

## **Rethinking International Aid Partnerships in Fragile States**

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Peacebuilding work has multiplied and expanded considerably in recent years. In the United States, legislators and policymakers are increasingly engaged with bilateral and multilateral aid donors on peacebuilding projects. In this context, the Global Fragility Act (GFA) passed in 2019 aims to fund, develop, and test new mechanisms to reduce and prevent violent conflict and the exacerbation of existing conflict by addressing political, economic, and social grievances in pilot regions. In 2022, the Biden Administration identified the following fragile states for consideration under the act: Haiti, Libya, Mozambique, Papua New Guinea, and the coastal West African states of Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo.

On May 18, 2022, Bridging the Gap, the Research on International Policy Implementation Lab, and the United States Institute of Peace, convened a workshop on the topic of “Rethinking International Aid Partnerships in Fragile States.”<sup>1</sup> Scholars and policy practitioners engaged in a focused discussion about key challenges in aid allocation and localization and proposed timely recommendations for effective and sustainable implementation of the GFA. This brief report covers key elements of the conversation, which was conducted under the Chatham House Rule of non-attribution. A USIP brief will be released in the Fall 2022 that will include the scholar memos presented at the workshop.

### ***What Makes Partnerships Effective for Prevention and Peacebuilding?***

The workshop opened with scholars’ and practitioners’ insights and perspectives on the meaning of effective partnerships with national, local, and non-governmental actors, and a broader discussion on how to overcome some of the challenges posed by fragile contexts. A number of key principles emerged.

First, successful partnerships fully engage local voices in policy design. The essence of effective partnership lies in the joint identification of problems and the co-creation of projects or mechanisms to address those challenges. The reality on the ground, however, is that local participation is most often still perceived as volunteer work and not acknowledged as labor that must be compensated to get the best long-term returns. Instead of starting new projects from scratch, governments and donor agencies must find ways to expand local work, fund ongoing and/or existing projects, and connect local communities with national actors to build a stronger development platform. Funding an organization based on a meaningful ongoing relationship between donors and recipients rather than on a project-by-project basis has the added benefit of improving compliance and relieving heavy audit requirements.

Second, civil society organizations (CSOs) need empowerment and autonomy to fully realize their potential as true partners in the development endeavor. Yet the ability of U.S.

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Government (USG) and other aid donors to invest in efficient local organizations and partners, trust them, and give them flexibility are constrained to a large extent by USG earmarks and legal requirements. While donors can hold formal CSOs accountable, these groups do not represent the bulk of the population. The reality on the ground often comprises loosely organized social movements of young people that are quite effective in building ties with the population and making demands of their governments. The absence of formal bureaucratic and accounting structures, however, makes it difficult for donors to engage with CSOs. A more trust-based approach that empowers local partners is risky in many ways for the USG, which has its own set of priorities and security concerns.

Third, aid effectiveness should be defined in terms of sustainability, not just efficiency. In particular, how *beneficiaries* see success matters more than the sum of the metrics for success for projects in GFA countries. When aid is given through projects to contractors and subcontractors, aid allocation unfortunately turns into a set of funds in exchange for documentation. One of the lessons learned from Haïti is that this transactional perspective incentivizes donors to pursue bureaucratic success — where the visibility of the project and how evaluators perceive it are misleading proxies for real success. The best assurances the USG can give to a recipient country are consistency regarding long-term funding, even if the amount of money is low, and a record of following through on promises. Yet the lack of internal coherence and cohesion within and between the U.S. government and Congress imposes serious limitations on the ability of aid agencies to take a longer-term, more relational approach. Concrete inter-agency innovation is necessary — and the GFA's 10-year timeline offers an opportunity to bypass short-term outcome mindsets and to make sustained progress in fragile contexts.

The United States aims to use the Global Fragility Act to target the political factors that drive fragility. But addressing these underlying drivers of fragility may have the unintended adverse consequence of increasing fragility and risk for conflict instead of minimizing them. Two main issues to consider are the situational, political context and the positionality of actors.

First, supporting incumbent regimes or administrations via state–state partnership does not necessarily reduce fragility. In seeking out stability, the U.S. typically supports incumbent regimes, some of which may have failed their populations. The GFA must therefore sensitize, but not coerce, the USG into better incorporating civil society and grassroots organizations and push the USG to rethink its definition of and indicators for measuring recipient country participation. Local people need to be a part of a flexible decision-making process, not only because they have a more exhaustive understanding of the root causes of fragility but because they are the ultimate beneficiaries of sustainable interventions.

Second, the inclusion and meaningful participation of marginalized groups can potentially destabilize governmental efforts and disturb deeply rooted hierarchies, along with other unintended consequences that exacerbate fragility. In a West African country, for example, a training program open only to women succeeded in empowering their involvement in enterprise. Yet evidence of increasing domestic violence against the female participants indicated that such initiatives can be threatening to groups or individuals in power, limiting efforts to reduce fragility. By mapping power holders, agencies can attempt to identify the type

of projects that would upset or be undermined by the population, as well as to keep in mind that many potential local partners have other potential donor partners who do not try to change local power dynamics.

### ***How Should the United States Implement Sustainable Partnerships with National and Local Actors for the Allocation of Aid in Fragile States?***

The GFA is catalytic funding that requires detailed planning and sequencing for successful implementation. Making the GFA work requires a deep understanding of the internal and external dynamics of donor–recipient partnerships to ensure that programs will not be undermined. Localization requires that leadership and decision-making must lie with the recipient government and the population it represents, a relationship mediated by a wide range of civil society groups. Key principles upon which to build a robust localization approach emerged.

Relationship-building and mutual accountability matter — and these goals are realized through dialogue-based trust built over time. Concretely, the USG must value instruments and opportunities to seek and take on board feedback and input. For example, the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund holds quarterly discussions between governments and the U.N to review priorities and break down objectives into actionable steps to move forward effectively. The Millennium Challenge Corporation has a similar setup.

Projects must be anchored in a realistic implementation period. As much as we expect fast progress and no risk, the priority should be given to slow work that improves organizations and builds sustainable innovation. We should likewise be open to the possibility of risk despite administrative constraints. A question that remains is whether decisions about funding and spending should be aligned around strategic compacts. One thing learned from Afghanistan is that it is preferable to slowly and steadily allocate money over time than to distribute a huge amount at the beginning of a program. Aid evaluation must go beyond information collection to more flexible and adaptable forms of monitoring — and the GFA offers an opportunity to empower embassies and missions to move in this direction.

Although the GFA is unique to the U.S., it is not a singular initiative and must be implemented in a more harmonized multi-donor context. Similar programs have been implemented by European bilateral agencies, the European Union, and via South–South development cooperation empowered by China. This burgeoning of initiatives increases the expectations on the GFA for building effective partnerships for aid allocation. We have learned in the recent past not to encourage the proliferation of new entities working on peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Rather, the U.S. must focus on and reform existing programs and better partner with its allies’ existing mechanisms, like AGENDA (Paris) or the triple-nexus Humanitarian–Development–Peacebuilding approach championed by the UN, World Bank, and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

The GFA thus affords the opportunity of an expanded notion of what current and new partnerships are and should be. Some conclusions and recommendations from across workshop participants included the following.

*Between the USG, U.S.-funded agencies, and their partners:*

- Consultation builds trust; and slow, deliberate work builds mutual accountability and sustainable partnerships. Consultation with other actors, donors and otherwise, operating in these countries is crucial
- Assess political feasibility and map the power landscape. Successful mapping must not be delivered externally and contracted out; it must incorporate the perspectives of those who have a sense of the recipient government, population, and context people with whom they are speaking.
- Empower local people; invest in local recruits and local knowledge. Americans could play more liaison roles and be less influential in day-to-day decision-making. Localization and partnerships would be well-served by keep American aid practitioners in aid recipient countries for 5- to 10-year deployments.
- Before creating more new programs, look carefully at other government-funded development sectors with long-term success, such as health programs. This includes taking multilaterals seriously, including the IMF, World Bank, EU, and UN, as well as new emerging regional development organizations and actors.

*Within the United States:*

- Bureaucratic barriers clearly impede what the GFA is asked to do. Engage with Congress to help legislators understand the mutually beneficial nature of pushing forward localization and partnerships. A lobbying group on behalf of interagency representative might serve to make the case to Congress that efficiency in aid and development is not possible with the structure of the current system and in an environment of mistrust in the country.
- The USG must reset expectations and re-examine the tolerance for risk. In part, this is about changing the narrative: we are not “solving” and “fixing” fragile states, we are a part of their trajectory to resilience. In that context, and in the 10-year GFA timeframe, narrow and high impact contributions to resilience — “doing less and doing better” — should be valued. In addition, to deliver on the localization agenda, the USG must continue to find ways to grapple with meaningful and productive civil society engagement across a range of contexts.

The GFA is a unique framework that can positively change the nature of aid and aid-driven outcomes in fragile contexts, from the design of projects to their implementation and long-term sustainability. The workshop highlighted the pressing challenges and opportunities that must be addressed to enable the successful implementation of the GFA in its 10-year timeline and in the broader geopolitical context in which it exists.