. Hence, language is procedural, scripted, perfunctory, and repetitive. In civil society-led side events, jargon is still present, but with some openness about its flaws. Still, there are signs of change, particularly among civil society actors – recognition of the incomprehensibility of global peacebuilding language, its needless complexity, and its role in maintaining the exclusive nature of global conversations on peace and conflict.

Instead of presenting a series of recommendations, this analysis raises further questions about how to advance global peacebuilding discourses that are more inclusive (or at least less exclusive). These questions call for greater collective thinking on the effects that language has on the practice of (local) peacebuilding and the functioning of the global peacebuilding sector.

[1] This was the last in-person HLPF prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the shift to virtual discussions for the majority of participants.

Introduction

Language is an important contributor to dynamics of exclusion in global peacebuilding spaces.[2] This language – a dominant discourse – can be inaccessible, needlessly complex, and often untranslatable.

[2] As an alternative peacebuilding language does not yet exist, and as key terms within global peacebuilding spaces are already well established, LPI is complicit in resorting to the dominant discourse to describe its own peacebuilding work. While expressing dissatisfaction at the inadequacy of these terms and especially the exclusions they constitute, LPI nonetheless refers to them in day-to-day conversations. In part, this is unavoidable: some of those with whom LPI speaks are also embedded in the global peacebuilding lexicon. Using these terms signifies LPI as a credible actor.

It is restrictive and risks communicating meaning only to those able to speak this language, as it were, who are conferred credibility and legitimacy just as those without fluency in sector jargon are barred entry. Language thus functions as an expression of power. It defines the meaning and practice of the term "peacebuilding", often preventing those who actually do peacebuilding work from understanding what is being said on their behalf.

Language also reflects power inequalities, with terms such as "in the field" or "on the ground" applied only to the global south.[3] In the peacebuilding sector, language simultaneously attempts to depoliticise this inequality by applying labels such as "partner", "participant", and "implementer" in ways that distract from the relationships of power between them. And finally, unhelpful terms drawn from the private sector ("clients", "suppliers", "tenders") commercialise peacebuilding and reduce it to a form of service provision, further promoting the exclusion of actors living in conflict-affected environments from influencing its design or direction, and (re)producing power inequalities.

Purpose of the report

This analysis seeks to understand the nature of peacebuilding discourses. It explores the language of global peacebuilding and asks how the use of language affects power dynamics between the varied stakeholders in the peacebuilding ecosystem. It reflects on how power in the sector is created, regulated, and reinforced through language, and more specifically, the effect that peacebuilding discourses have on reducing space for meaningful local-to-global engagement.

This analysis uses the 2019 HLPF on Sustainable Development in New York at the United Nations (UN)headquarters as a case study. It also draws on the related side events that take place outside the UN headquarters. The HLPF is a major event at which the global peacebuilding sector coalesces.[4] Held from 8 - 19 July 2019 when Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG16) was under review, the HLPF offers an opportunity to observe the global peacebuilding community using the language of their trade in a variety of official and unofficial events and sessions. This report analyses the direct language (speech acts) used by individuals during presentations, panel discussions, reviews, and informal conversations. It explores where people are speaking and to whom, as well as what is actually being said or not said. How does the global peacebuilding system speak? What and who does it talk

[3] A note on the use of quotation marks in this analysis: These are used in one of two ways. First, they indicate reference to specific terms, introduced by the word "term", "label", and such like. Second, they signify the use of directly quoted material drawn from speakers and contributors at the HLPF.

[4] For the purposes of this analysis, the term "global peacebuilding system" refers to the wide range of multilateral actors, bilateral donors, engaged member states, diverse civil society actors and practitioners, academics, and movements (and beyond) that are engaged in the act of or discussions on peacebuilding.

about? How does this language reflect (and/or reinforce) power dynamics? How does language affect who participates, and how meaningful this participation is? Finally, what should be done about the current exclusionary state of affairs? Are there signs of change, and perhaps more inclusive discourses emerging in the global peacebuilding space?

The HLPF was selected as the case study for this discourse analysis because it is a microcosm of the global peacebuilding system, and reflective of the broader state of peacebuilding discourse. Indeed, the HLPF represents the discourse at perhaps its most concentrated.[5] That is, the HLPF is understood here as an event where it is possible to hear the language of global peacebuilding most clearly and loudly, and where the peacebuilding ecosystem defines itself, its roles, approaches, and goals.[6]

Who is global?

In this analysis, the term "global" is used to refer to the collection of actors who engage in discussions and decision-making processes in an international multilateral space – diplomats, non-governmental organisations, and donor representatives, as well as concerned ministers, academics, think tanks, and research institutes. This analysis explores the discourses articulated by individuals and groups participating in one particular multilateral moment, and more specifically, those within this space with at least a peripheral interest in peace and conflict, and the agendas that surround these issues. The term "global", then, is distinct from the whole peacebuilding ecosystem, which includes a much broader range of actors and contexts.

[5] A caveat: While the HLPF is a space where the global peacebuilding community coalesces, there are also a significant number of peacebuilding actors who choose not to attend. They may not see the HLPF and the discussions held at this forum as a relevant or effective vehicle for advancing effective peacebuilding. Crucially, this assessment of the HLPF is also part of the logic of selecting it as the site of data collection. Although key discussions on peacebuilding take place in this space, the connections between these discussions and actions is less clear.

[6] While critical, this discourse analysis is not intended as a criticism of the HLPF per se. Rather, it takes the language of this event as the primary analytic focus of the report.

What makes peacebuilding discourses worth analysing?

A discourse is a body of organised statements that shape actions and practices. These statements are expressions of valid knowledge that arise through specific power relationships. Above all, discourses are functional insofar as the knowledge they produce has consequences for the way people using them think and behave.[7] Peacebuilding discourses are expressed through sets of beliefs, ideas, concepts, terms, and labels that are used and understood by those working in the sector. Language and discourse shape ideas about what good or legitimate peacebuilding looks like (and what it should not look like). They define how peace is conceptualised and, in turn, what practices, actors, contexts, tools, skills, and resources are used to build it.

In any field of practice, a set of terms becomes a lexicon that reflects how those working in that field describe its activities. This is often part of the process of developing and advancing a discipline or sector in general. In many disciplines, a language must be learnt in order for the members of that discipline to function and appear credible to one another. Peacebuilding (and, to a certain extent, broader development work) is different, however. It actively seeks to be inclusive in its practice, or at least recognises the need to do so in order to be effective and sustainable. The necessity of inclusion to peacebuilding thus means that its discourses should be as broadly accessible and clear as possible. At the same time that peacebuilding (rhetorically) recognises this requirement for inclusivity, it uses language that is not accessible. The individuals who are able to apply the language of the peacebuilding sector, and are involved in shaping and developing it, are often not those who benefit from the day-to-day practice of peacebuilding or those who implement it.[8]

In a profession or sector, jargon develops as a means of communication, with a single word or phrase standing in place of more complex concepts. Often, however, international peacebuilding discourse is needlessly technical or else vague, with terms that require lengthy explanations reduced to something quite hollow. In this way, rather than jargon helpfully circumventing the need for deeper background explanations, it can either gloss over something that is complicated or distort and overly problematise something that is very simple.

[7] See: M Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language, 1972.

[8] In addition, peacebuilding lacks consensus on what is meant by even some of its most ubiquitous terms such as "local", "global", "partner", or "participant". These terms lack definition in an environment in which their use is necessary in order to survive as an institution, to secure funding, and to continue working.

"When talking of SDG16 underpinning all other SDGs, make sure you say 'cross-cutting' – just to use the right UN language."

New York-based civil society representative during side event at the opening of the HLPF

"When member states hear the word 'commitments' they think 'obligations', 'financing', 'resources'."

New York-based civil society representative, noting that civil society is careful with the language it uses, wary of making it seem that they are creating new lines of responsibility or accountability

Peacebuilding is more technical in language than in application. In practice, peacebuilding relies on a few overall formats – meetings, dialogues, trainings, awareness-raising. At their best, these practices should be simple, accessible, and understandable. In an effort to stand out, and perhaps to secure funding and build legitimacy, organisations disguise these basic processes with conceptual frames that mystify them, using jargon that bears little reality to these various practices. This convoluted language is exclusive. It can prevent people – particularly those who do not work on peace as a career – from thinking that they can do peacebuilding or seeing themselves as peacebuilders.

Language versus practice

The business of peacebuilding is defined by its discourses. Approaches are conceptualised, particular sorts of policies are seen as possible and appropriate, and specific actors (with particular skills) are deemed credible and given the legitimacy to engage. As is the case with any discourse, the relationship between language and practice in peacebuilding is two-way, however, whereby language affects practice just as practice affects language. Discourse matters because it shapes how the field talks about its problems and designs its responses. Based on the insights presented in this report, it does appear that all peacebuilding actors, whether global, local, donor, practitioner, or analyst, use the vocabulary at the HLPF to convince, navigate, and work the system to their interests – to ensure the sustainability of their practice. This raises an important question: Are there dissenters, or is everyone in on it, playing the game and using the language to secure their own positions in the global peacebuilding system?

"When the diplomats come out of the UN, they lose the bullshit. They become human."

New York City local government official

Either way, language at the HLPF often seems closer to performance than reality. This may take the form of grandstanding, rhetorical commitments without action, or austere machine-like facilitation. Civil society actors at the HLPF recognise this, labelling the HLPF a "beauty pageant", denouncing multilateral actors (not while they are in the room) for settling for commitments rather than actions.

Civil society actors also criticise the HLPF for getting "weaker and weaker" in this regard; for instance, in how it rebranded "partnerships" as "accelerators".[9] Many are even questioning the value of attending in the future. "The focus of the HLPF is on stock-taking and reporting," an HLPF participant representing an international peacebuilding organisation states, "but it should not be about this. It should be about examining progress in a way that allows us to … look at where we go from here. There is not enough forward-looking [action]."

[9] The term "accelerators" refers to collaborative action (otherwise known as "partnerships") that advances progress quicker than otherwise would have been achieved, or makes progress in multiple areas; for instance, toward multiple SDGs or SDG targets at once. Perhaps this linguistic change signals a degree of anxiety among SDG proponents that not enough progress is being made and time is running out.

THE HLPF PEACEBUILDING GLOSSARY

Based on attendance at presentations, panel discussions, review sessions, interactive talks, and other event formats across the formal UN space and civil society-led side events, the following are a selection of common terms in contemporary global peacebuilding used at the HLPF. They provide a snapshot of buzzwords and global peacebuilding jargon (in the multilateral space) at the time of writing (soon to be outdated as the discourse evolves).

- **Accelerator actions –** commitments to move SDG16 forward, intended to emphasise the need to accelerate existing work and act quickly to avoid failing to achieve the aspirations of the SDGs by 2030.

- **Collaboration and coordination –** including with government, in order to avoid either the duplication or isolation of actions that should instead be synergetic (see below).

- **Data –** critically, not having enough of it; the need for a greater amount of more robust data on which to track progress and make decisions. A representative of the Swiss mission to the UN, for instance, sums up: "Everything we do, we realise that we do not have sufficient data to act upon. … I thought of them as nerds in data offices. Now, I have a new appreciation for them. It is fantastically important."

- **Institutionalisation –** focused on ensuring the SDGs become part of the instinctive, natural functioning of government, and discussions within multilateral institutions – the SDGs as part of the furniture.

- **Integrated action across thematic siloes –** the importance of implementing SDG16 in such a way that reaches across sectors; for instance, having peacebuilding actors work with private sector corporations to advance peaceful economic development. Justice – access to inclusive formal justice systems. Justice as a means to development and a broader trend toward quantified justice concerns, including a criminal due process-based approach to development and the achievement of SDG16; customary justice systems or broader definitions of justice are seldom mentioned.

- **Justice –** access to inclusive formal justice systems; justice as a means to development and a broader trend toward quantified justice concerns, including a criminal due process-based approach to development and the achievement of SDG16; customary justice systems or broader definitions of justice are seldom mentioned.

"No justice for the poor means no peace for the rich."

A minister from Sierra Leone

- **Leave no one behind –** the mantra by which inclusivity is labelled; both the means by which development is achieved, and what success per se looks like.

- **Localisation –** the technical process of contextualising global peace frameworks to particular (conflict-affected) environments, along withawareness-raising and training on these frameworks and translation of key texts, among other activities; the multilateral system speaks with some regularity about localisation, with rare references to local actors.

- **Inequality and peace –** the links between reducing inequality and reducing violence, as well as a more general concern for the connectionsbetween economic empowerment and sustainable peace.

- **The nexus –** often, the triple nexus; refers to the links between peacebuilding, development, and humanitarian relief, and the complementarity between the three.

- **People-centred approach –** although by no means new, this term (and variations thereof: putting people first; people-driven) continues to refer to a wide range of values and models for doing peacebuilding.

- **Positive and negative synergies –** the mutual complementarity of two or more SDG targets, whereby progress on one target by proxy advances another, and the opposite, whereby the achievement of a target negatively impacts another.

- **Proactivity and prevention –** the need to act before crises emerge, to understand upstream risk, and to an extent, to be prescriptive. Related: responsive versus preventative action – recognising early warning signs of violence, and mobilising quickly, in order to save lives, as well as time and money.

"Trade-offs and synergies are ultimately felt at the local level. So, to not include them is at their own peril."
Director of an international think tank, speaking at an HLPF side event

- **SDG16 as a bridge –** this goal is identified as the vehicle by which the other goals are to be met, as the connector across the other goals, and ultimately, the goal upon which all others depend; as such, SDG16 is often framed as an enabler for the achievement of other goals, rather than being argued on its own merit.

- **This moment –** the significance of this particular point in time is highlighted, with stakeholders keen to emphasise the need to protect gains, renew efforts, re-state commitments, and prevent backsliding.

- **Trade-offs –** the ways in which progress under a given SDG target may harm or otherwise reverse progress toward another.

- **Voice –** in a multitude of forms. Voice is at times "local", "grassroots" or "silent" and at others "collective", "diverse" or "coherent". Peace actors from the global south are often the voices in question, even as speaking of them only in terms of their voices seems to obscure a fuller picture of their work and agency.

- **"Violent extremism" –** variously referring to non-state groups, terrorism, criminality, and a broader set of ideologically driven violent actions; usually linked explicitly to youth writ large.

- **Youth –** young people are able to reach local communities and work in new ways; however, they are also seen as threatening and unpredictable – at risk of being lured toward violent extremism, and of advancing causes and models that transcend old rules (associated with the nation state, traditional forms of governance, or typical spaces for decision-making).

HLPF participants embracing or rejecting the jargon:
"The goals are within reach if we promote transformation and catalyse acceleration..."
Representative of the UN

"Our language needs to change. Call things what they are, not using the corporate language that we have imitated for many years now, and [that have] influenced our culture."
General secretary of a body representing public service unions

Key findings and insights

Listening to the 2019 HLPF generated a variety of emergent insights on the language of peacebuilding and the ways in which it influences access and power dynamics in the global space.

Local, global, national, and international: implicit meanings

At the HLPF, the terms "local", "global", "national", and "international" are used to assign responsibility, point out groups that are either over- or under-represented, emphasise diversity, or set oneself apart from the crowd.

In general, the term "international" is used to refer to individuals and groups from the "global north" (itself a flawed and uncomfortable term), while the terms "local" or even "national" should be read as "global south" or "conflict context". When used comparatively, the terms "global" and "national" (for instance "a global responsibility" or "resistance at national level") are broadly used to highlight differences (in opinion, priorities, perceptions, or actions) between the multilateral system and the governments through which it is constituted.

Reflecting the local in global peacebuilding discourse

At the HLPF, language largely moves between two poles – the sweeping and the granular.[11] The space in between the two is poorly frequented. In the multilateral space – among diplomats, the UN secretariat and its organs, and permanent representatives – discourse largely pertains to technical design. Following an infrastructural approach to peace, this group talks of quantifiable outputs such as the number of pre-trial detentions, the percentage of cases brought versus dealt with, and members of the public with access to legal aid services. In civil society, this discourse is more qualitative, instead highlighting broad thematic issues such as participation, the need for greater inclusion in decision-making, and working towards prevention. The discourses of multilateral actors and of civil society actors are often unaligned. They do not communicate meaningfully to one another and are spatially separated, aside from key moments when they come together (for instance, official reviews at UN headquarters or at particular multi-stakeholder side events). In regard to local-to-global connections, two key insights emerge.

[11] For instance, the need to realise what one speaker calls the "global moral enterprise" of the SDGs via a "whole-of-society approach", followed by a discussion on the number of mobile courts under construction in a particular area of an individual country.

FEW ACTORS SPEAK OF THE LOCAL

Over the course of the HLPF, it became clear that this particular space does not often speak of local peacebuilding or of the actions of local actors. The term "grassroots" is used to a degree, with some relationship to the term "local", but it is a catchall term that appears to stand alone. Instead, participants at the HLPF distinguish between the role of national governments and civil society, of multilateral institutions and non-governmental organisations. There is very little talk of people, with their agency ignored at the highest levels of the dominant discourse. At this level, permanent representatives and national governments discuss plans affecting the lives of people. Civil society is usually permitted not more than temporary entry. Those who make reference to the term "local", even in the most cursory form, are in the minority and are not part of the HLPF core. Sub-national civil society attendees, for instance, may talk of working with "local communities", while international non-governmental organisations emphasise "national partners", and the multilateral system subsumes all of these individuals and groups under a broad all-encompassing "civil society" umbrella.

While there is no coherent universal discourse that is used by all at the HLPF, the language and space to connect local-to-global actors and actions are mostly absent from both the HLPF and the wider UN system. Attesting to this lack, a representative from Switzerland is clear during the SDG16 official review that they are:

...looking for solutions that are located firmly in the community. We are convinced of the localisation, not importation, of solutions to Goal 16. A clear and full reallocation of roles and financial resources. This also covers the participation of local communities and civil society, particularly women's organisations. Getting them involved in national programmes and VNRs [voluntary national reviews].

LOCAL IS RELATIVE

Civil society participants at the HLPF typically refer to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working outside the global space as "national" peace actors. In particular, this tends to be the case when civil society from the global north speaks of peacebuilding work taking place in conflict contexts in the global south. Civil society actors from the global south, however, often refer to the importance of the "grassroots"; in other words, people. For instance, during an event held to launch a report on "Empowering Civil Society for National Reporting and Action on SDG16", a representative

of Cameroonian civil society notes that, "The issue here is to make sure the grassroots is really part of the process, and this is what is missing." This is echoed in a statement by an NGO staff member from Pakistan, who implores attendees to: "Invest more in grassroots processes, otherwise Goal 16 will not be achieved. Invest in grassroots civil society." An NGO representative from Senegal also highlights the need to focus on "local territories", while a civil society organisation (CSO) from Ghana emphasises the importance of translation into "local languages".

Despite the message to include the local far more than they currently do, the UN typically only uses (in almost all cases) the term "civil society". This term refers to international (read – global north) and national (read – global south) organisations, and almost never refers to the local people most affected by conflict. When civil society is discussed at the HLPF, it is also viewed as a homogeneous bloc.

The language of formal spaces

At the SDG16 official review, taking place in the UN headquarters and in which member states formally report on their progress toward SDG targets, global peacebuilding language is perhaps at its most absolute. It is generic, jargon-laden, and delivered via scripted, meticulously timed performances. In general, discourse at this official review reflects a declaration of intent and a laying out of national approaches by those reporting on SDG16. Statements rarely include reference to results, impact, or change. Discourse at the official review is technocratic, data-based, approach and model obsessed, list centric, and countable.

The nexus – between peace, security, development, environmental degradation, humanitarian relief, or something else – is also a strong feature of this formal space. Those listening are regularly told that cross-sectoral collaboration is needed, and peace and development programmes should be aligned or, better still, integrated. In this way, the official review does not articulate issues in terms of levels (local, national, regional, global), but in sectoral boxes that reinforce horizontal siloes, rather than vertical collaboration. This space rarely articulates the needs, desires, or aspirations of people.

While being inclusive of all sections of society is a critical issue for the SDGs, at the HLPF this does not connect clearly to local peacebuilding. Engagement with these actors is often reduced to generic statements. Information on what it means to be inclusive in practice, to work with local peace actors, is not discussed. A permanent representative to the UN states, "'Leave no one behind' is a central

promise. To achieve this, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making is necessary at all levels." An EU representative is clear on the need to "deliver on the promise of leaving no one behind", primarily by ensuring "inclusive, representative decision-making at all levels," reminding listeners that there will be "no sustainability without participation".

But what does that look like? Who does what? What are the key roles and responsibilities for inclusion? These questions remain largely unanswered. Generalities are established and accepted. Articulating them affords any speaker the legitimacy to talk about the global peace architecture. Very little other practical information is required in this space.

Figure 1 - Displaying the most used terms at the SDG16 official review; note the absence of the term "local".

Simplistic discourse on young people

Youth are a critical focus of discussions in formal HLPF sessions at UN headquarters. It is clear that the need to engage youth, to integrate them into conversations on peace and development, has become an accepted mantra. At the same time, however, delegates speak of "pragmatism", of "criminal justice", "juvenile delinquency" and "recidivism". During the SDG16 official review, it appears that youth are a homogenous group – young people are "at-risk", "vulnerable", "delinquent". Separate from broader civil society, delegates should engage "youth representatives". When an inclusive vision begins to emerge for youth engagement, it is driven by a concern that failing to bring young people into the fold would be a lethal mistake, rather than a principled decision. Disenchanted youth are "fertile ground" for violent narratives – easy prey for armed groups, as victims of conflict or tools of war, a threat to the established order.

Overall, the formal space is also dominated by procedural language. The most jarring disconnect is between the informality and sincerity of youth participants (limited in number), their recounting of lived experience, and the established, traditional formality and quiet management of discussions from others. No clapping. Timed statements. Performances. Officialisms. The barriers to broader participation in this space are not only that the language is exclusive, and that the protocols of communication must be learnt. It is also that conversations here are banal, repetitive, and archaic. They all take place using similar models: closely scripted panels, statements, and presentations often at odds with the urgency of situations being discussed. In this way, exclusion is also sustained through conversations and presentations that are tedious-by-nature and lack creativity or energy. People are excluded and/or choose to disengage as a result of enforced boredom.

How local and global describe one another and their functions

Power dynamics between global and local civil society actors are evident in the language used at the HLPF. Discussion here focuses on the ways in which divides between local and global are found in the language they use, and how they refer to one another.

WHO SPEAKS ON BEHALF OF WHOM?

There is a chain of representation at the HLPF in terms of who speaks on behalf of whom. In many cases, organisations based in the global south speak on behalf of communities, while those in the global north speak on behalf of the global south. More specifically, those who implement programming tend to talk about practice and those who engage with policy actors speak about the frameworks and approaches within which this practice takes places. Those INGOs and think tanks with a presence in the global north, or in New York, act primarily as knowledge sources and intermediaries, speaking on behalf of others and influencing which perspectives are heard and which are not. Civil society from the global south implements work and may be brought to the New York space (temporarily), but usually to provide information, not shape the resulting discourses.[12]

Layered accountability is implied here, with global north civil society actors holding the UN accountable on behalf of global south (referred to as "local", "national", or "implementing") partners, while global south civil society actors hold global north civil society actors to account on behalf of local communities. Those in the peacebuilding ecosystem use language based on their placement within it. Localisation, in this case, is an explanation process, and the locals are the recipients of knowledge, not the providers of it. They are "capacitated" and made "aware".

LATENT DIVISIONS IN EVERYDAY DISCOURSE

In general, organisations headquartered in the global north are referred to in this space (including by themselves) as "international". Other terms are used to refer to those from elsewhere. Civil society in the global south is labelled as either "national", or in fewer cases, "local". It remains to be seen, however, whether global south organisations are or can be international organisations in their own

[12] This exclusion is multidirectional. It is also the product of geography. Organisations based in New York do, of course, convene without those based in contexts in the global south. The latter also meet without the former in their respective national or regional hub locations. Nonetheless, power (in various forms) remains in New York, so exclusion from discussions in this location has greater repercussions. At the same time, however, policy actors in New York are unlikely to feel the impact of their exclusion from local processes.

right. For instance, a representative of a civil society network focusing on the SDGs and headquartered in New York, with members from around the world, notes, "We began as a northern-heavy network, mainly international NGOs. … Then we brought in more partners from the global south."

CIVIL SOCIETY: POTENTIAL TO CHALLENGE RATHER THAN REINFORCE JARGON

Some civil society attendees, primarily those operating in conflict-affected contexts, are clear on their role in breaking down impenetrable language, and increasing the accessibility of the discussions and agendas of the global peacebuilding architecture. A representative from civil society in Pakistan outlines his approach:

It is not about telling them [local communities] of SDG 1, 2, 3. … It is about telling them that the SDGs are for us. They are part of our daily lives, linking the technicalities of the goals to everyday experiences. Not only translating it, but also clarifying that these are our usual life questions, on not going to school, on schools not being equipped with furniture, and other items.

Refreshingly, a representative of a charity supporting the elderly in the UK outlines her views on breaking through jargon to focus on practical reality:

We talk about the SDGs, but it is not a pretty chart like that. It's where people live. Talking of homes for the elderly in the UK, we have some good homes, but some where people have been treated very badly. If I want to do something about that, I would not go to the SDGs. I would try to change that place. We do not have a platform for the SDGs. We have a platform for human dignity and human life. Talk about it very basically – this family does not have food. We are doing it from the perspective of the SDGs, but we are doing it to put something right that is not right.

TRANSLATION AS AN INCOMPLETE SOLUTION

A number of government representatives at the HLPF recognise that some barriers to engagement in the SDGs are associated with language; for instance, English-language texts. Translation of key global agendas from English as a means of promoting inclusion and localisation is taking place, but creates its own risks. That is, translation of key texts is articulated as evidence per se of localisation, without any meaningful engagement with local communities. During a side event on evaluation practice, a minister from Uganda notes, "In Uganda we have translated 17 SDGs into … six languages. So that every person, every community, gets to understand what the 17 SDGs are about. So, we move it from English, and take it down to other languages." This is also articulated as a means of local engagement by civil society actors. During an event hosted by a civil society network headquartered in New York to promote a toolkit created by the network, a representative explains, "The Toolkit is available in the six UN languages, but these languages still leave some behind. We are looking for people to assist in translating into local languages, to make sure we leave no one behind from a language perspective." Translation is a positive step, but additional engagement with local peace actors is necessary to ensure their participation in realising the SDGs, among other international frameworks.

"Translation can be particularly difficult, particularly when you are translating from UN jargon. We will do some translations, but need colleagues in this room that work at the global level, that can understand the jargon. It is not just about hiring a translator because that translator may not understand the SDGs and the broader context. … [We are] not just translating from language to language, but from language at the global level that is jargony to language at the local level that speaks to people."

Representative of a civil society network headquartered in New York

Expectations: local peacebuilders speaking in global spaces

When local actors are granted access to global discussions at the HLPF, the language used to refer to them, and the guidance given to them in how to speak, also reveals power relations. In particular, how local peacebuilders are expected to speak in this global space is shaped and influenced not by what they want to say, but rather by dominant discourse of the space in which they are speaking. Here, the unspoken function of discourse in any field is visible. That is, discourse denotes the competency of a speaker to other stakeholders in that field, especially those who exercise power, from whom the speaker would either like to solicit support or seek to influence.

LOCAL ACTORS RESTRICTED TO ADDING CONTEXTUAL FLAVOUR, NOT ANALYTICAL SUBSTANCE

In global spaces, local actors speak practically, of context: their environments, the events taking place within them, the various inequities and forms of violence meted out around them. This allows global actors to hear what "fragility" looks like "on the ground". Global actors, in response, talk of themes, trends, and agendas. They analyse, aggregate, and allocate resources. Local actors rarely engage in this analysis. Instead, the provision of their experiences calls others to do so, on their behalf. In this way, local peacebuilders are frequently brought into global processes to demonstrate vulnerability, rather than to articulate agency. They are used as a call to action or to validate decisions already made by global actors.

At the HLPF, a linguistic divide is often felt between how the lived realities of violent conflict at a hyper-contextualised, often personal level are described by local civil society, and the officialised, arcane language of excellencies, dignitaries, chairs, speakers, protocols, and procedures. Officials on the United Nations Security Council, for instance, thanked young people who had provided two-minute statements for their "touching stories", as many put it. Speaking about experiences, of helping bureaucrats to be moved (by memories of conflict), seems to be an implicit role for local peace actors in global spaces. Nonetheless, the request for emotive content often seems to disconnect local peace actors from the serious business of managing multilateral processes.

Dynamics of power are also present in the discourses used by international NGOs when articulating this role for local actors. When acting as this intermediary, global north organisations ask local peacebuilders to tell "stories", to speak of "experiences" rather than issues, themes, or priorities, and

to describe "lives that have been changed". When asking someone to speak from the heart or tell a story, there is an underlying disempowerment – an anti-technical, experiential appeal to empathy. A representative of a civil society platform headquartered in Europe, for instance, asks a group of local peacebuilders participating in the HLPF: "What did you see [in your context]? You do not have to make it about policy discourse. … Speak from the heart." Would local peacebuilders from the global south ask INGO staff – global actors – to do the same?[13] The key point here is not on the validity of the experiences, memories, and stories as forms of data. Instead, it indicates the way in which local peace actors are often asked to provide this form only.

Moreover, that this happens in combination with the tendency in global spaces toward measurable quantifiable data serves to exclude them from more meaningful participation in decision-making in multilateral fora. The request to speak from the heart may be well-intentioned, as an attempt to create entry points for the inclusion of local peace actors in high-level discussions despite not having knowledge of the official discourses in those spaces. At the same time, this often means feeding emotive perspectives into policy processes defined and managed by others – in ways that frequently appear novel, naïve, or divorced from the politics and practice of global decision-making.

POWER IN NAMING

Where local peacebuilders (meaning, in the majority, individuals implementing peacebuilding practice in the global south) are present, they are sometimes only introduced by their first names: "Sophia from the Philippines; Ismail from Somaliland". This has the effect of making their work appear frivolous, while infantilising the individuals themselves. Can a situation be conceived in which a German diplomat, for instance, is introduced in global fora as "Bernd from Berlin"?

INTERMEDIARIES NAVIGATING POWER AND LANGUAGE

There are limited moments in which civil society actors look to challenge the power dynamics outlined in this discourse analysis. When attempting to equalise north and south in the global space, and to disconnect the term "local" from the term "global south", these efforts run into their own linguistic knots. There are limited and well-intentioned efforts by civil society organisations to ensure local peacebuilders are present from countries typically viewed as peaceful, as well as those in conflict. In these cases, however, local peacebuilders from the global north demonstrate their relative power through language.

[13] Further, the same global south representatives are frequently provided with "capacity building" of one kind or another, a service that seems quite at odds with the request to "speak from the heart".

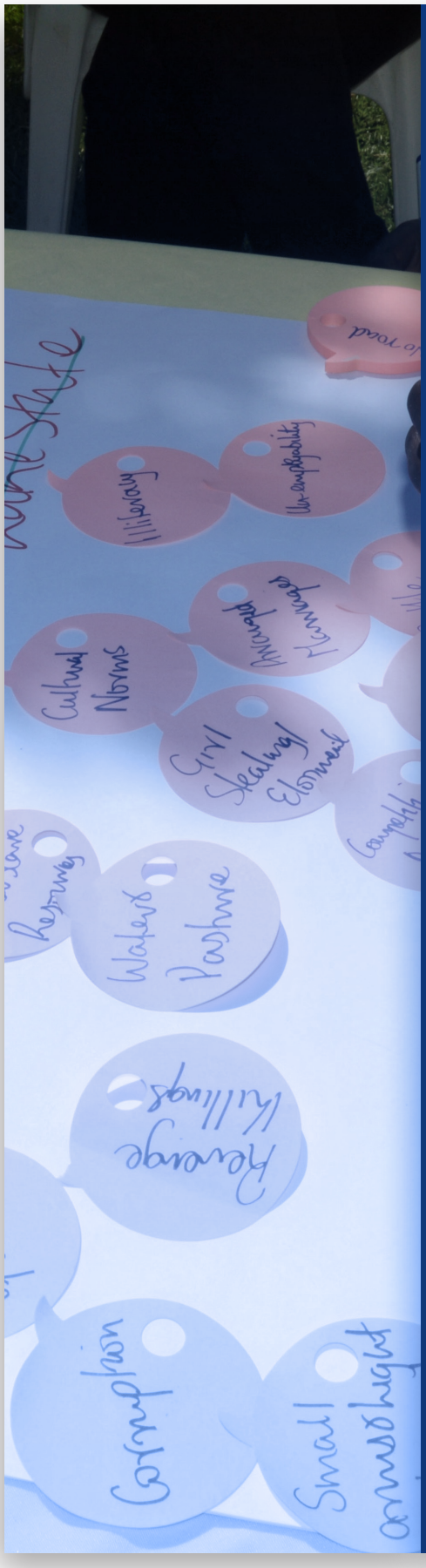
At the HLPF, power is entrenched in labels applied to local peace actors. "We are pleased to have Esther [name changed] join us and be our representative from the global south, and a programme context." Representative of an international civil society organisation focused on food security, introducing the speaker.
Would a similar opening be stated for a peacebuilding representative from the global north (and in this opening, frame them as representative of the global north)?

Paradoxically, trying to avoid defining the term "local" as "global south" by inviting representatives from the north to participate can actually reinforce the divides in the room and risk entrenching the trend of those in the global north being de-contextualised and international. Local peacebuilders do not have similar experiences. They do not speak the same peacebuilding language. They do not have the same roles in the peacebuilding world. They are different, even from peacebuilders in the global north.

NO SUCH THING AS A LOCAL VOICE

During a small number of side events outside UN headquarters, local peacebuilders were able to communicate in a more open and independent way. In preparation for a side event in which a group of local peacebuilders was to give short presentations on their work and goals, the organisers (a group of INGOs headquartered in the global north) were keen to maintain an unfiltered local voice in these presentations, and avoid overly shaping or teaching the presenters what to say or how. This is an ethical and principled position aimed at avoiding the imposition of the global lexicon on actors who operate outside it.

Nonetheless, this effort to maintain the agency and linguistic clarity of local participants inadvertently reduced their agency in the global space. In this case, local participants asked for guidance on precisely what needed to be said in order to get the most out of their brief attendance at the HLPF. In trying to avoid instrumentalising local peace actors by allowing local peacebuilders to speak without resorting to the discursive codes, passwords, and formalities that characterise the global space, the INGO organisers reinforce their exclusion by unintentionally preventing the local participants from themselves instrumentalising the HLPF for their goals, and articulating their thoughts on the HLPF in a way that resonates with global actors.



Language: a necessary condition for access and influence

It is clear that learning and articulating peacebuilding jargon is important for accessing spaces of decision-making, and having influence once allowed in.

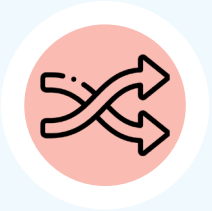
Change happens from within rather than without, through understanding and manipulating the linguistic rules of the spaces in which decisions are made on global policy. A representative from the Canadian permanent mission to the UN articulates this requirement for local (youth) peacebuilders to assimilate in order to achieve their goals:

> ***No doubt that the world's future is in great hands. But believe me there are obstacles facing you. … When you hit them, when they hit you, listen. Internalise the arguments that are presented to you. Learn the language, learn the world view, the priorities, the corridors of power that are standing in your way. Know how to communicate in that style in order to get over the obstacles. Learn how to speak the same kinds of language you're going to be faced with in opposition.***

In addition to learning the language, the terms on which it is spoken are also important in shaping the way local and global interact at the HLPF. These terms are largely decided by global decision makers. Tokenism remains a strong feature in formal UN meetings at headquarters. The environment itself is an imposing mire of gates, checkpoints, locked rooms, and inflexible, pre-decided, scripted interactions. It is designed to only admit invited people. For example, two youth speakers were wheeled out to read from a prepared piece at the opening of the SDG16 official review, themselves stating that: "Key to solving the issue is increasing the dialogue with youth where we are not present as silent people at the table, tokenistically, but as active participants in the discussion." Yet, their opening, their presence at the official review, was itself tokenistic, lasting two minutes before they returned to their seats to remain silent.

Local actors (here meaning those who receive funding from INGOs and operate in their conflict contexts) are at the receiving end of global decision-making. They face compound exclusion at events such as the HLPF. Burdensome administrative requirements, visa denial, and the large expense associated with attendance are all practical barriers. Their participation is further hindered by the English language. When local peacebuilders are given a timed opportunity to speak during side events, their wrestling with a non-native language to meet a three-minute speaking slot is not just a personal battle with a foreign language, but means that they often speak slower.[14] In the process, this sacrificed substance, depth, and detail, and potentially weakened their case as the global (financiers) in the room looked on.

[14] It should be noted that simultaneous translation is provided, particularly for formal events at UN headquarters. This was not often the case during side events, however.



Signs of change?

There does appear to be fairly strong recognition that the UN, and the HLPF in particular, function as a bubble in which discussions taking place on the inside develop their own dictionary, functioning through a discourse that is sometimes incomprehensible to those outside.

Language is noted as a barrier to inclusion, and even a discredit to multilateralism. A representative of Switzerland to the UN speaks during a side event about how language separates the HLPF from the broader landscape of peacebuilding work: "In here we are all part of the bubble. … We are speaking our language – SDG this, SDG that." This feeling is echoed among civil society representatives.

"It is about how we bring experiences from local and national level into conversations here at global. They are different languages … not just different languages, but completely different words and understandings. We need to think better about how we connect the global and the local level."
Representative of a civil society network headquartered in New York

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For example, a regional coordinator at Fight Inequality Alliance laments "kizungu mingi", going on the explain: "In Swahili, this means 'a lot of English'. It means you talk in a way that you cannot be understood. To describe things in such a way that if the people you were talking about were in the room, they would not know what you were talking about, would not understand you." A representative of civil society platform focused on peacebuilding speaks of "local action" being missing from the same "New York bubble". Other civil society representatives note that people doing the everyday work of peacebuilding are invisible to those in New York, while the volunteerism and minimal budgets that funds this work is also hidden from UN view. The same representative of Switzerland to the UN notes the need for "greater awareness of the shared responsibility we have – moving away from this division

of north–south, developed–developing countries. We are all developing countries to a degree. We need to be better on partnerships, speaking to people outside the bubble."

There is a growing awareness among multilateral actors that greater clarity of voice and a more accessible language is needed in order for the global peacebuilding architecture – its agendas, frameworks and processes – to be understood and valued, to live its values, and to be more inclusive. During a side event exploring the connections between human rights and peace, a senior UN representative states:

The new OHCHR [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights] has come in with a strong message to move away from the legal language that the human rights community has been prone to using. See Greta Thunberg. She has been much more successful than us in getting the message across. At a time when the populists and populist nationalists are so good at finger-pointing a particular minority and saying they are the problem, we need to get much better. ... With some exceptions, let's be honest, the enemies to human rights are much more vocal. They have the wind in their sails. They feel they can influence the top people.

(FINALLY) FINDING HONEST DISCUSSION

At the HLPF, there were open discussions on the ways in which this gathering replicates and maintains existing power dynamics through language. These debates were, however, reserved for the margins, in spaces where only civil society actors were present. Further, these critical discussions were articulated primarily, and most incisively, by civil society representatives working outside traditional multilateral spaces. At a session held at UN headquarters exploring what civil society wants out of an upcoming review of the HLPF itself, CSO participants broke with script:

We are used to seeing these spaces dominated by INGOs, western groups, wherever the meeting is taking place. … We recognise the value of the proximity of those regional spaces. Visa-related reasons – maybe we need to take the UN out of the US – and all these other structural barriers that prevent locals from participating … [mean that we] need a constituency-based and people-based solution, not one that is driven by INGOs, by the west.
Major Group[15] representative from the Philippines

At the HLPF, a high-level political forum trying to solve issues for the grassroots in the world … there is some misalignment when we talk on a high platform … as the beneficiaries are not engaged. We should engage the grassroots. We can talk, we can think, but we are not doing anything.
Civil society representative from Malawi

I know many civil society organisations do not engage the UN process because they believe it will strengthen a system dominated by the elite and further the status quo.
Farmers Major Group representative

An honest discussion took place, absent of talking points, thematics, and bureaucracy. This side session was among the most heated and active sessions at the HLPF, with the staid formality of the official UN-led presentations replaced by a loud, impassioned debate – clapping, cheering, and shouted interruptions included.

CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS: AWARE OF FLAWS IN THE GLOBAL SPACE, BUT HESITANT TO ARTICULATE THEM OPENLY

Power imbalances are clear, but can only be discussed when benefactors (the UN, donor governments) are not in the room. Frustrations at the superficiality of HLPF, its language, and the terms upon which such words are spoken are felt keenly among civil society actors, particularly those from the global south:

[15] The term "Major Groups" refers to those sectors of society considered to be important in UN discussions, and whose participation is facilitated at key UN events. These sectors include: Women; Children and Youth; Indigenous Peoples; Non-Governmental Organisations; Local Authorities; Workers and Trade Unions; Business and Industry; Scientific and Technological Community; and Farmers. Combined, they are referred to as "Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS)". For more detail, see: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/mgos.

Before we do our shadow reporting, we need some reforms on how the HLPF is done. Our inputs come at the end, when the 10 minutes that is given are over. Ninety per cent of the questions we ask are not answered fully
Civil society representative from Lesotho

In two minutes, you cannot express yourself. I know what my country has presented. You know what your country has presented. And we all know we are not satisfied. But how much have we expressed what we really think?
Civil society representative from Pakistan

It's probably time for us to reconsider the way we work here. Countries will never feel accountable to us. This is a government process. They own the process, they founded the process, and they will always lead it. They will never give us something unless they see the value. It is time for us to propose ourselves, and the role we have here, as more positive, that we are here to offer something to the member states. ... Stop making only requests. We have rights, we are the stakeholders, we are the taxpayers.
World Farmers' Organisation representative

You cannot just keep banging your head against the same wall and hearing the same response. We need to think more radically about how to get the governments to listen. If we have a two-minute speech with no real response from government, then why do we put so much time in?
Representative of Action for Sustainable Development

Conclusion

The language of global peacebuilding is often self-defeating. It appears that the way the sector speaks prevents the very attainment of what is being spoken about. The terms used, the jargon wrapped around the key priorities and approaches being discussed, the dominance of English, the strict scripting applied to statements all shape a peacebuilding discourse that is exclusive to all those fluent in it and present in the global space. As such, discourse at the HLPF often feels performative, dominated by excellencies and dignitaries, and follows established protocols, procedures, and codes.

In many cases, peacebuilding discourse is used to legitimise actions taking place at local levels, despite actors living and working in local spaces being absent from decision-making processes at the global level. In this sense, global actors stylise the local, at best (at worst, they objectify the local), denying them meaningful opportunities to shape the policies affecting their daily lives. When discourse is used (inadvertently or deliberately) in ways that exclude local peace actors from conversations in places such as the UN, the genuine inclusion of local needs, described in locally understood forms, is difficult to achieve.

For instance, when local descriptions of conflicts are heard but linguistically repackaged to match UN language and activities, this disconnect will manifest in the way global peacebuilding operates. Because language is connected to practice, influencing what is seen as reasonable and possible in peacebuilding, in the end exclusive language contributes to less effective (or at least mismatched) action supported or undertaken by the global peacebuilding architecture. By participating in global discussions, it therefore should also be recognised that local peace actors may empower the UN more than the other way around. They make events such as the HLPF more legitimate, credible, representative – and indeed relevant – through their engagement and presence.

There appears to be increasing recognition among civil society and multilateral actors of the problems with global peacebuilding language in places such as the HLPF. It is overly formal, complex, scripted, with discourse practiced, performed, and replicated. Many would welcome alternative discourses structured in more honest, open, equal, and clear language. One way to begin to deal with the challenges and power imbalances associated with global peacebuilding discourses is to enable local peacebuilders being brought into global processes to have a greater say on the merits and use of this global language. Rather than assuming local peacebuilders are better placed to tell personal stories, recount experiences, represent data, provide analyses, or anything else, intermediaries (such as LPI) should ask what role these individuals want to play in a given policy process, and support and accompany them to do so. What is useful for local peacebuilding actors What do they want out of this global space? Who do they want to listen to them?

The role of INGOs as intermediaries in the current local-to-global configuration is perhaps to interpret this language, help others more unfamiliar to deploy and leverage it – and shape it – if and when they see it as useful to do so. Intermediaries can also contribute to broadening the discussion on how to change the discourses of peacebuilding so that these discourses are more genuinely inclusive, accessible, and reflective of the needs and concerns of those who live with and seek to transform violent conflict in peaceful ways. By playing this role, intermediaries can support local peacebuilders to continue the practice of peacebuilding, while avoiding the introduction of new required knowledge and an externally imposed set of terms to label and talk about the work they have been doing with or without the HLPF and the global actors that constitute it, including intermediaries.

Local peacebuilders accessing (in various forms) the global peacebuilding architecture have the potential to shift global actors toward being more helpful supporters and partners to those doing the day-to-day work of peacebuilding. In pursuing this, contemporary peacebuilding language is a key barrier to more meaningful partnership between them. Challenging global decision makers to be more inclusive in these terms is important. In many ways, however, the global peacebuilding space is constructed to sustain itself – guided by its own norms and expectations, with its language functioning in part to regulate its own interactions. It is equally relevant to focus attention on the ways in which actions (and words) at the global level are felt, seen, or manifest in conflict contexts, in addition to the theatre of global discussions about these conflicts.

Extending the conversation

This report uses the same language that it seeks to unpack, and is a victim of the discourses it analyses. At Life & Peace Institute, we write proposals, draft analyses, engage peers, and communicate with decision-makers using the jargon that is criticised above. We are working on ways to challenge ourselves and hold ourselves accountable for the problems created, and unequal structures sustained, through our language. We do not have clear answers to these difficult questions, and we are not in a position to provide these answers by ourselves.

We hope to work with others, to learn together and collaboratively explore the means to transform the power dynamics and exclusions that are generated and reinforced through language, and in doing so, promote more inclusive engagement across the local-to-global ecosystem of peacebuilding. A few areas for collective reflection include:

Collectively rewriting the dictionary of global peacebuilding, or rejecting the dictionary altogether

Do we need a new set of terms to describe our field and its activities, decided upon collectively by local peace actors, global decision makers, and intermediaries? Or, should we collectively reject the jargon that constitutes global conversations, and speak more directly, precisely, and practically? To use language that communicates meaning to the recipient, without a requirement for prior orientation in the terms being used. Is there value in forming a collective of some sort to advance this shift toward speaking in clearer, more accessible, and transparent language that actively seeks to balance power?

Translation and power

What is the impact of particular critical peacebuilding terms being either untranslatable, or having their meaning altered during translation? The exercise of gathering key terms within the current peacebuilding lexicon, and exploring their translatability and meaning in other languages, may increase understanding of how power functions through translation (and language). Further, the process could yield insights on how research respondents react to questions, how programme participants receive and interpret capacity enhancement processes, and how local peace actors interact with INGOs.

Connecting language and practice over time

This analysis represents peacebuilding discourse as articulated during a particular process, in a specific arena and at a particular moment. What form of longitudinal, multi-level discourse analysis would highlight the connections between global discourse and the visible, practical approaches, and models used in peace practice, and the day-to-day interactions between local and global?

The relationship between language and space

In formal spaces (for instance, at UN headquarters), linguistic codes and rituals must be learned and conversations are often dominated by jargon. What approaches might be effective in encouraging transgression of these rules, including by decision makers who operate in these spaces, to change the terms of the conversation and promote informality? What would this mean for relationships between those in the room, and for the outcome of their discussions? Related to this, in what environments and under which terms can peacebuilding stakeholders across the local-to-global ecosystem speak honestly, openly, and equally with one another?

Local discourses on the global system

How do local peace actors talk about global decision makers, INGOs, and other representatives of the international infrastructure of peacebuilding, in local spaces? What is the nature of local discourses as they refer to global processes? What implicit and explicit dynamics of interaction and power are present in the language used in these conversations?

INCLUSIVE PEACE IN PRACTICE

Our four-year Inclusive Peace in Practice (IPIP) initiative explores the interface between global decision-making on peace and the practice of local peacebuilding. It works to create more meaningful local-to-global connections by developing and testing new approaches to building collaborative relationships between those working toward sustainable peace in conflict-affected environments, and policy and decision makers discussing themes and directing finances in policy capitals. It is envisaged that this will contribute to the emergence of more reciprocal and equal partnerships between local peacebuilders and global decision makers, which will lead to more effective policy responses to violent conflict.

LIFE & PEACE INSTITUTE

The Life & Peace Institute is an international centre that supports and promotes nonviolent approaches to conflict transformation through a combination of research and action that entails the strengthening of existing local capacities and enhancing the preconditions for building peace. The Institute works closely with civil society partners across the Horn of Africa, as well as leading learning and reflection among the peacebuilding community of practice at the global level.

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