



# The empirical translation of narrated ownership: a case study of localized peacebuilding in Lebanon

DI MECO, L. (LUDOVICA)



**Radboud Universiteit**

Ludovica Di Meco  
Student number: s1043123

Master of Science Human Geography  
Specialization: Conflict, Territories and Identities  
Radboud University, Nijmegen  
Supervisor: dr. E. van Ommering

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# Abstract

Noticing the increasing relevance of the topic in both academic discussions and international policies, this research intends to contribute to the debate on ownership and localization in peacebuilding, by investigating how ownership is shaped within a localized program. It builds on critical and relational reflections in the second local turn in peacebuilding, which have posited the necessity to overcome top-down approaches and reflect on how outcomes are shaped by power dynamics and produced by negotiations or interactions. Importantly, ownership is treated as an idea informing localization strategies, and being translated and reshaped by involved actors according to contextual opportunities. In order to assess such process, an interpretivist qualitative approach has been adopted to examine one critical case study, represented by the collaboration between a Dutch INGO, the Dutch MFA and four Lebanese NGOs working on the INGO's Lebanon program. The findings suggest a threefold narrative around ownership, which translates into specific practices in different aspects of a program's development. Despite a positive impact of individual actions, contextual obstacles associated with the incompatibility between a European and a post-conflict settings show the inadequacy of current peacebuilding structures to foster full ownership (however conceived) and effective localization on a large scale.

**Key words:** localization, peacebuilding, ownership, donors, local

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# List of abbreviations

CAQDA	Computer-assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EU	European Union
NGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
IO	International Organization
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations

# Chapter I Introduction

In 1995, the concept of ownership first appeared in international politics, with a OECD report positing it as the necessary condition for effective development (OECD, 1995). Nearly three decades later, ideas of ownership, local, and participatory processes have become an overarching theme informing intervention strategies in conflict and post-conflict contexts, with an increasing emphasis of non-state, civil society actors as the drivers of transformation. Supported by milestone agreements such as the Grand Bargain (2016) and the Charter4Change (2018), as well as by major IOs' commitments to better appreciate local capacities and bottom-up solutions (for instance the United Nations General Assembly, 2015), local ownership appears now strictly entangled with sustainability and resilience (European Commission & High Representative, 2017), thus founding the basis for the promotion of a stable, democratic society. Therefore, the idea of domestic actors in target areas feeling adequate ownership, i. e. effective control over intervention (Donais, 2009), appears to be the crucial assumption informing localization: despite different nuances and utilizations of the term, the latter tendency in international peacebuilding, humanitarian and development policy usually implies the recognition and support of local civil society through instruments such as "financing, partnerships, capacity-strengthening" (Roepstorff, 2020, p. 285). Hence, there has been a growing practice from international donors and NGOs to establish relationships with relevant actors based in the area towards which interventions are directed, with the belief that their engagement would contribute to legitimacy and long-term sustainment of peace.

Such process, however, not only seems to be failing to realize fully inclusive practices, but has also been criticized in relation to the premises guiding it and to the unequal narratives and strategies it reiterates. As will be shown, definitional ambiguities and asymmetrical power relations have resulted in a top-down imposition of notions of ownership and inclusivity, thus revealing a dominant imperialistic approach to localization (Paffenholz, 2015; Richmond, 2012). More recently, issues have been raised regarding the perpetuation of racist, neo-colonial dynamics which produce dependency and fail to challenge the Global North's exercise of hegemonic power (Peace Direct, 2020). The Covid pandemic has further contributed to reflect on the current implications of the North-South peacebuilding practices: the vulnerability of local entities to external donors' funding decisions has meant the impossibility to ensure ongoing work at a time where the health crisis was shifting the priorities in donor countries (Conductive Space for Peace, 2020). It then appears necessary to operate a deep rethinking of how localization is being enacted through the existing aid system, and to capture the perspective of various involved actors to assess why the promised outcomes have not yet been realized. This research departs from the identification of such problem, and seeks to assess which form localization is assuming in current peacebuilding programs. In this context, the idea and definition of ownership is treated as the narrative framework standing in a relationship of mutual construction with localization practices: if assumptions on ownership-based effectiveness can guide the connection between external and domestic entities (Lee & Özerdem, 2015), the empirical application of localized strategies then also results in variously specific forms of ownership (see for instance Westendorf, 2018). Collecting the insights of an institutional donor, an INGO and four locally based NGOs working on the same projects in Lebanon, it was possible to shed a light on the meanings and

implications attributed to ownership in various occasions and from various perspectives. Hopefully, the resulting picture might prompt a transformative, conscious consideration of which are the best practices fostering a sense of inclusiveness, while also highlighting the behavioral and institutional obstacles necessitating reform.

## **1. Research objective and research question**

This research's objective is to assess the current state of localization in peacebuilding: considering the increasing relevance of the local and the insistence on ownership in international policies, it seeks to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the form assumed by such emphasis in an empirical localized program. In doing so, the study aims to account for and compare the perspectives and practices of each actor and entity involved in what they consider a localized peacebuilding project, while also noticing the function of contextual dynamics in shaping the meaning and application of key issues in the localization debate. For this purpose, the concept of local ownership is treated as a policy idea which is influencing the development of international intervention in conflict and post-conflict settings, and which is channeled and translated through localization strategies (e. g. partnerships, financing, supporting, etc.). Hence, the main goal is that of building a picture of such influence, considering which meaning it is attributed, how and where it is channeled, the constraints it faces and the resulting practical and theoretical implications. The investigation seeks to be both descriptive and exploratory in nature. On the one side, in fact, it considers the impact of relevant factors and phenomena which have been identified by the literature on the topic, such as donor dependency, the prevalence of top-down approaches, or forced professionalization, thus building on the critical and relational developments of the second local turn in peacebuilding and attempting to describe how such elements are traced in the current policies and practices. On the other, it adopts an inductive approach to explore a multiplicity of possible interpretations of power and ownership and their empirical translation in actions and considerations, hence trying to be receptive to new insights and original explanations.

In order to achieve the research objective, the following question has been formulated:

*How is ownership currently shaped within a “localized” peacebuilding program?*

The analytical distinction of ownership as a central idea in the study of localization strategies, as well as the aim to obtain an exhaustive assessment of the inquired phenomenon, prompted an appropriate account of its narrative, practical and contextual dimensions, so as to ensure openness to a plurality of relevant elements and aspects. Therefore, the main query has been disaggregated into three sub-questions:

- a) How is ownership understood in a “localized” peacebuilding program?
- b) How is localization practiced in a “localized” peacebuilding program?
- c) How do contextual elements influence localization and ownership in a “localized” peacebuilding program?

This study has been conducted between March and June 2022 within the scope of a research internship in the Lebanon team of the Dutch peacebuilding INGO PAX for Peace, with PAX's Lebanon program having been selected as the case to investigate. Hence, the answer to the research question and sub-question is founded upon the experience of the entities involved in such program, namely PAX staff, the Lebanese NGOs it works with, and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the program's main donor.

## **2. Societal relevance**

There appears to be wide recognition in both academic and policy debates that the top-down approach to peacebuilding and humanitarianism which has emerged since the end of the Cold War can only achieve limited (and at times counterproductive) results, and that bottom-up strategies to conflict resolution might foster resilience and sustainable impact (see for instance European Union, 2016; OCHA, n.d.). However, such statements do not seem to have yet produced neither a truly emancipatory constitution of ownership and peacebuilding as called for in the academic literature (Ejdus & Juncos, 2018; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2016), nor a set of sustainable localization practices capable of fostering a fruitful collaboration between external interveners and domestic actors, thus reproducing mainstream blind spots and doubtful outcomes (Autesserre, 2010, 2017). It is then relevant to ask what exactly is restraining the peacebuilding field, and why localization is not reaching the potential it has been attributed. Some authors have pointed to the hegemonic influence of top-down strategies anchored in neoliberal assumptions (Petrova & Delcour, 2020) or to the institutional and practical challenges faced by IOs such as the UN (Campbell, 2020): arguably, a comprehensive investigation accounting for both the discursive and institutional aspects of localization can provide a multifaceted explanation of the phenomenon, highlighting the most beneficial practices, their origin and their implications, as well as the motivation for persisting obstacles. While necessarily contextualized in an embedded case study, the resulting insight might provide the basis for a conscious, collective reflection by the actors and entities involved in peacebuilding, signaling the existence of a radical path for change in terms of both actions and understandings. It appears crucial in this specific period of time to sustain the momentum for change: the recent outbreak of new global and regional crises, accompanied by the increased frequency of natural disasters and by a growingly concerning resource scarcity, prompts a profound reflection on the efficiency of an intrinsically asymmetrical aid sector, and of how the collaboration between various actors can be improved towards the achievement of ethical and mutually beneficial outcomes. The Covid pandemic has already displayed the necessity of a deeply transformative process: with the health crisis enhancing tensions in unstable areas (Brown & Blanc, 2020) and revealing the extent of global and national inequalities (Patel et al., 2020), the shock has been deemed as an opportunity to rethink strategies, challenges and opportunities for peacebuilding, especially considering the leading role played by local organizations when travel was significantly restricted (Clark & Alberti, 2021). Such urgency has been particularly felt in Lebanon, where the pandemic has produced a "crisis within the crisis" (Diwan & M Abi-Rached, 2020, p. 8), fostering sectarian tensions and exacerbating the economic collapse (*Ibid.*). Currently, the country is vulnerable to the destabilizing impact of the war in Ukraine, with the financial crisis worsening and the

doubtful impact of the most recent elections (Gallagher, 2022). Hence, this study acquires additional relevance in the case of Lebanon, since it offers context-specific insights aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of peacebuilding programs while establishing sensitive parameters to improve the collaboration between external donors and Lebanese civil society.

### **3. Scientific relevance**

This study locates itself within the academic debate on the local turn in peacebuilding and on the meaning and exercise of ownership and localization. More specifically, it builds on critical appraisals to the liberal peace paradigm by being sensitive to the relevance of hierarchical relationships, power asymmetries and top-down imposition (e. g. Mac Ginty, 2010). At the same time, it recognizes the value of relational, non-linear approaches in overcoming essentializing dichotomies between the local and the international, thus focusing on the interactive nature of peacebuilding practices and the collaborative construction of the meaning and implications of localization (see Randazzo, 2021). It appears especially relevant to assess the contribution of different theories in explaining an empirical case of partnership within the aid sector, and to identify both the limits and potentials of each contribution: while the discussion on localism has been advancing since the late 90s, in fact, scholars have not yet reached a satisfactory conceptualization of several key terms, including ownership, hybridity, and civil society (see on the topic Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2016; Paffenholz, 2015). The ambiguities and contradictions of both theoretical speculations and international policies on the topic have fostered doubts regarding who exactly is supposed to own what (for instance, Hasselskog & Schierenbeck, 2017): hence, this research seeks to assess a plurality of possible understandings in shaping definitory processes, thus attempting at reaching an overview of what ownership and localization might mean. Several studies seeking to explore the application of localism in peacebuilding have often maintained a unilateral focus: for example, Van Leeuwen et al. (2020) and Vogel (2016) investigate local actors' opinions on peace strategies and on the partnership with international donors, while Campbell (2020) and Petrova & Delcour (2020) focus on the UN's and EU's perspective in enacting and developing localization strategies. An exception is represented by studies such as that conducted Cohen (2014), who gathered insights on the topic from South-based and North-based practitioners, and by Collins & Thiessen (2020), who relied on a greater variety of participants involved in various aspects of state-building in Afghanistan. This research especially builds on the latter instance, since it seeks to include a multiplicity of inputs from the range of various actors working on the same issue. However, not only it extends such plurality to a distant back donor which is not present in the field (i. e. the Dutch MFA), but it also narrows the case study to a singular program which engages a limited number of organizations: this allowed to include diverse inputs from entities which are grounded in different realities, while also ensuring to take proper account of their daily interactions and mutual influences. The resulting insight has a twofold contribution to the localization debate. First, it underscores potentially fruitful developments of existing approaches, demanding an expansion of the applicability of critical scholars' notion of micro-practices of resistance and of the transformative potential of intentional relationality. Second, it notices a threefold conceptualization of ownership, which informs (and is informed by) localization practices in three different sites of a collaborative project's development, with the difference between a European and a post-conflict context

playing a crucial role in privileging specific narratives and constraining possible actions. This contribution constitutes a sound basis for the elaboration of more complex conceptualization, and for the investigation of hidden causal relationships, overcoming sterile critiques and reflections.

#### **4. Outline of the study**

Chapter I has presented the research problem, stating the research question and illustrating its relevance. Chapter II examines the existing literature on the topic of localization in peacebuilding, displaying the origin and evolution of the academic debate and suggesting the operationalization of relevant frameworks. Chapter III illustrates the series of methodological choices which have underpinned the research process, clarifying the underlying philosophical assumptions, the case study design, the methods adopted to collect and analyze data. Chapter IV presents and discusses the research findings, providing an answer to each sub-question: the first section focuses on the narrative dimension of how ownership is understood; the second one on the practices and sites facilitating the exercise of empirical localization; the third one on the role of contextual institutions. Finally, Chapter V summarizes the research's conclusions, highlights possible policy implications, and suggests the advancement of further research.

# Chapter II Literature review and theoretical framework

This chapter provides an overview of the academic debate around localization in peacebuilding. First, an analysis of peacebuilding in its assumptions and implications illustrates its inherently political character, thus offering the basis for understanding the development of the first local turn. Afterwards, the developments of the second local turn are emphasized, alongside its limits and struggles in defining key concepts and categories, and a new perspective is presented through the lenses of relationality and complexity.

The chapter then focuses on the specific element of ownership in localization, noticing how it has been described differently by several scholars and how its emancipatory potential has been deemed incompatible with its current employment in international peacebuilding policies. Finally, key components of the conceptualization of ownership are indicated as useful to analyze an empirical case of localized programs.

## **1. Peacebuilding in the Agenda for Peace**

The 1992 Agenda for Peace introduced the notion of peacebuilding to international politics: supported by an increased confidence in the UN's capabilities after the end of the Cold War (Hatto, 2013), the document established a direct link between avoiding a relapse into conflict and promoting democratic practices, international cooperation, development, and the transformation of deficient national structures. In this sense, the concept had two meaningful implications. On one side, it built on Galtung's claim that a sustainable peace rests on the removal of the structural causes of war, and that an infrastructure of peace must be created on the basis of horizontal relations able to solidify non-violent mechanisms of conflict resolution (Galtung, 1976). On the other, it adopted a long-term perspective which was essentially preventive in nature, as its ultimate aim was enabling a form of well-being and stability which would avoid future reoccurrence of violence (Boutros-Ghali, 1992). The long-term focus, as noted by Lambourne (2004), was functional to the inclusion of goals of both negative and positive peace, which implied a transformative approach to existing conditions and which was oriented by the satisfaction of human needs. Hence, peacebuilding prescribed the impressive task of accounting for the short-term necessities of war-torn societies while embarking in a long reconstruction effort going beyond the mere re-establishment of pre-war conditions, addressing a long-term socio-economic structural change (Harris, 1999). Empirically, such objectives were reflected in the realm of humanitarian assistance and development efforts, with increasing specialization of agencies and the problematic need for integration and coordination (Cutter, 2005).

### *1.1 Multifunctionality and definitional issues*

An attempt to systematically analyze the peacebuilding dynamics and their possibilities has been presented by Doyle & Sambanis (2000): by elaborating a triangular model of peacebuilding, they argue that interveners' capacities for a successful strategy interact with the level of war-related hostility and with post-war levels of local capacities in shaping eventual outcomes. While such insight rightfully points to an interplay of contextual factors shaping the opportunities and form of peace interventions, it relies on a rational understanding of civil war and fuels the prediction of a pre-determined model of what successful peacebuilding could look like. Importantly, the definitional problem of what peacebuilding is introduces the notion of building local capacities for conflict resolution, thus reinforcing the preventive and transformative grounds of the intervention (*Ibid.*). The intrinsic ambition of such mission was not surprisingly accompanied by an increasing expansion of international peace operations, which became more and more multifunctional (Hatto, 2013) and incorporated an overwhelming variety of tasks, approaches and definitions: Cutter (2005), while identifying three main pillars of peacebuilding (justice and reconciliation, governance and participation, economic and social well-being), posits the controversial question of what peacebuilding really is, and questions the capacity of the international community to provide such a complex system of solutions. The difficulty of reaching an operational coherence about the description of peacebuilding is effectively illustrated by Barnett et al. (2007): they argue that the variety of factors at play in a conflict allow for virtually any activity to be classified as peacebuilding; consequently, each agency and organization intervening in a war or post-war area define peace priorities on the basis of its mandate and expertise, adopting a wide variety of terms and conceptualization.

**Table 2 Sectoral Activities and Focus Across Agencies**

Activity Categories	Multilateral Institutions						United States		
	DPA	DPKO	UNDP	World Bank	IMF	EC	State	DOD	USAID
Security and military									
Demining	☐	☐	☐	☐		☐	☐	☐	
DDR		☐	☐	☐		☐		☐	
Security sector reform		☐	☐			☐		■	☐
SALW			☐				☐		
Security stabilization	☐	■					☐	☐	
Conflict assessment and early warning	■		■			■			☐
Defense diplomacy		☐						☐	
Social, economic, developmental, and humanitarian									
Reconstruction			☐	■		■	☐	☐	
Infrastructure			☐	■		☐	☐	☐	☐
Economic recovery	☐		■	☐	■	☐	■		☐
Financial assistance			☐	☐	■	☐			☐
Policy and technical assistance			■	■	■				☐
Health and education			■	■					☐
Food and agricultural support			☐	☐		☐			☐
Media support						☐			■
Repatriation and return	☐		☐			☐		☐	
NGO capacity building			☐	☐					☐
Trauma counseling			☐						☐
Political and diplomatic									
Peace agreement and mediation	■	☐							
Democratization	☐		☐			☐	■		■
Decentralization			☐	☐	☐	☐	☐		☐
Good governance			☐	☐	☐	☐	☐		☐
Rule of law		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Institution building			☐	■	☐	☐			☐
Human rights	☐					☐			
Election assistance	■					☐		☐	☐
Justice and reconciliation									
Leader dialogue			☐						☐
Community dialogue			☐						☐
Bridge building			☐						■
Truth and reconciliation					☐				☐

Note: ■ = Core organizational competencies; ☐ = Named activities.

Figure 1. Retrieved from "Peacebuilding. What is in a name?", M. Barnett, H. Kim, M. O'Donnell, L. Sitea, 2007, *Global Governance*, 13(1), 35-58.



Importantly, such definitory process acquires a political value, marked by a concern for what constitutes a threat for the international community and by a Western-based bias towards a liberal state model (e. g. the promotion of human rights and the rule of law, a market economy, representative institutions) (*Ibid.*).

### *1.2 Liberal peacebuilding as a political project*

Conceptualizing peacebuilding, therefore, risks equalizing the notion with a meaningless catch-all label unless it is recognized as a political intervention resting on specific normative premises. In this sense, it appears more useful to analyze the idea of peacebuilding as a political discourse rather than as an operational strategy, and to address its reliance with the wider liberal peace paradigm.

Adopting a discourse analysis approach, Heathershaw (2008) recognizes in peacebuilding a tripartite discourse of democratic reform, civil society and statebuilding, within which the term “peace” becomes the representation of determinate political interests and ideas. In this sense, peacebuilding is an imperialistic form of governmentality, in which incoherent prescriptions shift in a liberal hegemonic governance. The concept of governmentality is here of particular significance: given Foucault’s definition of a range of institutions, procedures, reflections and tactics supporting the exercise of power (Foucault, 1976, as cited by Rose et al., 2006), it is suggested that the list of strategies and activities falling under peacebuilding could constitute a system of dominance permeated by a neoliberal imperative. Such conclusion has been particularly advanced by Richmond (2010) when noticing the cooption of peacebuilding by a neoliberal agenda, which needs a fundamental restructuring and reform if it has to overcome its imperial character. In this vein, Jabri (2010) associates liberal peacebuilding with a form of social engineering which is internationally dictated and oriented towards subjugation, reproducing a colonial deprivation of political subjectivity towards conflict-affected populations. Importantly, such hegemonic project is argued to be functional to a Hobbesian security agenda rather than, as internationally claimed, to the idealistic promotion of Wilsonian liberalism, so that the implicit exercise of power is directed towards a conservative assessment of what constitutes a threat to the international community (Newman, 2009). Importantly, a similar perspective appears to be unfruitfully contrasted by the tendency of UN organs and policy circles to de-politicize peacebuilding through a problem-solving approach, which looks at supposed effectiveness disregarding the normative implications of choices and interests (*Ibid.*). The assumption of the liberal peace theory, describing a certain kind of democratized and marketized society which is deemed inherently more peaceful (Newman et al., 2009), then reduces its own system of power relations and defining assumptions to a solution-oriented list of prescriptions: on the basis of presumed efficiency, such action undermines its own democratic confidence by denying the right of conflict-affected populations to determine their own peace (Belloni, 2020). The main result, exemplified by the international action in the Balkans in the mid-90s (*Ibid.*), consists in a top-down imposition of Westerly conceived social, political and economic structures, with target citizens being merely instrumental components of a social engineering project.

Hence, while an operational analysis of peacebuilding appears fruitless given the increasing multifunctional character it has acquired, a proper understanding of its core assumptions and political values allow a more solid definitory attempt: in this vein, liberal peacebuilding as

described by the Agenda for Peace has emerged as a purposeful exercise of top-down power, resting on the belief in the importation of the liberal state model for the preservation of a conservative international stability. A similar understanding of peacebuilding demands analytical attention to the power dynamics it entails, the assumptions on which it rests and the overall objectives it is intended to achieve. Importantly, as will be shown in the next section, it is useful to recognize how neoliberal considerations underpinned the first attempts at engaging new actors in peacebuilding interventions.

## 2. The first local turn and the origin of the localization debate

Given the practical complexities and the normative imperialism introduced by the notion of peacebuilding, it is perhaps not surprising that since shortly after its emergence there have been discussions questioning the effectiveness of such approach, and introducing the issue of which actors are – or should be – involved in peace processes. Despite the initial post-Cold War hybris, and faced by the blatant failure of interventions in countries such as Rwanda and Somalia (Paffenholz, 2015), the 1990s witnessed the first local turn in peacebuilding, based on the assumption that effectiveness is dependent upon the ability to address local actors in conflict-affected settings. Such notion was first introduced in relation to development by a OECD report stating that “for development to succeed, the people of the countries concerned must be the “owners” of their development policies and programmes” (1995, p. 18). With a more specific focus on war interventions, Curle (1994) argued in favor of a careful training of local peacemakers building on their existing practices to cope with conflict. The pioneering work of Lederach further analyzed the role of local populations in fostering peace and stability: adopting a positive peace framework oriented towards sustainable reconciliation, he emphasized the importance of building a peace constituency relying on contextual resources (1997). Middle-range local actors are then advantageously positioned by their connection to both top-level and grassroots levels of leadership, thus being capable of mobilizing crucial cultural assets and of playing a vital role for conflict transformation (*Ibid.*). As mentioned, such argument rested on the equation between peace and sustainable reconciliation, envisioning outsiders as an external assistance to long-term human capacity building (Paffenholz, 2015). In this vision, the cooperation between external interveners and such actors was not problematized but assumed as intrinsically fruitful, based on assistance and capable of fostering wide legitimacy.

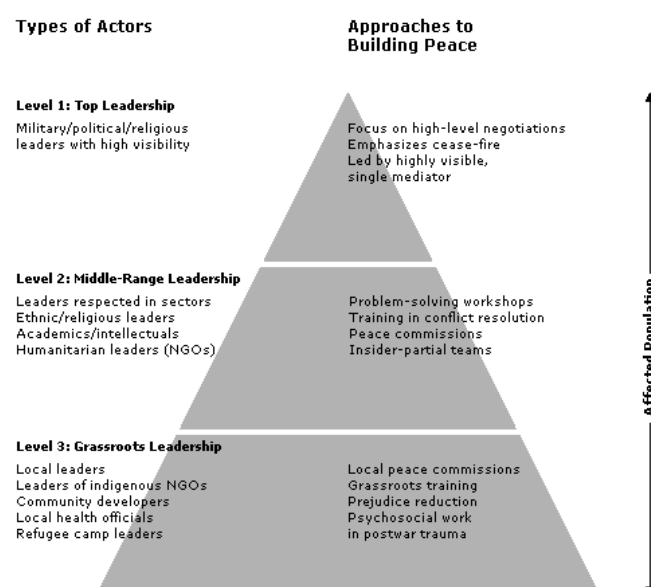


Figure 2. Retrieved from *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (39), by J. P. Lederach, 1997, United States Institute of Peace Press.

## 2.1 The emphasis on civil society

The focus on middle-range actors, however, further contained the potential to fuel the drive of the liberal paradigm by becoming easily associated with the idea of democratic civil society. The relevance of civil society defined as an organized sphere between the government and the private sector (Van Leeuwen & Verkoren, 2012, p. 81) is historically linked to the Western political experience, which attributes it the Tocquevillian function of watchdog against tyranny or the Habermasian value of articulation and edification of democratic interests (Paffenholz & Spurk, 2006). In the 1990s, this notion of civil society as an essential component of the liberal social contract pervaded the development and peacebuilding field: Peck, for instance, has underscored how “the development of an active civil society (...) would provide the built-in corrective mechanisms needed to enhance and maintain good governance and accountability” (1998, p. 258). Similarly, Hampson (1996, p. 10) indicated the reemergence of civil society alongside the markers for a successful peace, right next to elements such as civil order and participatory institutions. The supporting idea was that the action of insiders could foster a wider base of legitimacy and accountability, while strengthening the promotion of global values (Verkoren & van Leeuwen, 2013). Despite warning against the necessity to improve the way in which civil society is promoted and calling for more reflexivity in engaging with conflict-affected societies, Fischer (2011, p. 307) later reiterated such discourse in stating that CSOs are functional to the transmission of democratic reforms and values, which “must be learned at the grassroots levels of society”. It thus appears evident how the first local turn, while grasping the relevance of conflict-affected populations as an agent for peace in themselves and despite acknowledging the value of contextual indigenous resources, still remained entangled in the universalization of a Western model of state: by resting on a set of pre-determined political and philosophical assumptions, it intended to address local actors as an essential part of a larger statebuilding endeavor, coherently with the prescriptions of the Agenda for Peace.

## 2.2 Critiques

The emphasis on CSOs as an agent of peace has been influential in redirecting an overarching amount of donors' expenditures towards building and empowering local civil society in conflict-affected and post-conflict areas (Vogel, 2016), but it revealed itself as myope and counterproductive. An interesting critique had been provided in this regard by Belloni (2001) when analyzing the effect of external democratization in Bosnia: he underscored the assumption of a liberal, pluralistic and horizontal relationship between civil society and the state, which posits the former as intrinsically civic, thus leading to an international focus on a quantitative growth of associations. This view, however, was not compatible with the fragmented reality of the Bosnian post-conflict society and was unable to validate the territorially based set of existing identities: as a result, the top-down process of civil society building has been highly exclusionary and has limited the opportunities for reconciliation. Such consideration can be directly linked to the tendency of outsiders to work with recognizable, familiar actors, so that localization efforts merely look for culturally variant forms of the Western model of civil society (Poulligny, 2005): the focus is consequently on like-minded NGOs which are hardly well connected to the societal dynamics on the ground, and which become a homogenous actor facilitating the exportation of external programs (*Ibid.*). In reviewing the long-lasting impact of Lederach's theory, Paffenholz (2014) identifies three

main ways in which the original vision of localization did not promote an increased peacebuilding effectiveness: first, the unquestioned centrality of middle-range actors has been insufficiently supported by empirical evidence; second, international action still appears to deny its political value by insisting on a technical, limited scope of support; third, the “local” has been homogenized as a consistently good entity and reduced to an elite-based constituency detached from the actual power relations on the ground. Importantly, such tendency ignores how a broadly defined civil society can actually foment violence and sectarian divisions, with conflict and post-conflict settings being fertile ground for uncivil groups (Belloni, 2008). A similar concern raises the fundamental question of what does constitute local civil society, and of how its definition within an external intervention can have profound consequences on peacebuilding outcomes and on the meaning of localization. Vogel (2016) addresses these dynamics by analyzing the action of the international community on civil society in Cyprus: she finds that donors have mostly “captured” CSOs through methods as discriminatory financial support, implicit requirements, or active exclusion. Thus, they have encouraged a high professionalization and de-politicization of actors, barring the emergence of alternative voices which could have challenged the mainstream peace talks entangling national and international authorities.

Overall, the endorsement of localization at the policy level was driven by the necessity to counterbalance the ongoing failures of external interventions: in the seek for effectiveness through legitimacy and connection with existing structures, local actors have remained a tool in the achievement of limited liberal peacebuilding goals (Belloni, 2020). However, the narrative of cooperative efforts between peacebuilders and civil society has been detected as a mere display, which actually rests on accountability towards external donors financing interventions and, by fostering a relation of dependency, attributes them an illiberal authority over the peace agenda (Philipsen, 2014). Importantly, such critiques developed in parallel with the growing recognition, promoted for instance by Autesserre (2010; 2014) that top-down interventions have been intrinsically ineffective in addressing root violence in conflict areas, since they have fostered the detachment of peacebuilding’s objectives and the needs of target populations: hence, bottom-up processes are presented as the only viable path to sustainable peace.

### **3. The second local turn: resistance in everyday peace**

This set of arguments, supported by the failures of statebuilding programs in countries as Afghanistan and Iraq, led to a reframing of the meaning of localization in a second local turn in peacebuilding (Paffenholz, 2015). The main assumption was in this case that indigenous and traditional approaches to peace could be the corrective to the fallacies of technocratic peacebuilding (Mac Ginty, 2008), and that sustainable peace should be non-linear, bottom-up and post-liberal (Ejdus, 2021). Importantly, it has been posited that international interventions are not inherently legitimate and justifiable, but necessitate resonance with the local dimension to which they are directed (Hughes et al., 2015). Engaging consistently with anthropological and post-colonial studies, especially critical scholars began to explore the relevance of local actors within the supposed crisis of the liberal peace, focusing on everyday processes and on notions of resistance (Bräuchler & Naucke, 2017). Mac Ginty & Richmond

(2013) present such new critical approach as capable of overcoming the counterproductive problem-solving attitude of peacebuilding operations by questioning liberal paradigms and their underlying power dynamics: they thus call for a conceptual reflection on the meaning of “local”, which must be understood in its everyday practices or peace. In their view, the local exercise its agency in an emancipatory process of resistance against the governmentality of the liberal peace, underscoring questions of power and assertiveness in an emerging postcolonial order (*Ibid.*). It is thus possible to note the shift from Lederach’s positive stance on the collaboration with conciliatory entities in conflict-settings to a more adversarial posture which identifies local actors as the agents of a change directed *against* the dysfunctionalities of international actors.

In this vein, the conceptualization effort aims to disentangle the local from its territoriality, which has been instrumentalized by mainstream peacebuilding in the name of efficiency and legitimacy, and to redefine it in terms of its action, networks and agency (Mac Ginty, 2015). Such notion is further supported by authors as Roberts (2011), who notice how external top-down interventions need to account for the existence of a popular, democratically determined peace: the idea is that people do have the agency to manipulate and shape their everyday lives, according to their own priorities and understandings. The notion of the “everyday” is thus crucial in such discussion, as it places resistance in micro-practices both privately and publicly conducted, which shape pace formation in response to hierarchical systems of imposition (see Richmond, 2016). The everyday, intended as the dynamic set of quotidian realities encountered in unstable (post)conflict dimensions, is then qualified as an alternative to the technocratic turn of peacebuilding and as the site for local knowledge, agency and legitimacy (Kent, 2018, p. 149).

### *3.1 Friction and hybrid peace governance*

Such framework, stating the centrality of local dynamics and local agency, advanced analyses of the interplay between international interveners and local agents, which has been explored through the framework of hybrid peace governance. Tsing’s theory of friction (2005) proved particularly influential in revealing how the global and the local are mutually constituted, and how asymmetrical relationships and the interactions of culture and knowledge can produce power and reshape particular outcomes of a seemingly universal. Applying such idea to the realm of peace interventions, Björkdahl & Höglund (2013) build a typology of encounters between international and local actors’ discourses and practices, namely compliance, adoption, adaptation, co-option, resistance and rejection: they argue that their outcomes are anyway diverse and unpredictable, with local agency being understood as both oppositional and conciliatory and with hybrid peacebuilding results which might blur the boundaries between actors and actions. In this vein, hybridity has been conceptualized as “composite forms of practice, norms and thinking that emerge from the interaction of different groups, worldviews and activity (...) It is the coming together of dynamics that stretch from international elites (for example, United Nations peacebuilding personnel) to national elites, and to local communities and individuals. It is found in everyday life, but also in the structures and institutions that shape how society is organized” (Mac Ginty & Sanghera, 2012, p. 3-4): as such, it is an organic process rather than a purposeful outcome, and could be used as an analytical lens to understand peace and development processes (*Ibid.*). Mac Ginty (2010) further identifies how hybridity in peacebuilding is shaped by the changing dynamic between four main tendencies: the ability of liberal actors to mobilize mechanisms of compliance and

conformity (e. g. by presenting the liberal peace as the only viable solution); the – albeit limited – attractive promises of liberal programs in terms of, for instance, human rights and security; the potential for local actors and structures to resist or ignore liberal reforms (resting on contextual influence and resources); and their faculty to promote and sustain alternatives to the liberal paradigm, thus challenging its hegemony. Shifting the focus on the results of such factors' interaction, Richmond (2015) emphasizes the complexity and dilemmas of hybrid peace, which is necessarily at odds with liberal conceptions of sovereignty and which is shaped by the circulation of power in negotiations and encounters: specifically, he distinguishes between a negative hybrid peace, structurally violent and based on alienation and compromise, and a positive one, emancipatory and empathetic, based on social justice and on both local and international legitimacy. Importantly, such perspective appears to go beyond hybridity as a natural process or analytical framework, by bringing attention to calculated results of hybrid politics (Bargués-Pedreny & Randazzo, 2018). Thus, hybridity has been attributed a descriptive power of an organic condition on the one hand, and a normative potential of shaping a more inclusive action on the other (*Ibid.*).

### 3.2 Critiques and difficulties

While rightfully pointing to the relevance of agency and resistance in shaping power dynamics, several insights suggest that the critical theories supporting the second local turn should not be linked to an excessive optimism with regards to the decline of the liberal paradigm and the rise of an emancipatory peace. Belloni (2012), for instance, recognizes that the notion of hybrid peace governance allows to overcome the traditional and unsustainable Western-driven social engineering: however, he notices how the everyday focus supported by critical scholars has yet to explain how such practices may promote change on a broader structural level. Additionally, despite the critical scholars' emphasis on power and co-option, an extreme reliance on agency and negotiation risks overshadowing the persisting structural inequalities between the global North and the global South (Peterson, 2012). In this vein, Mac Ginty (2008) admits that indigenous and traditional methods of dealing with conflict are only relevant insofar as external mainstream interventions allow them to be so, and can be easily co-opted and reshaped according to international preferences. Randazzo (2016) further criticizes the notion of everyday agency, claiming that it implies a fundamental selectivity about whose agency is emancipated and how: she notes the ongoing struggle to maintain the original pluralistic stance of critical theories and to avoid the marginalization of dissenting voices, especially in relation to violence; she further emphasizes that narratives of resistance and hybridity actually reinforce a reductive, binary view resting on spatial categorization.

#### 3.2.1 The local and the international

The latter observation especially serves to highlight that the selection and conceptualization of local voices and agency is in itself essentially political, and reveals one of the main questions which localism in peacebuilding is struggling to address, i. e. the delineation of the local and the international. Importantly, a dichotomic distinction between the two categories has been widely criticized as reductive and counterproductive. Roepstorff (2020), for instance, notes how such vision is often accompanied by the tendency to essentialize the related conceptualizations: the international, equated with the global North, becomes the universal and the modern, while the local is associated with the rural and the traditional, to be either

romanticized as authentic and inherently good or deplored as incapable and uncivilized. She then proposes, as earlier suggested by Mac Ginty (2015), to adopt a critical understanding which links the local to everyday activity and interaction in a network of power and politics. In criticizing the evolution of the local turn in peacebuilding, Paffenholz (2015) also addresses the problematics of the local/international dichotomy: on one side, an Eurocentric perspective risks romanticizing the local as the front necessarily resisting liberal reforms, while on the other it homogenizes a monolithic colonial West disregarding discrepancies between different kind of interveners, which might have a diverse set of expertise and mandates and which are not necessarily Western. Thus, the international/local binary is associated with the power/resistance one, which is reified into a formal model with little transformative potential and with a poor account of contextual socio-economic factors (Chandler, 2013). Moreover, supporting the critiques against an essentializing dichotomous view, Millar (2017) analyzes conflict management mechanisms in Sierra Leone to show that the local is not unified, but presents complex dynamics of competition and contestation: the author, however, still recognizes the analytical utility of a binary differentiation to explore the reproduction of power dynamics in peacebuilding processes. Obradovic-Wochnik (2020) further advances such arguments, by shifting the focus from the theoretical conceptualization of the local to the power and imbalances intrinsic in localized projects of peacebuilding and transitional justice: in accordance to the critiques that have been moved to the idealized reliance on civil society actors, she argues that when interventions claim to empower the local they actually promote the constitution of elites and the reproduction of inequalities, so that the identified “local” needs to be conceived as a governing agent capable of exercising exclusionary politics within hidden power relations. Further emphasizing the political nature of identifying the local, Hirblinger & Simons (2015) note that even critical hybrid theory often resulted in othering processes towards such category, and that most scholars and practitioners operate a representation functional to their understanding of what is “good” and “bad” peacebuilding. Hence, the authors advocate for more reflexivity and consciousness when engaging with the “politics of the local” (*Ibid.*, p. 434). Exploring the practical consequences of the tendency to otherize and homogenize the local, moreover, Van Leeuwen et al. (2020) deplore how it neutralizes the diversity of peacebuilding debates and the relevance of different actors as purposeful stakeholders, thus missing out on the opportunity to enrich possible paths and contributions to peace.

### *3.3 New developments: relationality and complexity*

It is then possible to observe how the local turn might have been effective in thinking critically about how the liberal paradigm could be challenged and how external interventions can reveal the reproduction of asymmetrical power relations: however, the debate is still struggling to conceptualize and operationalize the meaning of localization in terms of actors and interactions, easily falling into either the vagueness of the everyday resistance or the romanticization and essentialization of locally elaborated dynamics. A different, relatively recent approach aims to overcome such analytical difficulties by shifting the ontological and epistemological premises of both liberal and critical thinking, rather adopting a relational perspective. Brigg (2013) notices in fact the emergence of a relational sensitivity in peacebuilding, which embraces a flatter ontology based on openness and exchange rather than hierarchy and objectiveness, and which recognizes the impact of a plurality of inputs. Relationality, by attributing conceptual priority to interactions and exchanges, is deemed

capable of better grasping fluidity and diversity (Brigg, 2018), hence escaping the limits of fixed labels and categories. Importantly, reality and knowledge about reality are considered the result of exchanges and interlinkages, so that the authority of peacebuilders to understand reality is easily questioned, as shown by Torrent (2019) with regards to the UN engagement with civil society in conflict areas: while the latter is often conceived as a separate stakeholder which can be identified and addressed, relationality undermines the utility of fixed categorization, so that civil society only emerges from non-objectifiable, uncertain interactions with other actors and processes. It is here interesting to note how the focus on uncertainty and interconnection is also shared by scholars adopting a Complexity theory: de Coning (2013) for instance, illustrates how post-conflict societies are able to organize themselves outside hierarchical frameworks, through bottom-up feedback systems and which cannot be externally grasped or controlled. Complexity and non-linearity could then be further applied to the contribution of external interveners: in this sense, assuming peacebuilders as teleological, purposeful entities reiterates a hierarchical reasoning, while agency should be rather recognized as subject to constant evolution and reproduction through unpredictable encounters between actors (Randazzo & Torrent, 2021). Further criticizing the resilience of reductive binaries in conflict studies, Hunt (2017) suggests to overcome an ontology of entities in favor of an ontology of relationships: he claims that possible hybrid or emancipatory forms of peace are better understood through the way in which different actors “relate to one another, interpenetrate and co-evolve” (p. 218), and proposes a typology of relations based on the concept of symbiosis and comprising predatory amensalism, parasitic commensalism and mutualism. Such categories describe the nature of actors’ interaction, respectively indicating extreme incompatibility and attempt at substitution, sustainable asymmetry based on incorporation and hybridization, and complementarity producing mutually beneficial outcomes (*Ibid.*). Hence, despite the possible reductivity of such framework, the call for relationality highlights how actors are entangled in the structures and relationships in which they operate, thus advancing a progressive rejection of the linear, modern subject-object division (Randazzo, 2021).

Relational and complexity-oriented perspectives have surely enriched the debate around the local turn, pointing to the relevance of the co-construction of processes and outcomes through interactions between actors and entities, further demonstrating the limits of conventional essentialization of defined categories. However, the transformative potential of such theoretical lenses appears uncertain, especially if co-created entities and outcomes result from non-purposeful dynamics as claimed by Randazzo (*Ibid.*): the question is how to explore the forms of power resulting from and shaping such relationships, so as to avoid the risk of reducing this new approach to a sterile self-reflexivity to be operated by peacebuilders (Brigg, 2013). This research then seeks to account for relational frameworks to investigate how their reframing might have a more transformative potential.

#### **4. Conceptualizing ownership**

Importantly and disregarding of different premises or approaches, supporters of new policies and theorizations of peacebuilding have long advocated for principles of local ownership and legitimacy in forming the basis of transformative reforms (Ejdus & Juncos, 2018). However,



the term ownership remains highly contested, with its meaning not only varying according to the political entity adopting it but also depending on a multiplicity of theoretical assumptions around the local and peacebuilding: the existing gaps and contradictions call for an accurate consideration of the concept, which risks otherwise becoming a mere hypocritical tool (Wong, 2013). While ownership is more often analyzed operationally (in terms of how it is or can be realized) than conceptually (in terms of what it might consist of), its achievement is often regarded as the basis for an emancipatory form of peacebuilding. Hence, in order to analyze the shape assumed by localization in a peacebuilding program, it is essential to theorize what local ownership implies and according to which parameters it has been described by its proponents. Indeed, the discursive relevance of ownership has on one side informed the local turn in terms of its effectiveness-oriented objectives, positing domestic engagement and control transfer as the foundation of self-sustaining structures (Narten, 2009). On the other, the discrepancies between an idealized, genuine ownership, international localization strategies, and the practices of identified local actors call for a deeper understanding of what ownership in itself implies (Grøner Krogstad, 2014). The specific focus on this concept will then allow to identify and operationalize a key component of the localization debate, and to assess the relationship it establishes with current discourses and practices.

Chesterman (2007) reflects on the meaning of ownership in peacebuilding settings, noticing that it is either associated with the desire to avoid hindering existing structures and processes or, more defensively, with the attempt at discarding accusations of neo-colonialism (p. 9). The author then proceeds to explore how the term is used, noticing that it is associated with a population's feeling of a policy as its own, either because such population has been involved through active consultation or because the policy is designed as to respond to contextual culture and circumstances (*Ibid.*). From a more self-reflective perspective, Bargués-Pedreny (2015) notes how in both literature and policies the term might imply a process of learning cooperation between actors, which have to be reflexive in solving the dilemma between the international community's commitment to autonomy and its general lack of willingness to accept self-government. Understanding ownership in terms of attachment, Lemay-Hébert & Kappler (2016) identify two aspects of the concept, both of which can be exercised in a superficial and deep way: a social-material dimension relates to the extent to which local actors are socialized into peacebuilding structures, including for instance aid mechanisms or external networks; a social-normative one, on the other hand, entails attachment to the language, meaning and value-oriented underpinnings of the peace agenda. Hence, the authors are effective in highlighting how ownership must be explored in a plurality of realms in which it emerges, which are surely interconnected but which suggest attention to both formal procedures and normative principles of peace processes. A similar multiplicity of domains, including the normative/ideational one, is shared by Collins & Thiessen (2020) but from a different perspective: by adopting a grounded theory approach, the authors equate ownership with a meta-conflict around contested values and conceptual dissonances as well as structural stakes of statebuilding; such conflict is deemed to take place at any level of society, from global to local, and to be shaped by the relationships and power dynamics between actors at each level (*Ibid.*, p. 225).

#### *4.1 Limits of international practice*

When applied to the assessment of liberal peace interventions, the term local ownership emerged in opposition with the international ownership stemming from the authority of the UN Security Council and of international law (Richmond, 2012): the latter's legitimacy is inevitably detached from local preferences and communities, with statebuilding projects necessarily failing (as shown, among others, by Autesserre, 2010). However, the progressive adjustment of intervention strategies, which have made local ownership a buzz word in international policies, have kept accounting for the issue through neoliberal frameworks: thus, they have created the notion of a liberal social contract between peacebuilders and recipient societies which relies on a top-down definition of ownership itself, with external actors prescribing what local ones should want and own (Richmond, 2012). Importantly, international interveners have grounded the notion of ownership in human rights and self-determination, while at the same time negating such notions through their own aim to restructure conflict-affected societies (*Ibid.*). From this perspective, ownership could then be conceptualized as a rhetorical exercise, aimed at insisting on the compliance of a carefully selected set of voices (see above on the political nature of selectivity) in order to increase the legitimacy (and, supposedly, the sustainability) of peace programs. Such is, for instance, the argument advanced by Wilén (2009) when noticing how narratives of capacity building and local ownership advanced by UN agencies and NGOs mostly function as value-adding and legitimizing tools, functional to avoiding accountability more than to fostering empowerment. More radically, the emphasis on ownership has also been described as a postliberal governmentality attempt (Chandler & Richmond, 2015), which echoes colonial techniques of controlling from a distance. A similar kind of rhetorical ownership, which still mostly relies on interveners' priorities and fail to engage with local populations in an emancipatory and reformatory way, has been for instance detected in the EU's peacebuilding action through CSDP interventions (Ejdus, 2017): in this case, ownership is constructed as a "middle ground between imposition and restraint, a negotiation between the EU and those on the receiving end" (p. 462), and its operationalization is mostly top-down, with little space for actual participation by receivers communities.

#### *4.2 Emancipatory ownership, emancipatory peacebuilding*

Importantly, such practices are in contrast with what prescribed by critical theories with regards to how local ownership could ensure an emancipatory form of peacebuilding: a more careful understanding of what is implied by the latter appears thus necessary to theorize a form of ownership capable of escaping the top-down tendencies of mainstream peace interventions. Emancipatory peacebuilding has been in particular associated with social justice and with attention to existing social processes and cultural understandings, which should be prioritized over neoliberal objectives (Thiessen, 2011). Richmond (2007), advocating for a "local renegotiation of the liberal peace" (p. 477), argues that it is necessary to overcome merely institutional approaches and rather focus on interaction and cooperation, accounting for feedback, welfare, culture and the status of marginalized groups. Exploring the emancipatory potential of the developments of human security, Peterson (2013) further advances the discussion with the notion of agonism, intended as a form of politics by which a plurality and diversity of voices is accepted in the creation of new spaces for competition and confrontation: this could open up the possibility of new elements which the limited liberal pluralism relegates as tradition, culture, or as unacceptably illiberal. The idea of multiplicity and representativeness is further promoted by de Coning's Complexity

approach, which uses a different terminology in suggesting the shift to an adaptive peacebuilding: this would require interventions to be mere facilitators of endogenous processes based on feedback, variation and selection, and would importantly demand the beneficiaries communities to be involved in any choice and adequately represented (de Coning, 2018). Therefore, it appears that a non-liberal ownership should consider conflict-affected societies as the locus of peace in its elaboration and reproduction, on the basis of a plethora of context-specific inputs which cannot be reduced to a pre-determined model.

#### *4.3 Operationalizing ownership*

Such plurality, specifically, is exactly what appears to be hindered by the mainstream practices of current peacebuilding. Examining the case of UN interventions, in fact, von Billerbeck (2015) identifies how the prevailing assumption that local actors are illiberal and lack capacities prompts a selectivity based on either liberal or elite ownership: in the first case, the UN chooses actors which promote liberal values and principles (e. g. human rights-oriented civil society organizations), while in the second it privileges higher level elites which have the capacity to deliver concrete, effective outcomes. The recognition of such selective practice directly feeds into the empirical observations that localization efforts present a strong bias towards well-established, well-structured actors, which are more easily identifiable and are often already known by the international community as viable partners (see for instance Hellmüller & Zahar, 2018). Hence, it is possible to establish a causal relationship between the level of representativeness of actors, entities and communities which are involved in the process and the extent to which ownership and peacebuilding are emancipatory or purely rhetorical. Importantly, as suggested by the literature reviewed above, such representativeness cannot be intended as a quantitative indicator of the number of individuals or organizations engaged: rather, it should refer to how much a peacebuilding project is negotiated and reproduced through different spheres and levels of societies, and to how each unit or subunit entangled in a community is involved in the elaboration of feedback and inputs. Notably, this entails accounting for diversity in terms of cultural and geographical background, age and occupation, social positionality, political, ethnical and religious identification.

Donais (2015) adds a further distinction in the operationalization of ownership, noticing how most proponents rely on a minimalist or maximalist approach: in the first case, engaged actors are bounded by the prescriptions of interveners, while in the latter they autonomously decide over every aspect of a peacebuilding reform, including design, management and implementation. Such differentiation could allow to conceptualize a degree of local ownership ranging from high to low and varying according to the amount of choices over which actors have decision-making power. However, as underscored by the author (*Ibid.*), none of the two options appears desirable: while a completely externally led program is problematic in its own right and is incapable of fostering sustainable impact, a fully maximalist approach leads to the assumption of non-intervention, and thus to the conceptual (and unrealistic) inutility of discussing the issue in the first place. Additionally, such narrative could fall back into the binary distinctions criticized by the developments of the local turn in peacebuilding, as it risks naturalizing the liberal conception according to which interveners have to yield their unquestioned authority to domestic actors. Hence, it does not account for more complex and agency-based dynamics between the involved entities, nor it problematizes the structural power inequalities marking such autonomy transfer. This is not

to say that the degree of involvement is irrelevant in measuring ownership: on the contrary, it does offer a useful descriptive indicator. However, it has to be complemented by a more accurate analysis of case-dependent phenomena: such analysis should, for instance, adopt the language of relationality to understand the interactions between different actors, their entanglement and co-creation, and the form of power which shapes and is shaped by their dynamic relationships.

Therefore, an analysis of localization efforts should take into account the practices and narratives which might enable high representativeness, high involvement, but also a form of interaction tending towards complementarity and horizontality rather than hierarchical imposition: by aggregating the mentioned insights, attention is attributed to detecting diversity, horizontality and intensity of involvement as parameters of exercised ownership.

# Chapter III Methodology

This chapter describes the methodological choices which allowed to provide an answer to the research question *How is ownership currently shaped within a “localized” peacebuilding program?*. The philosophical assumptions underlying the research are first explained, as well as the relevance of an interpretative approach to the selected case study. The data collection methods are then illustrated, with an emphasis on the three different sites that have been identified to achieve triangulation. Finally, the instruments and steps of the analytical process will be explained, followed by a reflection on the research’s limitations and the researcher’s positionality.

## 1. Ideational interpretivism

This research adopts a qualitative interpretative approach, based on the constructivist assumption that considers knowledge as intersubjective and socially produced. First, reality is supposed to be relative and multiple, so that different perspectives can be expressed by one or more individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Such acknowledgement allows to validate a diverse set of nuances and interpretations emerging from the data, and to recognize that any construction of a phenomenon is not only variably produced, but contributes to the perception and formation of the surrounding environment with plural, subjective implications on how such environment is consciously shaped (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Hence, it is possible to inquiry a context-specific determination of meaning, by understanding the self-conscious intuitions through which informants make sense of their reality (Demmers, 2017). An interpretative epistemology thus underpins this research, in that it posits knowledge as the result of a reflective interpretation of a socially produced, value-informed, interactive and contextual meaning (Scotland, 2012). Importantly, the historical and cultural embeddedness of such meaning is accounted for, as sense-making is forged in situated discussions and interactions within an identified social setting: as illustrated by Hay (2011, p. 172), explanation is associated with understanding contingent key factors shaping an outcome, and thus with accounting for “the motives, beliefs, preferences and meanings to the actor of the actions in which they engaged and of how such ideas informed their conduct.”

A similar stance points to a strong ideational dimension of the inquiry, which needs to properly consider the role of ideas in the production of perceived reality, and thus in the justification and evolution of both political discourses and practices. Indeed, a number of scholars of public policy have underscored how ideas, which have been defined as causal beliefs guiding action in the world (Béland & Cox, 2010), have a profound role in shaping policy change within existing social institutions. For example, Béland (2019) notices the interaction between ideas and institutions and how they become interdependent in molding behavior, with each element’s relative weight determined by contingent situations. In this sense, the term “ideas” can be further referred to “historically constructed beliefs and perceptions of both individual and collective actors” (*Ibid.*, p. 4), which can be turned into institutions or variably interact with current ones. Crucially, scholars have begun to consider the relation between ideas and the distribution of power, arguing for instance that the former acquire

political capability in their interaction with pre-existing interests, so that it is fruitful to analyze the relation of structures and actors in their “material and ideational struggles” (Bøås & McNeill, 2004, p. 5). The discursive institutionalism proposed by Schmidt (2011) argues for an elucidation of how sentient agents engage in differing types of discourses to promote change within a specific institutional context. Such emphasis then prompts attention to the role of social, political and normative settings in which ideas are elaborated and advocated for: introducing the notion of translation, Campbell (2004) argues that policy change is implemented accordingly to the system of meanings, norms, interactions and structures which define the extent to which innovation is realized. Such translation acknowledges uncertainty and complexity, intending policy practice as a collaborative and evolving process (Stone, 2012).

Hence, this research adopts an interpretative focus on the concept of ownership as an idea informing localization policies and being differently understood and implemented according to contextual institutional opportunities. A similar approach is fostered by the increasing emphasis on local ownership which is notable in international policy documents and instruments (Richmond, 2012): alongside the development of a local turn in academic discussion (see previous chapter), major international organizations such as the UN, the World Bank and the EU have operated a narrative shift towards the centrality of ownership in policies and strategies in the fields of development, humanitarianism and peacebuilding (see for instance Petrova & Delcour, 2020). This suggests the existence of a discourse about ownership which is being operationalized by multilateral institutions in the evolution of localization as a determinate peacebuilding policy. However, it is possible to notice how the emerging narrative is far from homogeneous, given the multiplicity of possible definitions and domains which fosters ambiguity with regards to the relation between ownership, agency and the role of various actors (Hasselskog & Schierenbeck, 2017; Korosteleva & Flockhart, 2020). Such ambiguity, implying a tension between innovative demands and current intervention structures, is significantly accompanied by a widespread recognition that the current emphasis on ownership and localization has failed to achieve the pursued objectives of legitimacy and sustainability (Campbell, 2020; Hellmüller, 2012).

In this sense, assuming ownership as an idea which is constantly co-constructed through the interpretive interactions between actors and social institutions allows a relevant understanding of current localization outcomes. First, such approach is receptive to a plurality of meanings which might be attached to the concept, and to the interplay of a variety of discourses that relate to power-based interests and cultural-historical norms in the constitution of sense-making processes. Second, the contextual conditions in which such sense is produced can be adequately assessed, both as the site of culturally specific inferences and as the system of structures and institutions which constrain or enable the enactment of determinate interpretations of ownership. Finally, the empirical outcomes of such dynamics can be analyzed as the result of a translation process in which a multifaceted idea is being currently implemented, thus allowing an evaluation of the resulting power struggles and of their implications.

## **2. Qualitative Case study**

Hay (2011, p.172) notices that an interpretivist approach demands explanation to be case or instance-specific. Indeed, it appears relevant to choose a methodology capable of grasping the internal complexity, multiplicity of perspectives and context-dependent factors which contribute to the understanding of the investigated phenomenon. This research has then been configured as a case study on the localized peacebuilding projects which are funded by the Dutch MFA and implemented in Lebanon by the Dutch NGO PAX and its Lebanese partner NGOs. According to Flyvbjerg (2006), case studies permit the elaboration of a deep narrative which accounts for complexities and contradictions, thus identifying the inapplicability of rule-governed explanations to the more nuanced realities of human behaviors. Such approach is especially recommended for the capture of situated social interactions, due to the fostered detailed, comprehensive analysis of a diverse range of situated, bounded issues (Harrison et al., 2017). Given the interpretive premises of this research, as well as the plurality of insights and dimensions suggested by the research question and sub-questions, Stake's vision of the case study appears here of particular relevance: the author presents it as the "study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (1995, p. xi). The aim should then be that of truly understanding, emphasizing a reflective path of interpretation which, detecting the meaning attached to a small database of perspectives, is capable of identifying the "different and even contradictory views of what is happening" (*Ibid.*, p. 12). Hence, the case-based methodology of this inquiry intends to be receptive to a constellation of elements, inputs and variables, and to how they relate to each other in the production and sense-making of the whole. Clearly, such richness would not be possibly achieved through a breadth-oriented, large-scale study, which would be rather concerned with generalization than with the complexity of in-depth peculiarity (Verschuren & Doorewaard, 2010). Instead, the focus on one subject allows the achievement of an overarching perspective on the studied object, which is accounted for in its completeness and in the interconnections of its constituting elements (Thomas & Myers, 2015b). Importantly, case studies are often (though not exclusively) associated with qualitative research, since the entailed methods are deemed better suited for a comprehensive and detailed elaboration (Bryman & Bell, 2019). Qualitative research, in fact, aims to visualize and transform the world, representing data in their natural setting and interpreting phenomena on the basis on how people understand them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). In effect, the choice of a qualitative approach is highly compatible with the aim of assessing how ownership is shaped in a localized peacebuilding program: a similar question, in accordance with the interpretivist assumptions underlying its formulation, requires non-quantifiable insights pertaining to intimate, unique sense-making processes and to dynamic, uncertain and multidirectional connections.

## 2.1 Case selection

As suggested by Thomas & Myers (2015a, p. 5), case selection should be guided by a purposeful sampling, which validates the case not for its representativeness of a larger set but in its relation with the phenomenon object of the inquiry. More specifically, following the classification proposed by Palinkas et al. (2015), PAX's Lebanon program has been identified as a critical case, which allows the maximum application of information due to the recognition of key dimensions relevant for the investigation of the phenomenon of interest. Flyvbjerg (2006) proposes an identification of a critical case on the basis of its strategic importance for the studied problem, which is usually measured in terms of "most likely" and "less likely" to

reveal the validity of propositions (p. 231). The selected case for this research has been noted to be a “most likely” one, as it presents important features which appear to facilitate the emergence of interesting localization narratives and practices. As will be shown in the paragraphs below, the Lebanese civil society and its involvement with the international community, as well as the declared position of PAX and of the Dutch MFA with regards to their support to local actors in fragile areas, offer a scenario in which the localism-oriented tendencies registered in the academic debate have witnessed a long-standing flourishing. PAX’s Lebanon program is mostly funded by the Dutch MFA, and involves four locally-based NGOs working on specific peacebuilding methodologies. The connection between the involved entities has assumed a long-term, strategic more than project-based framework: this allows exploring how protracted encounters might have shaped relationships and perceptions, thus producing a complex co-construction of outcomes which is suitable to both a critical, hybridity-oriented perspective (e. g. Mac Ginty, 2010) and more fluid, relational one (Randazzo & Torrent, 2021). In fact, the parameters of ownership are situated in a plural network of translation, reflecting a complexity of inputs which suggests the exercise of power in both formal and informal sites (Randazzo, 2021): hence, the long-standing interaction between the multiple organizations studied in this inquiry, as well as the diversity of their position towards each other, is expected to overcome a more traditionally linear, problem-solving approach to localization. The choice of privileging such aspect is especially based on the emergence of the relational approach in peacebuilding, which as mentioned in the previous chapter, which posits outcomes as dependent by interactions rather than entities (Brigg, 2018): it then appeared appropriate to select a case which could display several forms and degrees of exchanges between connected organizations.

### 2.1.1 Civil society in Lebanon

The specific focus on a Lebanon program was chosen to better reflect on the critiques which have been moved to common intervention strategies. In fact, the features of Lebanese civil society appear adequate for a study of localization practices, since its role, position and dimension places in an interesting condition in relation to the international community. Indeed, civil society in the country has a long and active history, having begun its development since the Ottoman’s rule on Lebanon, and it has witnessed an ongoing adaptation to the continuously changing political dynamics (Haddad, 2017): it has thus established a vital social system devoted to filling the gaps unfulfilled by the state, especially in the fields of health and education (*Ibid.*). In a study intended to support the EU engagement with non-state actors in the country, civil society in Lebanon has been described as the most vibrant of the MENA region, but limited in its promotion of democracy and good governance because of the immediate concerns related to access to education, health, and unemployment (BRD/I Group, 2015): it is then suggested to support Lebanese CSOs by advocating for a more freedom-oriented legal environment, empowering associations to play an active role in service and education, and elaborating appropriate capacity-building programs oriented towards financial sustainability, outreach and organizational skills (*Ibid.*). Such insight suggests an active international involvement towards fostering a democratic, change-enabler civil society, which (as illustrated in the previous chapter) has historically marked the underpinnings of localization in peacebuilding and development. Simultaneously, it has been registered that especially young people have nurtured a certain mistrusts against formal CSOs and their ability to advance change beyond sectarian and corrupt institutions, and are thus engaging in



more informal, unconventional forms of activism such as demonstrations and street campaigns (Sika, 2018). Such element in particular posits a challenge to mainstream international intervention methods, and to their ability to recognize non-state actors other than formally registered organizations. Kiwan argues in this vein that a contextualized assessment of Lebanese youth engagement in politics challenges Western linear model of citizenship, emphasizing the emergence of political subjectivity in non-formal areas (2020). Similarly, donors' engagement in Lebanon has been criticized in its adhesion to the imperative of delivering bureaucratically measurable results, as well as to abstract, de-politicized and de-contextualized notions of community development (Kingston, 2012). Hence, Lebanon can be identified as one case in which international involvement has long been committed to encourage what has been identified as a vital and promising civil society, but has founded such encouragement on mainstream, ill-suited notions of democratic citizenship. External intervention in the country thus appears as a fertile ground for the appraisal to the local turn in peacebuilding, since it reflects a problematic identification of civil society (Vogel, 2016), and a generic difficulty in recognizing and representing societal dynamics (Paffenholz, 2014). Such tendency not only has failed to understand locally produced constructions of activism and civic life, but has also fostered counterproductive mechanisms of sterile professionalization: Mitri (2015) illustrates how, starting from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the highly funded form of institutional NGOs has taken precedence over more spontaneous movements, which has hindered the ability to mobilize a large part of the population towards significant social change by prioritizing alignment with globally trending issues rather than anchoring the agenda to the reality on the ground. A similar dynamic has been explained with an overall donor-dependency, which is widespread in the country due to the national government's lack of funding for CSOs: such condition prompts funding to become the main motivation for an organization's existence, which deepens the distance with the surrounding people and context, fosters competition and fragmentation among actors, limits the creation of dialogues and networks and results in a generic incapability of promoting meaningful impact (AbiYaghi et al., 2019).

In its Lebanon program, PAX works with four Lebanese NGOs (whose names are not mentioned for reasons of confidentiality), all of which appeared suitable for this study. First, while they have a long-standing partnership with PAX, they also enact projects funded by other INGOs, which allowed a comparison between the experiences they had with different external donors: in this way, a wider picture of the contextual situation was sketched, so as to situate the specific investigated case in the current aid dynamics. Additionally, they are involved in peacebuilding activities concerning reconciliation, human rights, education and youth engagement: it has then been interesting to consider how their priorities are positioned towards the trending themes in international interventions, which as shown in the previous chapter are historically rooted in specific assumptions on peace, state and citizenship. Thirdly, they vary in terms of dimension, methodological approaches, and geographical location: such feature allows the exploration of how the international community might be able to relate to different forms of civil society, including smaller and less-structured ones.

### 2.1.2 PAX and the MFA

The Dutch INGO PAX for Peace has also been deemed interesting with regards to its engagement with civil society in conflict and post-conflict areas. Indeed, the organization declares as part of its action in the world the objective of supporting local peace initiatives,

with the aim of promoting inclusive society and mutual understanding between conflicting groups (PAX, n.d.-b). The 2021-2025 strategic framework, in fact, defines the enlargement of political space and of a resilient civil society (stressing in particular youth participation) as one of the main channels through which PAX intends to contribute to peace, and underscores the meaningful partnership with local organizations and groups which are strongly rooted in their communities (PAX, 2020). Such vision, combined with the 70-years-long history of PAX as a peacebuilding NGO (PAX, n.d.-a), suggests a long-standing engagement with localization practices, and thus a strong experience and entanglement with the evolution of localism in international peace interventions. Of additional interest is the multicultural composition of the PAX team working in Lebanon and in the Middle East, which is not prevalently European and thus displayed the perspective of employees working within a Dutch INGO on contexts closer to their own background. Hence, PAX has been able to enrich this research with its internal reflection process on the role of its local partners, which has provided a range of significant perspectives on how the organization works with non-state entities in fragile areas. The role of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the main donor of PAX's Lebanon program also appears significant. On the one side, the MFA explicitly recognizes civil society as an essential driver of development, functional to the achievement of the SDGs (Kaag, 2018): an explicit intention is then asserted to support and "giv[e] ownership" to CSOs, for them to promote socioeconomic change (*Ibid.*, p. 94). On the other hand, the acknowledgement of an institutional donor backing an INGO's action allow to differentiate the interests and visions shaping localization, and to account for how the relationship between such entities might influence the practical outcomes and transformative potential of a project (on the topic, see Banks et al., 2015). Therefore, a high probability has been noted in terms of the interplay of inputs and preferences regarding how to operationalize ownership and exercise power, which facilitates accounting for the specific positionality of each organization involved in the studied program.

### **3. Data collection**

Creswell & Poth (2016) stress how case studies, given the depth of analysis and information they require, demand a triangulation of data and sources: according to Patton (1999), in fact, a multiplicity of sources contributes to acquiring an exhaustive explanation of the studied phenomenon, as it allows to confirm the validity and consistency of each inputs by comparing it to the contribution of different perspectives. In order to ensure such richness of data, three main data sources have been identified, namely semi-structured interviews, documents and observations. All of them have been collected from three sites, i. e. PAX, the Lebanese NGOs PAX works with, and the Dutch MFA. In this way, it has been possible not only to account for and compare the visions and understandings of all actors involved in the selected case, but also to ensure receptiveness to information gathered in different settings and to the related nuances and possible contradictions.

The data collection process has taken place in the context of the researcher's internship at PAX, from March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022 to June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022: such position has been crucial in allowing access to interviewees and documents, as well as in providing the opportunity to observe the INGO's activities and meetings. The research topic was chosen independently, and adjusted according to PAX suggestions (for instance, with regards to paying attention to the role of a

donor as the MFA). There was no detected conflicting interest in the design and development of the inquiry: on the contrary, the findings are expected to guide PAX's own reflection process on the partnerships it establishes with other entities, and the internship agreement was specifically intended to facilitate the acquisition of relevant information for education purposes. Hence, the researcher's position as an intern was specifically designed to allow data collection.

### *3.1 Semi-structured interviews*

In qualitative peace research, in-depth interviews (both structured and unstructured) allow to ensure a people-centered approach, as they are appropriate to capture micro-processes, detailed inferences, and first-hand description of complex perceptions, thus fostering a more comprehensive grasp of individual and societal dynamics (Brounéus, 2011). Similarly, it has been stressed that such method is well-suited for discerning the social world, as it captures the human effort to reflect, learn and make sense of a surrounding environment (Rathbun, 2008). Semi-structured interviews have appeared especially suitable for this research: on one side, they entailed enough flexibility to let spontaneous reflections and not pre-established thoughts emerge, while on the other they granted that all topics of interest were adequately covered, permitting a comparison between the inputs of different actors: such is, indeed, the value of this data collection method as illustrated by McIntosh & Morse (2015). Before scheduling the meetings, three interview guides have been drafted, one for each collection site (PAX, Lebanese NGOs, the MFA; see Annex II). The questions intended to address each sub-question, with a section aimed at grasping the respondents' understanding of ownership and localization, followed by a more technical one requesting a description of practices, policies, personal experiences and impactful factors concerning the subject. Importantly, the exact order of the topics was flexible, responding fluidly to interviewees' inputs and connections. Generally, the interviews allowed a sound understanding of participants' point of view, especially with regards to their opinions on peacebuilding and localization. Usually, they were also specific in describing the decision-making processes they were involved in, and the challenges they face in their work and their partnerships. Drawing from the assumption that knowledge is socially interpreted, the interviews were approached as a site of co-construction between the researcher and the participant, thus attributing relevance to the interaction between the two (Bauman et al., 2002): hence, a relational approach to interviewing has been preferred, with attention to engaging in active listening, establishing familiarity and comfort with the respondents, and adopting a non-judgmental posture through constant reflexivity (Fujii, 2018).

Before scheduling the interviews, all participants were provided with an informed consent form, which presented the scope and purpose of the research, granted anonymity and asked permission to record the conversation. Of the 16 respondents, 14 agreed to be recorded: the remaining two, i. e. two MFA officers who were interviewed during the same meeting, denied such permission as they were concerned of needing further authorization, so that notes had to be taken during the conversation. Notably, in that case it was not possible to follow consistently the interview guide: rather, the participants expressed preference for a more spontaneous presentation of their perspectives, which allowed them to expand on the topics they were most knowledgeable about. Whenever possible, the interviews were conducted in person, usually in the participants' offices. However, due to the impossibility of travelling to Lebanon, meetings with respondents from Lebanese NGOs had to be held via Microsoft

Teams, from the researcher's house or from Radboud University's study rooms. The interviewees were aware of the researcher's position as an intern at PAX, which arguably supported their willingness to participate in the study. At the same time, it was also explained that the inquiry was conducted for the purpose of a university thesis, and special attention was attributed to the creation of a safe, amicable space in which respondents could freely express their opinions: while there is no guarantee that they fully disclosed potential criticism towards their donor and their partner, the feedback and claims of several participants confirmed the achievement of a comfortable environment. After recording, the audio files were stored in a password-protected computer, listened to carefully and then transcribed.

### 3.1.1 Population sampling

A purposeful sampling has been followed to draft an initial selection of interviewees, for which the inclusion criteria were identified as the participants' occupational status within one of the three collection sites and their closeness to the remaining ones: i. e., the inquiry specifically necessitated people working at either PAX, the Dutch MFA or the Lebanese NGOs engaged in PAX's Lebanon program, and whose job entailed a form of contact with at least one of the organizations in which they were not employed. Such population, in fact, was considered in the appropriate position to provide not only the perspective of each single entity involved in the studied phenomenon, but also a narration of the interactive and relational dimension of their professional collaboration with the other actors. Additionally, it was important to contact at least one respondent working in each of the collection sites, so as to obtain a first-hand account of every relevant point of view. In the case of PAX, after the identification of the sample universe, two interviewees were further selected for corroboration purposes, because of their involvement in the enactment in other Middle Eastern countries of activities pertinent to the same MFA-funded program: such further degree of triangulation can enhance the validity of the results, defying contextual biases of possibly misinterpreted causal relationships and hence preventing the risk of inaccurate generalization of the results (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). A similar process would have been ideally repeated for the other collection sites, but it was impeded by the time constraints due to the internship duration and the potential respondents' availability.

The sample size was originally set to a range of 10 to 16 participants, and effectively reached 16 available interviewees: such amount, in fact, has been considered adequate for an intensive analysis in which individuals can retain their peculiar position and characteristics rather than being merged in a larger whole (Robinson, 2014): hence, it was possible to appropriately consider the data setting, understood in this case as the exact occupation of each subject and the specific relation it establishes with the other ones. After purposefully delimiting the population and size, potential interviewees were contacted by email: from then, a convenience sampling based on their availability was adopted. The resulting sample is summarized in table 1. Note that the category "Lebanese NGOs" refers to the four organizations PAX works with in Lebanon, which remain anonymous for reasons of confidentiality. The distribution of interviewees between those organizations is displayed in table 2.

<b>Data collection sites (intended as organization where the interviewee is employed)</b>	<b>Number of interviewees</b>
PAX	7
MFA	2
Lebanese NGOs	7
Total	16

*Table 1. Population sampling. Source: Author*

	<b>NGO 1</b>	<b>NGO 2</b>	<b>NGO 3</b>	<b>NGO 4</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Number of interviewees</b>	1	3	1	2	7

*Table 2. Distribution of interviewees among Lebanese NGOs. Source: Author*

### 3.2 Documents

Documents are described as a common, valuable method for triangulation: being non-reactive and unconscious of the study, they are not subject to the potential adjustments of behavior which might threaten data validity (Bryman & Bell, 2019). Especially in the realm of policy analysis, textual material is considered a relevant source of expertise, complementary to the knowledge gained through interviewing (Bardach & Patashnik, 2019). According to Yanow (2017), the function of collecting data through reading documents might be threefold: they can provide additional instances of meaning-making, illustrate background information useful to better understand topics discussed in interviews, and further corroborate (or interestingly contradict) the knowledge emerged from other data sources. Crucially, the textual material analyzed for this research has served all three purposes, according to the related setting of each piece: public policy notes and internal statements or plans of action have contributed to elaborate the sense attributed to localization and peacebuilding by the organizations producing such documents, while reports and contracts allowed both a broader familiarity with the case study and a confirmation of the practices described by interviewees. In the very initial phases of this research, a preliminary analysis of such data resulted especially useful to study the selected case, acquiring an overview of what the program consists of, which are the involved entities' mutual obligations and roles, and how local ownership is conceived by PAX and by the MFA. Importantly, they provided a sound basis on which to elaborate during the interviews, so that respondents' contributions have been better understood in the context of the policies and projects described in the relevant documents. At a later stage, after the main themes had been acquired from the interview transcripts, the texts were analyzed again for confirmatory purposes: while the main policies and plans they indicated did correspond to the overall framework mentioned by participants, it was evident that they did not comprehensively represent their perceptions and understandings, which supported the sensitivity to each actor's peculiar construction and sense-making of the processes it is involved in.

In total, 12 documents have been selected for this inquiry, on the basis of their pertinence to the considered program and of their categorization into one of the types mentioned above. The following table shows the resulting classification and repartition of the collected textual material.

	<b>Data collection site (intended as origin of the document)</b>			
<b>Document type</b>	PAX	MFA	Lebanese NGOs	<b>Total</b>
Report			2	2
Plan/vision statement	2			2
Program/project framework	2	4		6
Contract	1	1		2
Total	5	5	2	12

*Table 3. Document sampling. Source: Author*

### *3.3 Observations*

The research internship at PAX provided the opportunity to conduct observations by attending meetings, being present in the organization's office, having informal interactions with employees and witnessing their daily conversations and activities. This condition has allowed the registration of multiple written and mental notes, as well as a gradual acquaintance with the surrounding environment and an increasing familiarity with the interviewees, which further helped developing a fruitful relational approach as described by Fujii (2018). In terms of field notes, and following the procedures described by Smit & Onwuegbuzie (2018), in the first weeks of the internship descriptive observations were preferred, so as to account for every aspect and detail indiscriminately: after gaining a sound knowledge of the INGO's functioning and ways of working, the observations became more focused and selective, so as to better concentrate on the elements relevant to the studied phenomenon. The registration of field notes thus proved especially valuable not only for grasping background dynamics, but also to later corroborate interviewees' descriptions of practices, events and specific situations. According to Patton (1987), such function is especially important, since while still relying on the researcher's own selective perceptions it permits to move beyond those presented by the participants. For the whole duration of the internship, the position of the researcher was that of observer as participant: the group activities were joined as desired and only when functional to acquiring information, but with the main role remaining that of collecting data, and with the full disclosure of the researcher's identity as such (Kawulich, 2005). As noted by Westbrook, in fact, "the observer must choose a point of balance between observing and participating" (1994, p. 243): the stance of observer

as participant constitutes the most ethical possibility, as the necessary data collection does not hinder and is not fully hindered by the transparency over the researcher's activities (Kawulich, 2005).

#### 4. Data analysis

During and after collection, interview transcripts, documents and field notes were analyzed through a process of thematic coding: considering the assumptions on sense-making and understanding, a similar strategy has appeared adequate, since it tends to focus on the contextual meaning of verbal expression rather than on the words themselves (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As suggested by Williams & Moser (2019), such method has implied a cyclical action in ongoing evolution, which combined open, axial and selective coding in a non-linear comparison and interpretation of emerging themes. At a very preliminary stage, all textual material was carefully read several time, so as to facilitate familiarization and a generic detection of key issues and recurrent ideas (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Hence, a first round of line-by-line, open and descriptive coding was enacted: this step allowed an initial, unrestricted marking of important passages and phrases (Clifford et al., 2016). Importantly, this phase was inductive in nature, as the main purpose was to ensure receptiveness to authentic meaning, experiences and evaluations emerging from primary data, with a strong orientation towards theory-building. A second round of coding introduced a more deductive approach, following the template method described by King (2004): here, a list of codes has been produced including both the inductively detected relevant ideas and a selection of key concepts retrieved *a priori* from the theoretical framework (crucially, a coincidence between inductive and deductive codes was noticed in several instances). Such passages allowed a visual classification of the data, thus facilitating a more immediate identification of common patterns, while also contributing to testing the applicability of the current academic debate on the subject. A third coding round then focused on a more theoretical categorization and definition of themes through axial and selective codes: this allowed to better define categories according to their features, sub-elements and implications, while organizing and delimiting their relations with broader, abstract overarching themes (Strauss, 1987, as cited by Westbrook, 1994). This process was accompanied by ongoing revision, adjustment and category-testing, and was only deemed concluded after thematic saturation was assessed: such condition has been understood according to the definition provided by Guest et al. (2020, p. 5), i. e. "the point during data analysis at which incoming data points (...) produce little or no new useful information relative to the study objectives". While a similar preoccupation usually points to the prediction of a sample size (*Ibid.*), the use of a template codebook as suggested by Lowe et al. (2018) resulted particularly useful in this case: during the analysis, a data-code table was used to register which themes were observed in which data pieces, and saturation was deemed fulfilled when additional coding did not further enrich existing categories nor produce new ones. Such condition was further confirmed through a final meeting with PAX staff, during which the research's finding were presented and discussed: in such occasion, the relevant inputs emerged appeared to support the adequacy of the analysis, while also enriching the conclusions by better highlighting the relations between various themes.

Most phases of the analysis process were undergone through the assistance of the software Atlas.ti. Such instrument has indeed been deemed crucial in facilitating the organization of data, the grouping and adjusting of themes, and a structured ordering of codes, while also allowing the production of graphical representations of relationship which ease further elaboration and interpretation (Rambaree, 2014). However, certain authors have pointed to the limitations of using CAQDAS tools as Atlas.ti (Woods et al., 2015): it has been posited that the pre-determined functions of such software risk homogenizing qualitative approaches and missing out on the specific reflections required by each one, and that they might foster a sense of detachment between the researcher and the data prompting a de-contextualization of each analyzed piece, thus producing a sterile, dehumanized understanding (see for instance John & Johnson, 2000). To counterbalance such risks, the software-assisted coding was accompanied by a manual process of notetaking, reflections-writing, and theme-building through the hand-drawing of maps and schemes.

## **5. Limitations**

A first limitation of this research was the impossibility of travelling to Lebanon: this has prevented a first-hand observation of the peacebuilding activities taking place, as well as of in-person interactions between the people involved. In this sense, the reliance on reports and interview-based narrations might have produced distance and detachment from the studied phenomena, impeding a closer engagement and understanding: potential additional information has therefore not been collected, and insights might have been missed which would have enriched the comprehension of the whole case study. Moreover, the inability to travel entailed that part of the interviews (notably all those with respondents from Lebanese NGOs) had to be conducted online: such condition caused the interference of noise disturbances and unstable connection, which hampered a smooth flow of the conversation and made it difficult to ensure an accurate transcription. The latter consideration can further be enlarged to the language barrier: while all interviews, for convenience reasons, were conducted in English, only one participant is a native English speaker; notably, the researcher's first language is also different from English. Ideally, a copy of the transcription would have been sent to participants so that they could express any feedback: unfortunately, while they all expressed interest in reading the final report of the research, none was able to spend further time correcting and editing their interview's transcript. On one hand, such obstacle enhanced the risk of committing mistakes when transcribing, which was counterbalanced by repeating the record-listening and transcription process multiple times for each interview. On the other, it might have impeded a free expression of nuances and deeper meanings, thus concealing other possible interpretations of the phenomenon.

Time and availability constraints were also impactful in limiting the number of respondents: it was especially difficult to contact relevant people from the MFA, so that it was only possible to schedule one unrecorded meeting with two officers working on localization policies. This has prevented the gathering of more specific information on the Ministry's development of peacebuilding projects, which had to rely exclusively (and limitedly) on the available public documents (which included facts and statements rather than more complex opinions). A similar consideration applies to participants from the four selected Lebanese NGOs: as



evident in Table 2, interviewees are not equally distributed among the organizations, which was caused by more potential respondents' lack of availability to be interviewed. While it was still possible to accumulate a consistent amount of inputs and reflections, a larger number of participants would have strengthened the understanding of each organization's position. Hence, time and availability constraints limited the possibility of corroborating and enriching data collection and interpretation: all interviewees were surely relevant to the case study and offered important information, but the research would have benefited from a wider set of contributions. On a related note, despite the importance of focusing on one contextualized case, the findings suggested the comparison with other INGOs and donors to be more interesting than originally expected: while at that stage it was not possible to adjust the research design and schedule, it would have been fruitful to expand the scope of the study to more entities, programs, or countries.

As for the conduct of semi-structured interviews, it has been noted above how they were functional to acquire information on all topics of interest. However, the switch between the different topics resulted too abrupt to some respondents, arguably because of the order in which they were addressed: the initial warm-up questions regarded their position in their organization, and were followed by a more conceptual section before turning back to their daily practices. Such alternation was at times confusing, and a better flow was achieved when, after noticing such issue, the order was inversed. Even better might have been to declare more openly at the beginning of the meeting the kind of information sought: while this would have prevented more spontaneity, it could have provided the participants with more clarity and structure.

A further limitation is traceable in the researcher's position as an intern at PAX: while it was crucial for obtaining access to all three data collection methods, it inevitably made the research more PAX centered. Indeed, all observations were conducted at the INGO office, with the researcher's being in close proximity with the organization's staff, thus enhancing the prominence of PAX's perspective and potentially producing subtle biases towards it. As mentioned above, all interviewees were explained the purely university-related purposes of this research: however, the evident connection with PAX might have resulted in participants from Lebanese NGOs associating the study with the INGO, thus restraining their willingness to express more open critiques or concerns. Additionally, the internship agreement entailed issues of confidentiality, which have impeded the full disclosure in this report of more detailed information on the projects and partners. The next paragraph will then elaborate on the researcher's positionality, both as a European citizen and as an intern at the studied INGO.

## **6. Positionality**

The internship position especially increases the relevance of deep reflexivity on the researcher's positionality in the inquiry process. Indeed, Bourke (2014) claims the cruciality of embarking in an ongoing, critical self-reflection process when conducting research, as a researcher's beliefs, experience and socio-political background necessarily influence interpretation and thus shape the research path and outcomes. Acknowledging positionality implies recognizing the inevitably subjective nature of meaning-construction, which is not

limited to participants but informs a researcher's choices, selections and unconscious assumptions on the studied phenomena (see for instance Hay, 2011). In the case of this research, a critical stance towards Western dominance in the aid sector has been prompted by personal political beliefs, as well as by years of education and specific teaching methods which stimulated critical thinking on common assumptions and narratives. At the same time, however, the economic and social privilege sustaining such education is rooted in a stable European background, which unavoidably impedes a full understanding of a post-conflict context, disregarding the amount of gathered information or of respondents' accurate descriptions. During the research process, such elements resulted in an ambiguous position, in which an emotional and political closeness to the categories commonly depicted as disadvantaged in the international scene was founded upon the socio-cultural commonality with those regarded as most powerful and resourceful. Such acknowledgement thus oriented the self-reflexivity with accompanied the inquiry: special attention was given to avoiding unconscious or unintentional othering practices, which would have risked perpetuating the essentializing narratives that this study was seeking to overcome. Rather, the researcher's values, beliefs and cultural background were redirected at establishing a form of empathy and recognizing similarity with all participants, refraining from judgment and actively fostering a sense of familiarity.

It has been noted that the research was conducted within the scope of an internship at PAX, whose purpose was exclusively that of collecting the necessary data and reporting on the results of the analysis. The research topic was chosen independently, and adjusted according to PAX suggestions (for instance, with regards to paying attention to the role of a donor as the MFA). There was no detected conflicting interest in the design and development of the inquiry: on the contrary, the findings are expected to guide PAX's own reflection process on the partnerships it establishes with other entities, and the internship agreement was specifically intended to facilitate access to the relevant information for education purposes. However, such position entailed an increasing closeness with the people working at PAX: over time, the greater familiarity with one among the three collection sites risked prompting the observer to become over-sympathetic, as if "going native" and being re-socialized into the studied environment (Spano, 2005, p. 595). Hence, a constant reflection was necessary during the analysis process to avoid observer bias or drift (McCall, 1984). Such reflection entailed questioning whether the interpretation of each theme was indeed confirmed by a consistent number of similar quotations or rather resulted from internalized biases. While the research timeline did not allow to engage with inter-observer reliability as suggested by Burghardt et al. (2012), a constant comparison was operate between the memos and thoughts sketched at the very beginning of the analysis process and the final understandings of the identified themes.

# Chapter IV Results and discussion

This chapter presents and discusses the results of the data analysis, thus providing an answer to each research sub-question. First, three complementary narratives around power and ownership have been identified in illustrating how localization is perceived among the involved entities. Second, numerous practices and behaviors have been noticed as capable of facilitating different forms of ownership, and have been grouped in three sites in which localization is exercised. Third, the contextual institutions shaping the translation of such localization have been recognized as hindering the emergence and exercise of any form of ownership.

For the purpose of illustrating the results, the following abbreviations have been used:

*Pn*: interviews and documents from PAX

*Ln*: interviews and documents from Lebanese NGOs

*Mn*: interviews and documents from the MFA

*Fn*: observations in the form of field notes

## 1. Three narratives around power and ownership

This section presents the answer to the question *how is localization understood?*. The data acquired suggest the interplay of three narratives around power and ownership, which depart from specific premises, offer various definitions of such concepts (which are not necessarily equalized, nor directed at the same entities), and have different relevant implications on how localization should be enacted. Importantly, these narratives are not mutually exclusive and should be rather conceived as complementary and functional to the interpretation of different phenomena: while there might be a slight prevalence of the first narrative in the data acquired from PAX and from the MFA, as well as a major emphasis on the second one in the data acquired from Lebanese NGOs, elements from both have been stressed by virtually all respondents. The third narrative in particular, providing the potential for a synthesis or reaction to the first two ones, is traceable in the conceptions of most respondents, disregarding of the organization in which they work.

### 1.1 Zero-sum power transfer: autonomy and responsibility

The first narrative emerged establishes a clear link between ownership, decision-making power and access to financial resources: driven by moral and normative considerations about decolonization and about the structural inequalities between the global North and the global South, it demands a reduction of the role of Western-based NGOs in favor of a power transfer towards South-based ones, which have to be given the possibility to manage the currently dominant set of responsibilities and procedures. At the same time, it claims the necessity of a pragmatic, step-by-step approach to such transfer of power, which entails a pre-determined framework of responsibilities and accountability skills and it is thus addressed through a tailored program of capacity strengthening.

### 1.1.1 Premises

Especially among data from PAX and from the MFA, the reflection on localization departs from an acknowledgement of present power and resource inequalities between the global North and the global South, which translate into an asymmetric relationship between donors (including both institutional donors and INGOs) and the partner organizations they work with in conflict and post-conflict settings. The founding observation is that, differently from Western-based organizations, the ones registered in Southern, unstable areas do not have the means to be self-reliant: this prompts a situation of unequal necessity, which places the former category in a condition of explicit (contractual) and implicit privilege. An analysis of co-occurrent codes displays indeed a clear association between money and hierarchy, suggesting that the availability of resources can determine inequalities among actors: there appears to be a general awareness that, despite all intentions to build an equitable partnership, the fact itself that projects are externally funded places the beneficiaries in a subjugate position, so that any of their inputs requires the approval and micro-management of their donors. As noted by P2, such dynamic is especially evident in fragile, conflict-affected settings, because the generic lack of alternative sources of income in a disrupted economy fosters a condition of donor dependency, strengthening the influence of external funders. This situation is especially exemplified by L1: in describing his experience with an INGO other than PAX, he noted how his necessity of financial resources made him feel pressured to abide to the prescription of his donor despite not deeming them context-sensitive, thus witnessing such structural power dynamic. Other than the explicit imbalance provided by the contractual power of managing financial resources, P4 mentions a disproportion in the budget amount acquired by the first receivers of funds in comparison with that channeled to additional entities, which deepens the inequality of organizations differently positioned in the aid chain.

Importantly, the acknowledgement of such structural inequality entails a set of moral and ethical considerations, on the basis of awareness and self-reflection. As made explicit in P12, the discourse on localization needs to depart from a conscious recognition and discussion on each actor's positionality, and on how structural asymmetries emerge in different dimensions of their partnership. This entails a strong ethical concern, anchored on principles of solidarity and human dignity (notable in M1), as well as on aversion towards the social injustice produced by imposition (especially expressed by P5). The moral and normative value of localization is strengthened by the discussions on decolonization: the report issued by Peace Direct (2020) has proven in this sense influential, making organizations aware of racist practices and mechanisms which reproduce neocolonial attitudes. Indeed, four respondents from PAX and two from Lebanese organizations described current practices of peacebuilding as colonial in their top-down approach. While debates might focus on specific aspects such as terminology and language, there appears to be acknowledgement that a shift in the power allocation is necessary to work on the basis of equity and solidarity. Such is specifically the view of the MFA, as explained by one officer in M1: the exogenous shock of the Covid pandemic, leaving locally registered partners to work alone in high-risk contexts, revealed the extent and human implications of existing inequalities, fostering momentum for the creation of more inclusive, decolonized practices. In fields such as peacebuilding, development and humanitarianism, the resulting narrative shift implies consciousness and reflection about how current systems are disempowering and coercing actors in (post)conflict areas, and how it is necessary to change such practices so that those actors are given more power in decision-

making. Localization, from being a method to achieve sustainable results, thus turns to be a moral imperative, demanding a systematic redistribution of power.

### 1.1.2 Definition of power and ownership

According to the premises of this first narrative, power is equated with control over financial resources, which entails the possibility of having the final approval over peacebuilding programs: notably, the donor or INGO managing the funds can contractually accept or reject both the design of a project and subsequent changes to be made during implementation. Such notion was made explicit by P2 when explaining the responsibilities of being a lead organization applying to a call for proposal: handling the grant implies deciding what is approved or not, especially because of the major accountability towards the back donor. In this sense, the increasing practice of European governments and institutions of demanding a local organization as project lead is the first step in countering the existing power imbalance: this would allow forms of association from the global South to be provided the set of power and responsibilities currently associated with mostly Western NGOs, thus giving them the possibility of exercising an authoritative voice in what happens. As exemplified by L1's experience mentioned above, in fact, the entity handling the funds can exercise such power to determine outcomes according to its preferences, with the back donor being the ultimate reference for what is acceptable and what is not. Additionally, as again underscored by P2, the power of having a sound, externally validated financial status is advantageous in terms of access to key stakeholders, other donors and international organizations, private and public entities, so as to facilitate access to additional flows of money and resources. Importantly, L5 notices how such large and continuously alimented money availability is exactly what could make localization possible or not, as Western-based actors do have the faculty to decide whether they want to yield their own power.

Hence, a resource-based conceptualization of power sees managing funds as the enabling condition to control peacebuilding outcomes, thus intuitively associating ownership with decision-making power. Indeed, the concept of ownership has been operationalized as local partners' level of influence over the program (P11), and the MFA presents it as the faculty of local civil society to establish activities (M1), thus addressing relationships of control (M3). Similarly, P2 and P5 claim ownership to only be fulfilled with local partners being in the lead and having a decisive voice over what happens in their area. P6 also associates ownership with local actors' decision-making power, while P7 calls for locally based organizations to be facilitated in acceding to funds in order to determine the scope and approach of peacebuilding projects. Therefore, the faculty of contractually influencing the form and details of interventions is supposed to enable South-based to own peace and reconciliation processes, increasing legitimacy while fulfilling a just decolonization of mainstream practices. Such ownership is determined by the privileged position of formally handling financial resources and being able to ensure their constant enlargement by close contact with prominent institutional donors: within the current structure of aid distribution, this form of localization entails that locally registered organizations exercise money-related power to have a form of control recognized by external mechanisms, so as to acquire the faculty to contractually approve or reject ideas. In this sense, ownership is also linked with autonomy, i. e. the dismantling of dependency structures in favor of independent decisions and less

entanglement with top-down micromanagement of resources, which notably requires a direct access to the main international donors (P7).

### 1.1.3 Implications

The first implication of this narrative is that in order to enact localization, locally registered organizations need to exercise the role currently occupied by INGOs: the idea is that of identified local actors in (post)conflict areas replacing Western entities in deciding the kind of intervention which is appropriate for their country. Notably, the conception of power as money-based is a strictly zero-sum one, which implies that if one category of actors needs to acquire more prominent control, another one must retrocede in its tasks. The position of lead party managing a peacebuilding program is again a valid example: talking about one EU-funded project which required a local NGO to lead, P2 notices how the role of PAX shifted in that case, with the local NGO being the one they had to report to and to be accountable to. Accordingly, in M1 and M3 it is recognized that the localization process requires a considerable reduction of the role of Western/Dutch NGOs in terms of their dimension and function: for instance, it could be providing external assistance instead of designing projects, and it could translate into the impossibility of directly applying to a call for proposals. Ideally, such reversal of roles would allow INGOs to be subordinated in relevance and autonomy to the decisions of locally registered organizations, which would in turn have an advantageous position in dealing with donors, designing projects, ensuring a constant flow of funds and hence emancipating themselves from a condition of financial dependency.

Perhaps paradoxically, the retraction of INGOs from their dominant state requires on their side a purposeful action: that of *giving, providing* and *facilitating* space for what is defined as local civil society. For instance, P5 talks about “giving ownership and responsibilities”, P6 of “putting [partners] at the steering wheel”, one officer in M1 of encouraging the development of plans by local organizations, while P1 states “we should definitely enable, support our partners in being better at doing more in their country”. Hence, the moral and ethical considerations tied to legitimacy and colonial imposition appear to function in this case as the motor of a conscious transfer of power controlled by those entities which feel as being currently at the forefront of peacebuilding programs. As they decide over the adequate strategy to operate such shift, it appears logical to adopt a pragmatic, step-by-step approach, which identifies various realms of localization and carefully plans how to intervene on each of them. As explained by P1, P3, and in P8, such strategy entails breaking down localization in several dimensions, being conscious about potential challenges and conflicts of interest, properly acknowledging what should be improved and which goals are logical to aim for. In this sense, pragmatism entails a progressive, controlled transferral of decision-making faculties to local civil society, according to the perceived abilities and potentials of each organization in pursuing each objective.

Such latter consideration is especially related to the second implication of this first narrative on localization: if autonomy must be given within the current aid system, not only Western organizations reduce their influence, but local ones crucially enhance their share of responsibility. Indeed, managing the financial flow between the back donor and the project recipients requires a specific set of organizational and management skills, a strong accountability pressure, and the ability to handle complex bureaucratic procedures. The technical competencies entailed by such demands are not necessarily available in

(post)conflict settings: for instance, L3 emphasized how financial and managerial expertise is lacking in the area where her organization works, and how her team is progressively learning how to acquire such knowledge in order to be able, in the long term, to handle funds more autonomously. This and similar observations points to a certain exclusivity in power transfer, as the shift, even just for bureaucratic reasons, can only be directed towards the organizations that do have the capacity to sustain financial responsibility. Hence, the inclusion of less organized forms of civil society remains a crucial concern in the shifting power discourse, as one of the main questions emerged in data from PAX and from the MFA addresses the possibility of further decentralization, and how to properly treat this process. While M1, M2 and M3 describe the engagement of informal groups as essential for successful localization, for instance, there emerges strong awareness of the related financial and political risks, whose management is then transferred to the responsibility of INGOs. Additionally, P1 and M1 raise the possibility of local organizations not even desiring that kind of responsibility, and P4 warns against the risk of uncontrolled, forced professionalization, which might cause activists to lose focus on their projects, become discouraged or fall into corruption. The practices of capacity-building are especially interesting in this context. The traditional teaching format and the accompanying terminology is acknowledged as colonial and morally problematic, resulting in imposition and coercion (P1, P3). Even if the more nuanced expression “capacity strengthening” is employed, when associated with a transfer of power in high-ranking decision-making its assumption still rests on the technical and bureaucratic tools necessary to manage a set of top-down requirements. In this case, however, a form of capacity building can be considered as a sort of empowerment for less technically skilled organizations, so that they acquire the tools necessary to handle more responsibility and, consequentially, be more autonomous in determining the projects implemented in their country. Such process could especially target the institutional and procedural features of an organization, in order for it to grow and have access to a wider set of opportunities. Rather than being concerned about forced professionalization, several interviewees from Lebanese NGOs have in this sense talked positively about learning new skills and being progressively able to manage more prominent roles.

## *1.2 Validation of knowledge – ownership by communities*

The second narrative on localization offers a differing vision on power and ownership, associating the former with contextual knowledge and the latter with a sense of belonging at the community level. Based on sustainability and bottom-up processes, it requires the validation of locally based expertise, which translates into a genuine effort to appeal to communities and to open the floor for ideas and assessments to every form of diversity both within and between them. Less preoccupied with the distribution of management tasks between specifically categorized entities, such vision calls for decentralization of inputs and wide consultations ensuring locally grounded accountability.

### *1.2.1 Premises*

While not implying the irrelevance of ethical considerations, this second narrative reiterates discourses on the sustainability and impact of peacebuilding programs. As expressed in the discussion at PAX registered in F9, the ultimate aim should be sustainable, long-term good governance structures. Importantly, however, sustainability acquires a very context-specific

meaning in conflict-affected and post-conflict settings: L6, sharing such concern with P6, notices how the unstable reality of Lebanon might quickly disrupt progresses towards reconciliation and human rights, fostering a sense of fatigue. Hence, careful attention should be accorded to the kind of impact which one intends to provoke, celebrating small achievements grounded on as far as possible stable premises. Crucially, there appears to be wide recognition that such premises need to coincide with a strong anchoring at the community and grassroots level: meaningful impact can only be obtainable insofar every action satisfies real, locally traced necessities, addressing the core issues and concerns in each faction of society. The unhelpful and counterproductive nature of imposition thus becomes apparent: L1 and L2, for example, expressed frustration when confronted with Western donors whose proposals or whose modifications to their proposals did not align with the culture and conditions on ground. As illustrated by L7, such attitude can only result in resistance and coercion, while long-term sustainability is better prompted by cooperation between entities, on the basis of the production of objectives and the formulation of problems by the communities themselves. Similarly, L5 notices that “you can’t just force people to fight for their rights”, thus describing the engagement of grassroots society as the necessary condition for progress. Therefore, sustainability appears incompatible with a top-down approach: this is further emphasized by L4 and L2 when claiming change to emerge bottom-up, underscoring that the exact meaning of peacebuilding is shaped by specifically contextual considerations. Hence, there emerges a strong correlation between sustainability and effectiveness, bottom-up approaches, context-sensitivity, and inputs from all levels of a conflict-prone society.

The second main premise of this narrative is that external interveners, be they institutional donors or INGOs, lack the set of knowledge and skills necessary to operationalize such a sensitive approach. Influenced by a different set of national and international trends, founded upon determined understandings of key concepts and values (e. g. government, citizenship, freedom), facing another set of daily challenges than their counterparts in fragile areas, they are simply not equipped to work in the latter places without a more locally grounded support. Such consideration is especially felt by P4, who claims that while PAX could not exist without its partners, the partners could still find ways to spread their messages in their communities without PAX. The general distance from the ground displayed by most donors has indeed emerged as a recurrent theme in the interviewees: in remembering her experience with a former Dutch colleague, L2 describes how long and difficult it was for her to grasp the Lebanese reality, to which the interviewee compares the facility with which less educated people raised in Lebanon understood complex political phenomena. Such acknowledgement is shared by P5, who recognizes that donors’ reliance on externally produced reports and analyses fosters a feeling of superiority and simultaneous detachment, which can only rely on ignorance as they are not actually part of the dynamics they are studying. Moreover, L1 deplores the way in which one INGO he used to work with insisted on rigid financial clauses in the contract without acknowledging the relevance of the Lebanese economic crisis. This shows the extent of outsiders’ lack of knowledge, which translates into a set of demands and requirements completely detached from reality and thus unable to ensure effectiveness or sustainability of work: linked to such tendency is the observation (e. g., by L3 and L4) that donors mostly care about numbers and indicators rather than human change and impact, thus missing out on the real goal of peacebuilding activities. In the same vein, L2 expressed



concern about donors' pre-determined notions of human rights and development, which are not necessarily compatible with local cultural and economic conditions.

### 1.2.2 Definition of power and ownership

Sustainable impact being the main objective identified by this second narrative on localization, power can be understood as the ability to make projects work by achieving locally relevant outcomes. Such form of power is then necessarily conditional upon knowledge, i. e. awareness of which are the main necessities to address and the proper ways to satisfy them. Virtually all respondents from Lebanese NGOs have stressed the importance of this form of knowledge to be adequately validated, so as to influence the allocation of funds towards the instruments and areas of intervention which can be better benefit the target population: it is here crucial to engage marginalized voices in the production and diffusion of a similar expertise, being able to understand their demands and concerns and to operate a context sensitive needs assessment. Such form of power is, for instance, the one stressed by L1: he claims that Lebanese NGOs do have the necessary experiences and education to work with their communities and know how to develop effective methods of work. This consideration is echoed by L2, who defines local groups as "practically experts by experience" and as deserving importance specifically because of their contextual knowledge. P7, reflecting on the role of local INGO staff, adds that they have the advantage of being aware of what can be considered correct and appropriate, and of how to maneuver the surrounding dynamics so as to ensure efficiency. Importantly, the MFA also recognizes the value of local knowledge, with one officer in M1 admitting the blind spots in terms of approaches and understandings which are associated with a strictly Eurocentric perspective. Hence, the expertise derived from grassroots groundedness appears an essential resource, which enables power in the form of creating an effective and long-lasting change.

In accordance with the assumption of bottom-up impact, ownership is in this case directed at the community level, and is associated with being actively part of the beneficiary population of peacebuilding: this entails the possibility of one's ideas being heard, understood and engaged with, so as to ensure the feeling of involvement in one's own transformative process. A code-cooccurrence analysis suggests indeed the association between a sense of ownership, designing projects according to the relevant established priorities, and the community/grassroot level of society. Additionally, L6 claims to feel a sense of ownership when public authorities from a foreign country base their speeches and actions on a report or analysis made in Lebanon by a Lebanese organization: a similar consideration highlights respect and recognition of the value of what local civil society is producing. Hence, ownership is also associated with representation at the international level, and with the perception that the international community is actively listening to local voices rather than pursuing its own agenda. L1 supports such claim, advocating for his ideas and perspective to be acknowledged and validated, as he presents himself as conscious of what needs to be done to help his own community. Such notion is linked to the importance of a grounded assessment of priorities, which suggests a conception of ownership beyond the NGO level and spread throughout the target community (P5, L4): the link to international fora surely represents a valuable and necessary resource for local voices to be heard, but only insofar as it serves the interests of the wider society. In this vein, L3 associates ownership with compatibility with the needs on the ground, and with the necessary flexibility to shift priorities according to what appears

more relevant at each moment. Bringing the argument even further, L5 explicitly states she feels a sense of ownership over her work due to her belonging to the project's target population: therefore, ownership is understood as the action of consciously supporting an impactful change for the society or subgroup of which one person is part.

### 1.2.3 Implications

Given that power and ownership are conditional upon knowledge and sense of belonging, it necessarily follows that outsiders, including both back donors of INGOs, can neither have power nor be owner of a peacebuilding process. By definition, in fact, they appear to lack the ability to understand the reality on the ground and elaborate the proper intervention method. In addition, no activity can possibly belong to them, simply because they are not personally experiencing the problems addressed and are not empirically touched by the resulting impact. Such notion is for instance reflected in P1's claim that partners should be "what it's all about", as they are best placed to assess risks and opportunities; it is then brought even further by P5 in stating that the relationship with partners should not be equal, since the latter "know better" and are better equipped to guide and advice internationals. Without diminishing the necessity of sustained funding (L1, L3), the main driver for participation in peacebuilding is then local civil society's engagement with their communities, their knowledge of context-specific methodologies and their understanding of what exactly a project's target population needs and desires. On the side of external interveners, then, it is necessary to operate a humble admission of ignorance: it is their duty to recognize such deficiency, and to engage in a learning process with their partners to acquire the expertise they need to work in the field. A similar vision is for instance echoed in P4's acknowledgement that most groups already enact projects serving the objectives pursued by PAX, but they are often less validated since they work more organically, without systematically labelling and measuring their action: hence, an outsider should pay attention to and recognize the relevance of more informal methodologies. From this perspective, PAX staff's frequent travels to Lebanon have been praised as an opportunity to have contact with the target population of their projects, to witness the dynamics on the ground and thus to – at least to a certain extent – shorten the distance between them and the Lebanese NGOs they work with (L3, L7). Such experience however, as particularly emphasized by L2, will necessarily be limited: it is then essential to embark in a continuous, long-term learning process, to understand for instance how communities work, or how to ensure that work is based on relevant needs (L7). This would imply, according to L5, obtaining meticulous, locally grounded analyses of the situation one wants to address before starting to work on it: instead of transferring autonomy, the focus is here on acknowledging the importance of the existing tools and expertise that civil society in fragile areas has already acquired. Importantly, this requires outsiders to listen to their partners' desires actively and carefully: this point has been raised in the majority of data acquired in each of the three collection sites, as such practice of understanding, valuing and accepting bottom-up instances is elevated as the necessary condition to establish priorities on the basis of grassroots demands. For instance, L3 deplores the tendency of some donors to not listen appropriately to locally based groups, especially when such groups are on a smaller, community scale.

By relocating the locus of change within a target society, this second also demands a further degree of decentralization, which cannot be achieved by simply replacing the actors at the

steering wheel: it is crucial to engage more actively with the community at large, in order to understand and respond to locally traced priorities. As phrased by L6, “maybe the international community has general things or rules to apply or to submit, but the local organizations can do a lot (...) You have to go more into the grassroot of the people, you have to be always between the community”. Instruments such as consultations and decentralized projects (which might allow smaller entities to benefit from part of the funds), as well as mechanisms of accountability towards the target population, are especially relevant in this context. P5 especially observes that ownership at the NGO level might not be enough, as a direct commitment is necessary towards the very target population of a peacebuilding program: the latter is placed at the forefront of priority assessments, so as to verify the applicability of the themes one intends to work on. Similarly, the majority of interviewees from Lebanese NGOs stress the value of receiving inputs and feedback from participants, or anyway conducting proper research before designing activities. This emphasis suggests that, given the connection between locally grounded contributions, sustainability and effectiveness, power and ownership are diffused in society. Importantly, such recognition calls for a greater openness towards less structured and informal forms of activism, in order to acquire inputs from the wider possible range of population. This point is strongly raised by P5, who argues in favor of a more equal distribution of funds within community-based organizations, who should have the necessary means and representation to advance their interests. In M2 and M3, the MFA also acknowledges that “loosely organized networks” might be “better suited for certain roles and strategies”, especially ones related to political and advocacy plans in situations of constrained civic space.

However, an instrumental focus on informal groups might appear capable of essentializing and limiting the meaning of openness and decentralization: a community-based ownership, in fact, rather demands the contribution of any kind of diversity, including geographical locations and social backgrounds. For instance, L1 stresses the need for leaders of marginalized communities to be more prominently engaged in peacebuilding activities, while L3 and L4 underscore the connection between major cities and remote, usually neglected areas, which enables confrontation and discussion. Importantly, engagement at the community level might also imply respect for disagreeing voices: as emphasized by L5, it is crucial to know how to appeal to constituencies, which entails making opposite factions aware that not only they are not forced to participate in the change process, but that they can feel safe to offer their inputs and contributions if they desire to. Hence, if the recognition of contextual knowledge forms the basis for sustainable peacebuilding, a fruitful enrichment of such expertise requires decentralization and diversity in the entities identified as partners: inclusivity would thus be enhanced by the allowance of a wider range of ideas, practices, methods and focus.

### *1.3 Shared ownership and mutualism*

The third narrative around ownership in peacebuilding appears as synthesis of the first two ones, while simultaneously building on them to imagine the possibility of equitable partnerships founded on mutualism and cooperative work. It departs from the acknowledgement that each entity desiring to be involved in a program might have an added value functional to reaching collectively desirable outcomes. The division of roles and responsibility within a partnership acquires then a specific relevance in determining the extent to which such common effort is subjugated to structural imbalances or is made

emancipatory by genuine engagement, shared understandings and mutual trust. Ownership can thus be shared as long as power is equally distributed and recognized, condition which is especially expressed in a participatory organization of the partnership itself.

### 1.3.1 Premises

First, this narrative assumes the possibility that different entities, disregarding their geographical base and their level of involvement in the society addressed, share a set of principles, values and objectives related to the change they want to see in the world. The recognition of mutual concerns provides the sound basis for a partnership between actors and organizations: L3 claims that she only works with donors whose objectives would align with hers, while L4 emphasizes the importance of a serious effort to achieve the established goal. Interestingly, most interviewees from PAX and Lebanese NGOs have praised the similarity of visions on peacebuilding and human rights, considering it not only a driver of horizontality in their relationship but also a foundation for the development of better achievements. In this vein, L5 and L7 argue that it is essential for groups sharing common visions to organize themselves, uniting their strengths to amplify their message in an organic and natural dynamic which brings together actors with enough similarities in their intentions and approaches to work fruitfully as a collective entity. In this sense, the rigid distinction between international and local actors appears useless in conceptualizing partnerships, as the ultimate role of achieving their objective is a single, collective one. L6 then describes a situation of compatibility, in which suggestions and feedback are based on genuine interest in the outcomes rather than on blind imposition, a perception also mentioned by P4. P5 underscores the value of proactively recognizing shared ideals and visions, and maintaining them as the main pillars of a partnership. Hence, the utility of cooperation between entities is not rejected, and does not aim to invalid the positionality of any possible contribution: if certain principles and understandings are acknowledged as mutual, collaboration needs to be encouraged, so as to join forces and achieving a more powerful impact. Effectiveness and sustainability are then again the main preoccupation, and in order to be gained they require a serious, long-term effort and commitment by each entity desiring them.

Given the praise of collective work, it is perhaps not surprising that this third narrative also rests on the assumption that any organization or group can bring an added value to the partnership, so as to establish a relationship based on complementary inputs and constructive feedback. That of added value is indeed a recurrent theme in the data, especially in that acquired from PAX and from the MFA: P1, for instance, traces such condition in the ties established with the Ministry, noticing common interests in certain areas and thus the possibility of being of added value to each other. Similarly, she identifies trust-building with any kind of partner as enabling the identification of such complementary set of strengths. In the case of INGOs financed by a back donor and working with other organizations in fragile and conflict-affected settings, their specific added value might be derived from the privileged position of easily accessing financial resources: as described by P2, and as unjust as such condition might be, they are best positioned to reach out to governments, larger networks, and global institutions, thus exercising a major international advocacy role which is further praised by P3 as the most efficient way for INGOs to influence political trends in targeted countries. Additionally, as stressed by L1 and L4, their money availability, when effectively allocated, can foster a sense of sustainability for associations which are constantly concerned

by their uncertain ability to survive: the external support can then allow them to focus on longer-term objectives, planning ahead to better develop their ideas. P3 and P4 advance such argument, by indicating as an added value strategic planning and advice resulting in long-term visions. On the side of locally registered and community-based entities, their added value appears to be the form of knowledge and entanglement with society which the second narrative describes as power: in this case, such resources stand in a complementary and horizontal position with financial ones, providing their necessary complement for effective peacebuilding. Importantly, their contributions feed into a dynamic of mutual learning and sharing expertise which is not limited to locally based organizations, but involves INGOs in that they can also learn new techniques, ideas and insights: from this perspective, P3, P4 and P5 emphasize how much knowledge they have acquired from their partners during their work at PAX. Therefore, the exclusionary forms of power indicated by other understandings of localization are here acknowledged as co-dependent and complementary, since they emerge as the basis for genuine mutual cooperation, growth and exchange.

### 1.3.2 Definitions of power and ownership

The centrality of cooperation shifts the locus of power to the relationship between entities, thus paying attention to the set or both formal and informal roles assumed in a partnership. Hence, power is not associated with a fixed amount of exclusive possess, but with a more subtle relational dimension which produces the relative value of each input. In this case, influence appears to overcome contractual asymmetry: P4 and P6, for instance, claim that they did not always feel the pressure of hierarchical requirements in their work, as they attributed a higher esteem to demands and concerns from their colleagues from Lebanese NGOs. Similarly, L7 and L1 describe the importance of a flat decision-making during meetings with PAX, in which ideas are co-created according to each participant's contribution. L6 also expresses this feeling with regards to project design, during which he states it is crucial to maintain the core of his input while being receptive to feedback and suggestions from his correspondents. Resembling statements advanced by L3, moreover, he emphasizes the importance of international resources in supporting his goals, practice which is then not necessarily equalized with imposition. This narrative does not completely ignore or undervalue structural inequalities: it is acknowledged that they can emerge even unintentionally, through invisible mechanisms of dominance in partnership (P8, P11, P12). However, there appears to be the possibility of working together in creating a more horizontal space for cooperation, which allows perception of equality *notwithstanding* underlying imbalances. This notion is exemplified for instance by the question of accountability: while virtually all respondents from PAX expressed concern about the unilateral nature of reporting, which privileges the position of the donors rather than that of the partner, most interviewees from Lebanese NGOs did not necessarily regard this as a negative feature, and displayed certainty that PAX is also accountable towards their organization. Therefore, the partnership's form seems to heavily shape power dynamics: power can then be understood as the agency to mold collaboration and the potential for one's inputs and recourses to be validated, thus actively contributing to both relational and peacebuilding outcomes.

Given the assumption of each entity's added value and the possibility of an equitable partnership, ownership is in this case conceptualized as shared. Such condition supposes that in a flat decision-making environment, in which every input is accorded the appropriate

relevance, ownership is diffused among all participants and is ultimately co-produced by meetings and discussions. As explained by P3, such vision is “about the process to agree on analyses and strategies”, which needs to be organized so as to avoid any entity’s prevalence over others. In a similar vein, P4 describes the centrality of the thinking process when designing a project, which needs to be a team activity in which eventual veto faculties are purposefully not exercised: in this way, there is openness to negotiation, compromise and mutually agreeable outcomes. P5 and L1 also emphasize the value of communication and trust, with L1 especially stressing that attention to thinking partnership together allows a project to be owned by both PAX and his organization. Thus, ownership is associated with a shared understandings and agreement over what a program is trying to achieve, as well as on the necessary steps to achieve it: confrontation and dialogue reinforce the feeling of collective teamwork, allowing active contribution and validating every suggestion, modification or feedback as the active contribution of a co-owner. Importantly, ownership is also exercised over the form of the relationship, in this sense almost coinciding with power in establishing a conscious positionality of actors towards each other: common agency in shaping roles and responsibilities is acknowledged (especially by P3 and L1) as highly relevant in producing shared entanglement with the program.

### 1.3.3 Implications

The discourse on added value and complementarity suggests an important implication of this third narrative on localization: rather than aiming for retraction and non-intervention, external donors and INGOs should better improve the way they work *with* entities in conflict-affected areas, so as to challenge structural inequalities through behaviors based on horizontality, solidarity and respect. As suggested by P5, a similar change should be accompanied by constant ethical self-reflection, and thus by an ongoing individual effort to not exercise the money-related, formal power imbalance. In this vein, P1 emphasizes the practice of several officers to engage partners in conversations on the theoretical and practical aspects of any project, even when not contractually required. As emerged from the definition of ownership, dialogue and communication are essential in the production of an equitable partnership: it is crucial to reflect together on the progress and the impact, as well as on the priorities and their relevance, monitoring indicators which have been collectively agreed on and thus reaching a common understanding of the decisions to be taken. L1 further suggests how every step needs to be collaborative and founded on trust, flexibility, and context-sensitive procedures: eventually, this process could also require revisiting bureaucratic frameworks to better facilitate an inclusive reception of inputs from unstable and fragile areas.

The methods of participation themselves acquire a specific functionality in fostering horizontality: P6 and L1 deplore the mainstream tendency to hold meetings according to Westernly derived standards of professionalism, thus implying a rigid sequence of moderated discussions, taking notes, writing reports. Such format cannot necessarily resonate with all participants, especially if they are used to work in more informal and relational settings: while inclusivity is claimed to be achieved given a high number of attendees, the conversation can then be in practice dominated by those few that are comfortable with that specific environment. With a similar perspective, the discussion noted in F9 prompted a reflection on rigid reporting formats, suggesting that it would be more adequate to normalize acceptance of more creative, open methods of narrating activities, thus avoiding burdening activists with

the requirement of strong writing and linearly logical capacities. In terms of easing participation, a long-term commitment to trust-building also appears valuable in this scenario: virtually all respondents have emphasized that through ongoing contact it could be possible to acquire knowledge about each other's experiences, intentions and values, overcoming a purely business-centered relationship and being honest about concerns, feedback, challenges and opportunities. Transparency and clarity are thus key concepts, as it is vital that contextual challenges on all sides are properly communicated and understood: this could imply, for instance, an external entity being sensitive about changes in local dynamics (L3), or a locally based organization being conscious of the presence of a back donor behind an INGO and of the related constraints (P5).

It is also relevant in this context to emphasize that, notwithstanding the focus on donors changing their ways of working in a more horizontal direction, this implication does not diminish the agency of actors and entities based in conflict or post-conflict areas. Rather a conceptualization of ownership founded on shaping partnership requires paying attention to how each entity exercises its power to mold its position according to its interests. For instance, P2 and P7 notice the practice of several South-based organizations to phrase proposals in way that might better please a donor, e. g. by avoiding strong political statements or by committing to trending thematic areas. On a different note, L2 and L1 emphasize the importance of being assertive in advancing their demands and complains towards donors, voicing instances of disrespect and insensitivity, requiring practices to change when not satisfied, and also ultimately ending the partnership if the situation is clearly unsustainable.

Directly linked to the recognition of agency and added value, a following implication is that in this narrative, as especially emphasized by L5, the distinction between external and internal actors might actually be blurred: as long as there is a common vision to base a project on, the geographical base of participating entities is irrelevant in comparison to the engagement and inputs they can contribute with. Indeed, the path towards horizontality and mutualism is reinforced by the expansion of networks and the creation of intercultural fora, which is not restricted to a formal partnership agreement: rather than distinguishing categories, the question is how to increase contact, identify similarities and build on mutual learning and fruitful influence. L3 and L6, for instance, praise the opportunity of fostering exchange between youth from various countries and regions, so as to facilitating mutual understanding and enrichment. L2, L3 and L4, moreover, agree on the positive impact which a direct contact with the Dutch MFA could have: not only it would allow a more direct awareness of mutual conditions, expectations and feedback, but it could provide a further channel for participants' voices to resonate, thus better informing funds' allocation. Importantly, L5 and L4 notice that collaboration should be based on a genuine interest and engagement with the population which is supposed to be helped, echoing principles of solidarity, respect and compassion. Active participation by all entities is thus encouraged, as a sincere willingness to make a change requires strong commitment more than distancing and retraction. Given that involvement appears conditional upon sharing and understanding, such commitment also implies acquiring intimate knowledge about the situation and the people which are supposed to benefit from any action: the issue of cooperating entities familiarizing with each other needs further expansion, demanding a more personal immersion in shared experiences and connections. The importance of travelling has been stressed in this context: L1, for instance, describes how the partnership between his organization and PAX benefited from PAX officers' frequent visits in Lebanon, as it gave them the opportunity to spend time together, witness

together national dynamics, and reach a common vision about their projects' target. P6 also suggests that donors, before engaging with a population or community, should commit to spending at least a limited period in that specific context, thus physically experiencing the reality on which they want to intervene and establishing a direct, genuine relation which could not be acquired from a distance. Importantly, a similar set of interlinkages is capable of reframing capacity-strengthening, which rather than a one-sided product of asymmetry becomes a mutual and transformative learning process, in which each entity is receptive to others' practices. This form of capacity building is organic and spontaneous (P3), it invites constant reflection and discussions (P4, P5), and results in an ongoing growth benefiting both the projects and the partnership. Given the importance of using such tools to shape collaboration collectively, it flows logically that the debate itself on localization cannot remain restricted to North-based circles of practitioners and policymakers: the main question, as suggested by P6, is to understand how people want to be owners, and what participation empirically entails. One officer in M1 effectively notices that the localization agenda is currently driven by Western-based organizations, and it should instead be enlarged to South-based entities to get more insights into their perspectives on power and ownership. Hence, making localization explicit is an essential component of clear and transparent communication, and should allow a common, horizontal understanding of the power dynamics in place at the moment, of how they should be changed, and of how it should be possible to reshape roles and responsibilities within a partnership.

## **2. Three sources of empirical ownership**

This section is concerned with the question *how is localization practiced?*. It presents three main areas in which specific behaviors and features are identified as factors allowing the exercise of different forms of power and ownership, in accordance with the conceptualizations outlined in the chapter above. In particular, the partnership established between organizations suggest the emergence of a relational co-ownership, through which structural asymmetries are alleviated by mutuality in attitudes and experiences. On the other hand, the different stages of a project can measure the extent to which it is possible to operate a shift in decision-making power, noting how at each stage the influence of involved actors is exercised variably. Finally, the characteristics of a project itself are detected to reveal how diverse inclusiveness might be enabled, thus indicating the possibility of enlarging localization at the community level.

### *2.1 Partnership's features*

The characteristics of the partnership between PAX and the Lebanese NGOs it works with suggest a set of practices facilitating the emergence of a certain form of ownership, notably compatible with the third narrative detected from the data. In fact, the strong personal bonds established between colleagues from different organizations highlight the presence of mutual trust, honesty and transparency, which foster the perception of a serene and flat environment. Such condition has also been facilitated by a long-term commitment to continue the partnership, and a selection process which favors a natural recognition of common grounds and aligning objectives. Additionally, frequent meetings and physical visits



appear to effectively facilitate communication, offering a stable platform for the co-production of ideas and the sharing of both opportunities and concerns.

### 2.1.1 Friendly relationship and personal knowledge

Virtually all respondents from PAX (program staff in particular) and from Lebanese NGOs have emphasized the value of personal bonds between them and their correspondents, which prompt their relationship to exceed the limits of professional contact by building a more intimate form of collaborative friendship. For example, P4 praises such condition as facilitating cooperation, and P5 argues that having a strong bond with her colleagues has helped her understanding the value of their activities and experiences. P6 also expresses satisfaction from the space he was provided by PAX to establish more personal connections, which have allowed to somehow break the structural power dynamic and eased work by increasing approachability and informality. The same practice has been indicated as extremely positive by L1, who deems it “very very sustainable” as well as rarely found with other donors, since it entailed “having fun, breaking the framework of business talk, cooking and eating together, this is not usual”. Such serene collaboration has been described by L2 and L5 as facilitating and accelerating the work, while L6 notices the kind of friendship between employees from PAX and his organization, which translates into a sincere interest in each other’s family and personal life. Observations of meetings between PAX and its partners (F3, F5 and F6 in particular) further registered how, despite the professional focus on the issues to be discussed, the conversation was evidently lightened by inside jokes, personal updates, or playful comments, which hinted to past shared experiences and suggested strong bonds, familiarity and acquaintance. Importantly, the development of friendship between one’s correspondents from a donor or partner organization is registered to foster knowledge about each other’s life, vision and position: not only, as highlighted by P5, this can prompt a sense of profound respect and admiration, thus adding to a sense of genuine interest and engagement, but it also practically expands opportunities for the elaboration of shared ownership even in front of formal constraints. P4, for example, narrates an episode in which a strict deadline did not allow time for long consultations when designing a project, but it was possible to quickly satisfy partner’s demands by anticipating their ideas and basing the proposal on their usual activities and approaches. L5 underscores that this kind of knowledge is useful to avoid misunderstandings, echoing L6 in noting how such condition offers certainty about how each person envisions working together, with which expectations and with which priorities. Interestingly, such type of connection has also facilitated PAX staff in better understanding contextual dynamics by getting insights into people’s background and the reality of daily life in the places they are from. This connection with the ground, especially when emerged from the physical visits in the localities where activities are implemented, contributed to shared living experiences, which according to L1 and L7 permitted a sound understanding of “where [his organization] stand[s]”. The willingness and interest in acquiring knowledge can also be traced in the space reserved to questions and insights during meetings, as registered in particular in F6 and F7: the tone and form of inquiries from PAX to its partners appears directed at a genuine commitment to understand each organization’s approaches, history and positionality. Importantly, and as confirmed by P4 and L7, several questions regarded the organization of the partnership itself, concerning for instance the preferred means of communication and frequency of contact or the procedures and frameworks deemed more comfortable to follow. Hence, a friendly and informal interest in acquiring

knowledge about a partner appears also functional to the development of a shared understanding of roles and methodologies of cooperation, thus contributing to a horizontal process of shaping the partnership together on the basis of mutual convenience and agreement.

### 2.1.2 Long-term commitment to trust and transparency

As displayed by a code-cooccurrence analysis, the development of personal relationships necessitates a long-term commitment to trust-building, which entails a long duration of the partnership and thus its constant renovation after a contract's expiration date. Indeed, the majority of respondents from Lebanese NGOs have emphasized that their cooperation with PAX, differently from what usually happens with other donors, has proceeded for a long period of time, eventually being an integral part of the history of their organization (L6). On the other hand, virtually all interviewees from PAX have displayed their determination in striving for a long-standing cooperation, maintaining contact with potential partners even outside the scope of a formal agreement. Notably, most organizations PAX works with in Lebanon have been involved in their activities since the very beginning of the establishment of the Lebanon program. Such commitment has then emerged as the necessary condition for a strong process of trust-building, mutual exchange and acquiring knowledge about each organization's ways of working. On the contrary, short-term contracts and projects do not permit a shared brainstorming and common understandings, thus hindering the recognition and validation of bottom-up demands: this situation has been for instance exemplified by L1 when describing his experience with another organization, when a rigid short-term program did not allow space for the elaboration of relevant ideas nor for a proper reception of his organization's inputs. Accordingly, it is also acknowledged that from a purely peacebuilding perspective change requires time, and therefore by definition short-term engagement is not compatible with actual benefits for the target population. Moreover, as underscored by P7, a long relationship enhances a process of mutual learning, improvement and building on past experiences, creating space to structurally reflect on and mutually strengthen the partnership and the designed activities. Such long engagement has strongly prompted a feeling of trust between PAX and its partners: L6, for instance, demonstrates a sound belief in the action and support endeavored by PAX and in their contribution to his organization's goals, and L1 states that the experiences and understanding he shares and developed with his correspondents at PAX have ensured him of their intentions, so as to positively regards their suggestions as an important and flexible external feedback rather than as an attempt at imposing detached assumptions. Similarly, P2, P4 and P5 express their profound trust in the people they work with and in their ability to assess the best practices and approaches: in this vein, they claimed to never question the validity of their partners' inputs, as their suggestions are known to be reasonable and founded on rational and impartial assessment. Hence, trust did foster a sense of genuine engagement and sincere support among Lebanese NGOs, while it alleviated concerns of potential corruption and mismanagement among PAX staff, in both ways contributing to horizontality and to the validation of each entity's ideas. Importantly, such condition further rests on a general attention to transparency and honesty in communication. Such tendency was for instance evident in the observations contained in F1, F3 and F6, with all attendees to a meeting extensively and comfortably elaborating on their concerns, complaints, and the challenges they were facing. P4 notices that while the frequency of communication is impacted by deadlines and reporting requirements, it is often discussed

and decided upon collaboratively, which is for instance appreciated by L1 and L6 when talking about the facility with which they can reach out to their correspondents. The possibility of constant contact is not only functional to monitoring updates and follow-ups to activities: L2 mentions the possibility to openly express personal problems as well as voicing complains and critiques, while L5 and L7 describe the clear communication they have with PAX as a fruitful platform to reflect on the projects and solve problems together.

### 2.1.3 Aligning vision and organic selection

In accordance with the elaboration of a common ground of mutual understandings, the question of aligning objectives and visions has been deemed by all interviewees from Lebanese NGOs and by most respondents from PAX as a crucial feature of their collaboration. The recognition of added value in cooperation, in facts, departs from the identification of a mutual interest towards a certain intended impact: P5, for instance, describes as essential the process of filtering and assessing topics together: is such step is collaborative, it allows the development of a common understanding of what a project is expected to achieve, thus avoiding disagreements or misinterpretations during subsequent stages. On a larger scale, P6 and L1 underscore their effort to discuss the assumptions underlying their collaboration, so as to reach a shared vision of what peacebuilding entails and of how it can be translated into practical actions. Importantly in this sense, most interviewees from Lebanese NGOs have affirmed that the conception of peacebuilding promoted by PAX does align with the orientation of their organization, which allows them to recognize the compatibility between their donor and the necessities of their community. Such conception includes, for instance, a strong focus on youth as an agent of change, a key component of human rights advocacy and research, the creation of space for dialogue and connections, the empowerment of marginalized voices and the facilitation of non-violent activism. L2, L6 and L7 specifically added that they further trace such compatibility in values and mindsets (e. g. objectiveness and impartiality), thus suggesting the importance of sharing high-ranking principles and working ethics which are beyond specific objectives and indicators. Perhaps counterintuitively, the establishment of a sound basis of defined values and visions appears to foster space for broadness and flexibility: as long as the larger intended impact is shared and agreed upon, in fact, there is room for centralizing a diversity of inputs and ideas in the contextual application of such mission. P2 is particularly explicit in describing such multiplicity of approaches, methodologies and specific topics on which different entities can work: every organization had its strengths and expertise, and is able to contribute to the same overall goal in a variety of ways. The appreciation of a similar diversity can avoid the risk of a one-size-fit-all approach, without forcing organizations to elaborate together on incompatible methods. The question of not forcing an undesirable partnership appears well relevant when discussing a partner's or donor's selection. For instance, L3, L1 and L7 expressed determination to avoid working with donors whose projects and ways of working do not align with theirs: while admitting that such principles might be hindered by the practical necessity of financial resources, they displayed a conscious practice of choosing trusted organizations and relevant calls for proposals so as to be able to meet the goals of their communities. Similarly, P3 and P4 claimed that the identification of blatantly incompatible methods or visions might constitute grounds for the exclusion or interruption of a partnership. Generally, the collaboration between PAX and the organizations it currently works with in Lebanon has developed organically, through informal interactions and personal networks which gradually

highlighted the opportunity to cooperate on activities which would fit both entities. A similar selection, as noted by P2 and P4, is usually based on long conversations, physical visits and a multitude of meetings, during which they noticed they “had a click” with a certain association and then decided to build on that, progressively enlarging the shared projects as they observed that the cooperation was fruitful. P6 better emphasizes the relational dimension of such process, which began from the suggestion of trusted people and progressed into acquiring personal knowledge of potential partners. L1 recalls how the decision to work with PAX was expressed only after the informal evolution of a friendly and trusting relationship, while L3 underscores how the encounter with PAX was rather unexpected, as a first meeting was suggested by a common acquaintance and revealed a high compatibility of ideas and ambitions. Hence, such organic practice of partnership development appears to confirm L7’s observation that, by a natural dynamic, similarly-minded entities tend towards each other in the realization of their common goals.

## *2.2 Stages of involvement*

While the features of a partnership can measure the relational dimension of power dynamics and ownership, the various stages of a project display a diverse set of opportunities for involvement. Accordingly, the influence of each actor might shift considerably from one phase to the other, suggesting each time the effective validation of contextual knowledge, a top-down allowance of control, or a more mutual process of co-decision. Indeed, most respondents have emphasized a multiplicity of stages which are not (and should not) dominated by unilateral decision-making: establishment of priorities, decision to apply to a call for proposal, design, implementation, post-implementation adjustments. However, the dynamics in place are not homogenous, with an overall dominance of Lebanese NGOs in the middle stages and an increased risk of imposition in the initial ones.

### *2.2.1 Brainstorming assumptions and establishing priorities*

The very initial stages of a program or project development seem to provide, especially from the perspective of PAX interviewees, the highest level of difficulty for partners to be included. First, both PAX and the Ministry work with a specific Theory of Change which relies of determinate theoretical assumptions on conflict dynamics. As explained by P1, involving the partners in the elaboration of such theory, however desirable, has proved to be practically impossible: on one side, the conceptuality and abstraction required made it a difficult topic to discuss, and on the other travel restrictions during the pandemic revealed the limitations of virtual interaction. P5 then observes that an overarching Theory of Change, especially when it is not conceived as a flexible instrument requiring ongoing adaptation, can result in imposition and can heavily influence the scope and themes of each project. It is then an individual decision that of endorsing the effort to consult the partners, or at least discuss the issue with them at a later stage, and eventually adjusting such theoretical assumptions according to their inputs. However, as emerged from L1’s experience, this does not impede officers to engage in a fruitful conversation with their colleagues from a partner NGO about the philosophy underlying the ideas they are developing, and how such ideas are expected to contribute to their objectives. This consideration links to the crucial process of brainstorming, assessing the quality of proposals and their contextual relevance. The establishment of priorities, strictly linked to the decision of applying to a call for proposals, proves in this

context extremely important. At this stage, it is acknowledged that local partners play a major role, as their analyses of national and grassroots dynamics inform the main themes that need to be addressed, as well as the groups and organizations that should be also involved in the partnership. For instance, in the discussions noted in F1 and F5, an emphasis was registered on the need for the attending Lebanese NGO to decide which area of the project they wanted to prioritize and the individuals they wanted to involve. Notably, in that case such form of involvement was top-driven, as it responded to a set of procedures established in M5 by the project's donor. Indeed, one officer in M1 expresses the Ministry's view that the elaboration of priorities and the development of plans by local organizations should be encouraged, with the back donor thus actively promoting the reallocation of decision-making power. P5, accordingly to P6's considerations of the role of South-based NGOs, also stresses the practice of constantly consulting with her partners and to encourage extensive research at the community level, so as to ensure that the available funds are allocated according to actually relevant priorities. In general and as mentioned above, it is recalled how constant communication and discussions have usually proved a valuable platform for brainstorming new ideas collectively, to express clear objectives and clarifying a mutually agreeable framework (P4, P6, L3). Describing a slightly different process, L7 outlines how the brainstorming phase is usually completed internally, and only afterwards the emerged ideas and plans are shared with PAX.

While these last instances might suggest an effective groundedness of chosen themes, the comparison of similar practices with the experience that Lebanese NGOs reported with other donors highlight that this is not necessarily the norm: for instance, L2 strongly expresses her dissatisfaction with the way in which the international community is intervening on her country, as they mostly select trending topic without adequate market research, thus fostering an offensive feeling of usefulness or actually worsening living conditions. Accordingly, L6 stresses his careful selection of the calls for proposals his organization decides to apply to in the first place, as they need to fit both the nature and mandate it endorses and the thematic priorities it deems important to focus on.

### 2.2.2 Designing and writing: the translation process

The technical process of designing a program and writing a proposal reveals itself a particularly delicate stage, as it implies not only translating the agreed upon vision into practical activities and a defined timeline, but it is also most evidently subject to a hierarchical dynamic dictated by the requirements of a back donor. Hence, the writing phase constitutes the space for translation between grassroots ideas and priorities and the donor language and structures, revealing the influence of money-related inequalities. For instance, P5 claims to conceive her role of INGO's employee as that of ensuring that the financial flow is sustained, by using "donor terminology" to translate projects in the standard format accepted by major organizations: without diminishing the importance of ensuring the ongoing consultation with partners on each specific detail, special attention is attributed to carefully wording proposals according to donors' preferences. In a similar vein, in F5 it is noted how one PAX officer offered a correspondent from a Lebanese NGO to rephrase the ideas emerged in the meeting they had. P4 further agrees that while it is common and desirable to have a collaborative thinking process, the partners she works with are perhaps less involved in the writing itself, even if they still retain the faculty to check and edit both the text and the underlying narrative. Hence, the demanded form of proposals appears to suggest the relevance of determinate

capacities functional to please donors and access funds. However, the influence of financing institutions might also be subtler, and exercised through strict deadlines which establish how much time is available to ensure a participatory design process. Comparing two different programs, P2 notices that in one of them they had a long preparation time, during which it was possible to convene several meetings with the involved partners and be receptive to their opinions; the second program, instead, had to be assembled in a limited period, so that despite the responsiveness to partners' inputs the process was perceived as prevalently top-down.

Notwithstanding such observation, interviewees from Lebanese NGOs have often underscored a form of collaborative and dialogic design. L1 describes how ideas are usually founded on his organization's specific area of expertise, and are then developed through several rounds of reflections in which the role of PAX is that of providing a valuable external feedback: importantly, such procedures appears to differ from that of other INGOs, as they foster the collaborative shaping of a vision rather than an interference in the core idea or a rigid "yes or no" framework of approval. A similar dynamic is presented by L2, who recalls that the program she is working on was originally co-designed by all parties, who sat together to discuss and draft the proposal. The prevalence of conversations as a designing instrument prompts a flexible dynamic of mutual argumentation, so that, as emphasized by P7, "sometimes they convince us, sometimes we convince them", which appears to anchor decisions to the quality of supporting theses rather than on the proposing entity. Considering again the comparison with other INGOs, however, the patterns seem to vary considerably according to the attitude of all parties involved. L1, for example, expresses frustration for when he felt forced by a donor organization to considerably reduce the scope of a project he designed: while he needed their funds to implement it, he was dissatisfied with the cuts they imposed and thus with the limited reach and impact it had. L6, on the other hand, describes a more positive experience with donors other than PAX, stating that there is little difference in the way projects are developed: in any case, once his organization decides to apply to a call for proposals whose defined outputs are deemed relevant and reasonable, they autonomously design a program and refuse to change it if the donor either does not accept it or proposes excessive modifications. The relevance of diverse financial conditions could appear here to be the underlying factor prompting varying behaviors: however, these examples might as well warn against a conceptual homogenization of practices and mechanisms, as there is a multiplicity of possible actions and reactions which can shape a project's design and development.

### 2.2.3 Implementation and flexibility

If the initial phases a project appear a major site for power and ownership dynamics, implementation still retains its own value as a platform for confrontation over new emergent inputs in a process of ongoing adaptation to contextual changes. P1, P2 and P3 state that partners have the most decision-making power when establishing how, when and with whom to implement activities: hence, such stage might compensate a less participatory, time constrained writing procedure and grant a large freedom of choice on what empirically happens. While there is constant communication with PAX correspondents, locally based NGOs are considered in the lead of every action to be taken after design: thus, making modifications represents a crucial opportunity for exercising agency and for validating the knowledge-based power of partner entities. For instance, P5 narrates an episode in which,

due to strategic considerations of opportunities for the project's functioning, the ongoing activities were relocated notwithstanding the bureaucratic effort of having to thoroughly report new risky actions to the back donor: the value of local understanding of urban dynamics was in fact deemed superior in terms of enhancing effectiveness and impact. Another dynamic suggesting the influence of bottom-up assessment has been further noticed in the meeting reported in F6, when a participant from a Lebanese NGO was uncertain about the usefulness of implementing a certain activity and stated he would discuss it with his team before proceeding any further. L2 also underscores how every time a significant change occurs in the surrounding context it is necessary to hold a meeting with PAX, in order to discuss how to adjust the project accordingly. Such discussion can then prove itself as an interesting space for the unfolding of the tension between contractual and knowledge-based power: the same interviewee registers an episode in which, when discussing how to overcome a contextual obstacle, the suggestions provided by PAX did not align at all with the reality of the target population. In that case, the conflict was resolved with the acknowledgement of L2's superiority in understanding her community. In other instances, instead, she accepted the refusal of her inputs and turned toward different options. Flexibility proves here to be an essential tool: as long as the proposal terms allow adaptability and are receptive to corrections, they can be adjusted on the basis of partners' inputs in such a way that they better fit the situation on the ground. Several respondents from Lebanese NGOs manifested a strong appreciation for PAX's flexibility, which allows them to better respond to the dynamic conditions faced by a target population, focusing each time on different themes or even pausing activities if contextual obstacles significantly hinder their applicability. P2, however, explains how such flexibility is usually conditioned by the back donor's preferences: while PAX contractually holds the power to approve or reject proposed modifications, the extent to which they are able to do so usually relays on which entity is financing the program, with degrees of adaptability varying greatly between different institutions. Such consideration shifts attention on the more hierarchical features of the implementation phase: as evident in P10, M4, F2 and F6, in fact, such stage is the locus of a set of top-down reporting obligations, time schedules and determined procedures which dictate not only technical tasks but also accountability mechanisms. Virtually all interviewees from PAX, echoed by similar considerations from L1, L2, and L3, agree that most often such requirements result in a stressful bureaucratic nightmare, which is not functional in that it might distract from the actual work on achieving impactful activities. Importantly, the linearity of the reporting process is deemed capable of hindering inclusion, demanding not only specific capacities but also a professional use of the English language. In this vein, and as noticed in L8 and L9, there are attempts at encouraging more creative ways of reporting, including pictures and videos.

### *2.3 Project's and proposal's features*

Considering the features of a project itself allows enlarging the investigation on power and ownership, coherently with the second narrative and its conceptualization of the latter at the community level. In this sense, the extent to which designed and implemented activities are rooted within their target population is significant in determining the relevance of grassroots inputs. Hence, an extensive reach aims to engage a highly representative group of participants with their varying political and social background, while enlarging the geographical coverage from centers to peripheries. Importantly, the practice of locally grounded research, community consultations and participatory needs assessment prove fundamental in ensuring

contextual relevance and inclusivity. However, the need is felt to further diversify the resulting methodologies and approaches, with a better coordination of activities and with broader established goals which could appeal to larger factions of the population.

### 2.3.1 Extensive reach: participants' diversity

Most descriptions of peacebuilding provided by the interviewees indicated the importance of engaging in dialogues and facilitating networks between different sections of the population, so as to processing conflict together and enhancing social cohesion. The question of representativeness is then extremely relevant, this time in terms of participants more than of organizations handling a program. For instance, L3 praised the geographical and societal diversity of the target group attending the project her organization is implementing with PAX, especially because of the reach it has in peripheral, usually neglected areas: such feature is claimed to have created fora for discussion and confrontation, in a fruitful exchange of ideas and perspectives which should be constantly enlarging. In this vein, interviewees deem relevant to channel funds towards the most marginalized regions, in order to expand networks and linkages and extend the influence of peacebuilding benefits. Indeed, P6 describes how, when entering Lebanon for the first time, his effort was directed at mobilizing people from various towns in peripheral areas of the country. PAX's main strategy, as presented in P9 and in accordance with the aims established in M2, entails connecting young activists from multiple parts of Lebanon, with an evident intention to reach remote regions and spread activities throughout the territory. The attention to geographical diversity is also promoted by other Lebanese NGOs that PAX works with, and that in describing their work have remarked how they try to implement projects in several districts, establishing connections between different areas. For instance, L4 and L7 reiterate the linkage between cities and peripheries by stating how the program they work on invites participants from various locations to collaborate in achieving the same goals. A similar effort has been registered in F6, in which an emphasis is evident on crossing divides between isolated neighborhoods.

Directly linked with the range of geographical locations, the diversity of participants' social background also appears to be a recurring preoccupation, especially among interviewees from Lebanese NGOs. For instance, L1 states how his organization offers a set of various activities for individuals of different genders and ages, thus enhancing the impact and change he desires to foster. In the same vein, L3 stresses how attendees to her programs "come from different traditions, nationalities, and from conflicting areas as well", so as to embrace diversity in promoting inclusiveness. Similar goals have been noted in F8, with a specific focus on establishing connection between participants of diverse ethnic communities, which is accounted for in detail in L8 and is reinforced in P10 as the basis of the collaboration between PAX and its partners. From an additional perspective, P7 appreciates how PAX's effort addresses a multiplicity of stakeholders from various strata of society, accounting for the individual, the collective and the national level: in this sense, diversity and reach might also be conceptualized as a reflection of the stratification of conflict, and of the importance to adopt a comprehensive approach which does not ignore the implications of each action on multiple societal layers.

### 2.3.2 Research and participatory assessments



However important a wide project's reach appears to be, the emergence of ownership at the community level needs participants' role not to be limited to that of mere recipients: rather, the relevant practices in this case are those capable of actively engaging the target population by being receptive to their inputs and feedback. L3, for instance, explained how her organization enacts a brainstorming and needs assessment process with the attendees themselves: before a project design and in parallel with the collaboration with PAX on the same topic, they are receptive to inputs coming from social media platforms and in-person consultation with the target community. After a program has ended, moreover, they create a discussion platform with the participants to receive opinions and constructive criticism, while further listening to ideas about what to work on in the next projects. Such effort is additionally reported in L8, which underscores the attention accorded to participants' inputs throughout a program and presents an ongoing significant engagement both with them and between them and the larger population they belong to. Of particular interest is also the approach described by P5, which entails encouraging extensive research among a target population before and after an activity's design and implementation: in this way, it is possible on the one hand to gain evidence of a topic's or methodology's contextual value, and on the other to foster a sense of accountability towards the community itself. As supporting evidence, F3 registers how the idea for one activity was proposed by an individual benefiting from the projects of one of PAX's partners, while one officer of a Lebanese NGO in F5 describes a participatory research and assessment process which entails a close, informal encounter with people and strong receptiveness to their demands and recommendations. L5 further stresses the way in which thorough research prior to defining a program's details includes interviews and roundtables, so as to gain enough knowledge and contributions about what is needed. Interestingly, she emphasizes the importance of the relationship established with both participants and non-participants: with solidarity and respect as fundamental pillars, she seeks to be emotionally present in people's concerns and experiences, seeking to actively appeal to potential participants and to be trusted by disagreeing voices, as she avoids alienating, coercing or deploring them for their opinions. Thus, from a relational perspective, the interaction with the community appears also vital and is deemed to have a transformative power in how a peacebuilding project is perceived and in the extent of its contextual relevance. Discussing about ownership then needs to take such interaction into consideration, as the relationship created with the grassroots level by nationally registered NGOs is also valuable in shaping eventual outcomes. The establishment of a positive connection with participants has also been noticed, for instance, by P6, P5 and L3, who praise the possibility of physical presence and exchanges with the target community, thus enlarging the reach of the process of mutual learning and sharing experiences.

### 2.3.3 Broadness and openness in ideas and approaches

A broadly defined proposal has further been noticed as an essential tool in ensuring that participation can take place and that a range of diverse voices can be heard within a program. Indeed, as stressed by P2, various groups within the same country might face different struggles and have different priorities, even if they might all be categorized under the same umbrella objective: an inclusive and grounded method which seeks to respond to contextual necessities then demands that all such instances are accounted for, and that space is granted to every input and approach. Several respondents highlighted the need to expand on the focus, priority themes and topics, in order to reach a wider population target and allow more

groups to materialize their ideas. An interesting strategy addressing such objective is presented by P5 and recognized in F6, and implies a locally registered NGO decentralizing its space to the projects of other activists or associations: such practice thus ensures a more even distribution of financial resources and is receptive to innovative contributions. Additionally, P4 claims to have established very vague objectives for a program, so that it is easier for the activities of various locally registered organizations to fit into those areas disregarding of specific details, plans and methodologies. With such approach, it is possible to appreciate the different nature of the organizations that PAX works with in Lebanon, which while founded on similar values are diverse in terms of dimension, scope and preferred type of activity. Importantly, P6 describes his work as that of “creating space for innovative approaches to peacebuilding, in different shapes”, which again suggests a crucial openness to innovative experimentation, and thus a form of broad-mindedness towards usually neglected ideas. However, the back donor’s influence is again of particular relevance in this case: it has been frequently underscored, in fact, that calls for proposals usually present strict and predefined themes, which do not allow enough openness to diverse approaches and might prevent several organizations from participating. Showing a perhaps even more negative implication, P7 describes how a large number of donors usually directs funds towards the same recurrent topics: this tendency prompts organizations to adapt their focus and activities according to such themes, thus de facto muting different ideas while also sustaining the strive for capacity building, as groups feel forced to work in fields which are not necessarily within their area of expertise. Additionally, according to L2, the homogenizing tendency of donor’s approaches risks ignoring and permanently alienating a section of the population, excluding them from even just the mere reception of peacebuilding benefits. Hence, as also emphasized by P5, the way in which a call for proposals (and, accordingly, the proposal itself) is designed can limit significantly the topics accepted, hindering both the inclusion of innovative suggestion and the contextual relevance of chosen themes, limiting programs’ reach and impact.

### **3. Contextual obstacles to decentralized ownership**

This section addresses the question *how do contextual elements influence localization?*. Crucially, the factors which are deemed by the data as capable of impeding the exercise of power and ownership can be grouped in the contextual characteristics of both a conflict-affected or post-conflict area as Lebanon, and a Westernly anchored, democratic one as the Netherlands. Such features might be considered as explanatory elements, since they show how different pressing issues enhance the relevance of different narratives around localization: for instance, the conditions of a fragile context render futile the emphasis on capacity and purposeful transferal of power which is demanded by Dutch political institutions, while the latter foster a perception of detachment and incompatibility which discourages trusting relationships. However, they might also have a transformative potential: as they display the discordance of current practices and discourses with the realities of contextual situations, it could be suggested to reorient localization efforts to challenge and deconstruct the influence of prevailing structures and institutions.

#### **3.1 (Post)conflict context**

Given that an unstable context reacts differently to both exogenous shocks and external policies, it inevitably shapes the opportunities and understanding of local actors in regard to internationally derived discourses. Hence, adaptability to changing dynamics becomes for officers in Lebanese NGOs a crucial instrument of ownership and agency, while the focus on small achievable steps, as well as the importance of youth as an agent of change, are integral parts of the peacebuilding idea. At the same time, the limited availability of financial expertise and high-level education, coupled with administrative obstacles to formal registrations of organizations, hinders the viability of a power-responsibility understanding of ownership and calls for a more priority-based and community-based narrative. Indeed, as stressed by P6, L3 and L5, an assessment of the Lebanese political context revealed a highly divisive environment with a lack of space for young people to demand change and be active citizens, thus actually enhancing the relevance of a broad understanding of participation and the strive for strong engagement with the grassroots society especially in neglected regions, in order to facilitate the blossoming of assertive, collaborative networks.

### 3.1.1 Limited access to peacebuilding efforts

Importantly, the Lebanese fragile context appears to cause individuals and communities to focus on immediate problems and short-term gains, which increases the cost of the time and effort to follow a long, complex bureaucratic procedure both before, during and after a project. Hence, several interviewees from PAX have noted that their assistance might compensate the potentially limited horizon of insider groups: such objective surely entails providing financial sustainability (which is also highly valued by L1 and L6), but it could be better understood as sharing and alleviating the burden of time-consuming bureaucracy and difficult reporting formats, thus allowing locally grounded organizations to concentrate more prominently on the relevance and human impact of their activities. Indeed, as highlighted by P2 and in F2, the fact that in some countries an already well-developed civil society might have to address complex national regulations (for instance, because of politics adverse to an open civic space) can make external requirements redundant, placing an additional and unnecessary burden. However, the prominence of immediate practical struggles might impede internationally acceptable activism to emerge in the first place. First, it is recognized that even when a call for proposal demands participation its format and requirements are often hostile to actual inclusivity. As explained by L3, such calls usually demand a long set of criteria and areas of expertise which are hardly encountered in an unstable, (post)conflict environment: the economic crisis in Lebanon, for example, makes it almost impossible for an organization to open a bank account, thus precluding access to most donors. Crucially, such requests are rarely accompanied by specific explanations of what is expected and how to acquire the demanded capacities, thus further hindering South-based organizations' possibility of applying to funds autonomously. M1 also expresses such concern, recognizing that criteria such as bank accounts and country offices are modelled on a Dutch/European context, rather than being sensitive to the reality of a fragile one. L2 further stresses that high-level education and a long path of internships or volunteering experiences (i. e. the kind of curriculum mostly valued in the global North) are rendered unviable by the critical financial condition of the majority of the population, which reduces the time and resources available for them to even attend promoted activities. Crucially, the issue of limited education raises questions about the dominance of the English language within partnerships: as observed in P8 and as emerged in the conversations in F6, F1 and F9, the language choice is already an

exclusionary device. The notion of unequal access to required resources has been especially evident in the consequences of the Covid crisis, which were necessarily different in Lebanon than, for instance, in the Netherlands: it has been highlighted that Lebanese civil society had generally more pressing matters to address, with a resulting shift in the ability and interest of individual activists in contributing actively to more long-term oriented peacebuilding projects. Moreover, in addition to fostering a generic feeling of doubt and detachment, the increased use of online platforms during the pandemic revealed the depth of internet inequalities, making it more difficult for people working from Lebanon to be present and speak during meetings.

### 3.1.2 Instability and risk

In general, then, the main top-down frameworks and terms of projects appear incompatible with the idea of diffuse ownership and emancipatory peacebuilding: a strict timeframe limits the time for wide consultations, and the need to report concrete results enhances the pressure to achieve important outcomes notwithstanding the difficult, rapidly changing dynamics on the ground. P3 and L3 underscore in this vein that most donors' rigid timelines and short-term programs cannot account for unexpected shocks or quick evolutions of internal phenomena, so that the difficulty in accessing extensions or budget modifications inevitably affects a project's effectiveness: as claimed by L3 and L4, it is rather appropriate to continuously shift and innovate thematic priorities, so as to account for the notion that a project relevant in one specific period of time might lose importance in the subsequent months. Importantly, as stated by P6, the lack of sensitivity to a constantly changing reality might cause external actors to ignore the unpredictable consequences of each action, and to assess eventual success or failure without appreciating possible repercussions in other fields or areas. L4 and L1 further add that a partnership with an inflexible donor is capable of provoking a considerable financial loss, since the exchange rate volatility of the Lebanese currency is often not adequately considered in externally conceived budget and expenditures frameworks.

Additionally, conflict affected areas necessarily cause groups to be to a certain extent entangled in conflict dynamics, with a twofold implication. On one side, as noticed by M1 and P4, it is difficult to assess whether a partner is engaged in politicized or corrupt practices, which fosters extreme prudence when trying to extend partnerships to unknown organizations. In the words of P5, such notion results in a "constant dilemma", as it implies the struggle of risking a potential partner to actually harm the supposed beneficiaries of a peacebuilding intervention. On the other, P1 expresses uncertainty about the possibility of various groups collaborating to deliberate on their country's peacebuilding program: due to the highly divisive environment, they might not trust each other nor perceive a compatibility of their interests, or even fear a detriment of their financial position. Not only does such observation recall the value of not forcing connection and allowing them to emerge organically, but it also casts a shadow on the viability of a representative participatory approach: indeed, it appears that in certain contexts the inclusion of one organization might provoke the exclusion of another, thus hindering the applicability of diversity and extensive reach. Interestingly, a sense of mistrust towards other geographically close groups is also traceable in conversations with interviewees from Lebanese NGOs, such as L1 and L2: while the former expresses concern that certain actors might take advantage of loose structures in partnerships, the latter notices that external donors are beneficial in that they have no

problematic ties with internal political instances. A similar attitude might confirm the value of accounting for the relational dimension of power dynamics, enlarging their appreciation from donors-grantee partnerships to the type of correlation between entities sharing more similar contextual conditions.

### *3.2 Dutch/European context*

A reflection on the positionality of an INGO, and even more that of a major institutional donor, shows that the localization discourse and practice is also shaped by the political dynamics of the region where such organizations are based. On one side, one might observe the general centrality of the democratization and peace discourse, as well as the emphasis on human rights and civic space, which is a recurring feature of mainstream peacebuilding and does certainly emerge from the definitions provided in the data. However, what is more interesting is the influence of larger political objectives in shaping the relationship established with fragile and conflict-affected areas, with sometimes non-aligning interests and visions undermining trust-building and informing selectivity. At the same time, the unviability of a mutual connection is fostered by internal institutional dynamics, which support the centrality of financial concerns and inform a risk aversion behavior: hence, responsibility and accountability appear the main imperatives, thus sustaining the emergence of a money-based conception of localization.

#### *3.2.1 National politics and risk aversion*

In projects funded by the Dutch MFA, institutional obstacles to decentralized ownership are rooted in the fact that the budget for peacebuilding initiatives derives from taxation: as stated in M1, such financial responsibility entails the necessity of balance between the desire to innovate and the notion that risky policies are constantly under strict scrutiny. Indeed, the MFA is accountable towards the Parliament in ensuring that tax money is properly managed, which as declared in M3 might subject funds allocation to internal political preferences, so that the national agenda dictates the degree and intensity of cooperation with other entities. Additionally, such condition constitutes the root of carefully planned reporting requirements and prudence in allowing flexibility. In this vein, the Ministry is trying to develop new instruments to address financial risk, usually including third parties and an informed assessment of challenges and opportunities: however, the capacities required to collect enough data and conduct an accurate analysis also informs the selection of parties and instruments involved, arguably retaining a Eurocentric approach to the evaluation of the dynamics in unstable, conflict-affected areas. In fact, as further suggested by one officer in M1, there is a generic reticence in engaging directly with less structured, less established, community-based informal groups, notwithstanding the recognized importance of their involvement. Hence the call in M3 for INGOs to operationalize such demand, thus decentralizing to closer and more trusted organizations the task of experimenting new paths to cooperation in peacebuilding and development. From the perspective of PAX officers, however, such practice might result in an INGO's difficult position of being required to take risks with an increased accountability pressure, which enhances the possibility of their loss of credibility towards the Ministry and thus of reduced access to future funds. The consequence is arguably the tension identified by P6 between the strive for grounded priorities and methodologies and the pursuit of PAX's interests, the latter being the maintenance of their

partnership with the Ministry through measurable results, reporting, respected time schedules. In fact, as stated by P2, if proposals are not receptive to the elements and features which are more sensitive for the Dutch context, they are more likely to be rejected, thus hindering the sustainability of the financial flow. From this perspective, then, internal Dutch political dynamics and institutions are at least one source of top-down requirements, which as noted by P1 are then necessarily oriented by Western-based mindsets and methodologies: this fosters a sense of obligation and frustration, as they strongly limit the space for openness and change while not contributing to the impact of enacted programs. Such consideration, enhanced by the acknowledgement that the MFA is PAX's largest donor, supports P3' claim for greater donors' diversification, which would allow more flexibility in projects' terms. Simultaneously, the same officer also argues that similar structural obstacles could better reorient an INGO's activity toward advocating for systemic change in the political institutions to which they are geographically and culturally closer, rather than engaging in complex micromanagement of projects or in the establishment of offices in distant areas with the risk of reproducing existing inequalities.

### 3.2.2 Non-aligning interests

Coherently with the strong political character of peace processes, the vulnerability of peacebuilding strategies to governmental orientations is not limited to bureaucratic and financial requirements of indicators and accountability, but strongly influences the thematic choices proposed by institutional donors. Significantly, there appears to be a convergence in certain definitions of peacebuilding itself that have been described by interviewees from both PAX and Lebanese NGOs: recurring categories are the promotion of civic space, the emphasis on human rights and freedom, social cohesion and reconciliation, education and awareness, active citizenship, and the promotion of democracy. While this is no guarantee of how such values are declined in their methodological and contextual application, their framing is significantly compatible with a liberal paradigm of restructuring societal practices according to the liberal state model: the fact itself that such objectives are recurrent in programs funded by the Dutch government suggests the resilience in the priorities of the Western (or at least European) public sphere of the established peacebuilding compass. Crucially, however, prevailing political attitude and the concern for foreign policy directives might be a limiting factor for the areas that a project is able to address: as observed by P2 and P3, it is necessary to use alternative funding sources when addressing more sensitive political issues, which might create tensions within the Dutch and European political sphere. Even when the Ministry is involved as a partner in a sensitive program, as the one described by P6, there is a general uncertainty regarding what could be expected by a governmental institution, and to what extent it could be engaged in concrete support to actions capable of triggering political critiques. This consideration brings attention to a further implication of the European context directing funds, i. e. the relevance of determinate foreign policy objectives serving specific Eurocentric interests. This is evident, for instance, in M4's concern with the liability towards international law, as well as in M3's recalling that the mentioned program is functional to the achievement of the SDGs (thus, the international obligations to which the Dutch government is committed). Crucially, most interviewees have acknowledged that the main motivation behind EU-driven peacebuilding is related to security concerns, thus undermining the call for a more genuine and unbiased interest in the concrete impact on the ground. Such notion questions the extent to which it is possible to observe an absolute compatibility of goals

between governmental donors, INGOs, and target communities: for instance, three interviewees from PAX have explicitly claimed that while they share visions and objectives with their partners, this does not necessarily apply to the MFA, which is reported to have foreign policy priorities which do not necessarily align with those of local civil society. L1 reports in this vein the business-oriented character of the current aid system, which is directed more at profiting and achieving unilateral gains than at actually benefiting the concerned populations, and L3 further expresses dissatisfaction at how the peace discussion is usually shifted by international interests and discourses. Hence, the acknowledgement of donors' political agenda appears to cement mistrust towards the intentions underlying their financial support, actually enlarging the perceived distance between them and the civil society they might aim to sustain.

#### **4. Reflections and remarks**

The overall picture emerging from this study reveals the complexity of producing a univocal definition of ownership: the questions of who is supposed to own and what is supposed to be owned are rather composed by the aggregation of multiple factors and insights, which suggests the interplay between various considerations constructing localization. It is thus required to appreciate each aspect both in its singularity and in its relationship with other elements, so as to understand where reform needs to be directed. Figure 3 summarizes and simplifies the research findings. This section will then proceed to discuss each of the detected dimensions.

##### *1. Narrative dimension*

The discourses around localization which have emerged from the data display the applicability of different theoretical conceptualizations of ownership, which can be reframed according to the way in which they are capable of challenging existing structures and institutions of peacebuilding practice. Importantly, such analysis calls for attention to how the idea of local ownership is translated and reformulated by the actors involved in it, with the influence of international discourses (as liberal peace and decolonization) and contextual experiences contributing to different interpretations and suggested strategies.

The first narrative appears in this sense to be the most conservative one, in that it rests on notions of autonomy and responsibility which do not problematize the current aid system: rather it emphasizes the faculty of entities retaining major financial resources to control and coordinate localization, intended as transferring an appropriate amount of power to specifically identified actors. In this, such discourse echoes a liberal, capacity-oriented ownership, which retains a distinctively top-down character marked by the purposeful action of Western actors towards locally recognized ones. More specifically, such action is concerned with the social-material dimension identified by Lemay-Hébert & Kappler (2016), with an attempt at effectively socializing new voices into aid mechanisms and institutions. The function of capacity-building is exemplary in this context: rather than positing a complete absence of capacities in non-Western areas, such practice appears to acknowledge the incompatibility between those forms of expertise and the ones demanded by major donors.

Hence, the conceived solution is that of facilitating a learning process by which the latter can be acquired, thus educating actors to the terminology, functioning and technicalities of the current peacebuilding architecture. Crucially, and perhaps unintentionally, a similar discourse could resemble the top-down liberal social contract described by Richmond (2012), with an external imposition of the meaning of ownership. The preoccupation with inequalities is also of particular interest: on the one side, it seem to reflect critical scholars' identification of a power struggle through which an hegemonizing faction can co-opt and define the terms for the validation of new inputs; on the other, it risks deriving into the rhetorical exercise which Chesterman (2007), among others, claims to be functional to legitimize existing structures in front of anti-colonial critiques. Interestingly, the role of back donors in perpetuating asymmetry is not problematized, which results in an overall acceptance of the aid chain and of its functioning.

The second narrative can be understood as a reaction and counterargument to the first one, as it neutralizes the relevance of outsiders and reclaims the agency and power of insiders. From a critical perspective, such contribution echoes the notion of resistance against externally imposed ideas of peace and development, as it emphasizes the possibility of constructing peace democratically through a grounded assessment of priorities and understandings (see for instance Roberts, 2011). However, it does not completely negate the contribution of alien donors, since a form of cooperation might be fruitful insofar as they base their action on an admission of ignorance, engage in a long learning process and rest on the guidance of the rightful peace-owners to direct financial resources where most necessary. The latter instance associates such discourse with a more social-normative dimension of ownership, (Lemay-Hébert & Kappler, 2016), focusing on the content and values underpinning peacebuilding. However, the internalization of such meanings is transferred in a direction which is opposite to that described by the first narrative, as the process is intrinsically bottom-up. Importantly, this narrative provides a strong answer to the question *who is the local?*, which still remains a complex issue in the peacebuilding literature and policy. Indeed, by identifying ownership with a sense of belonging and representation, it demands no selectivity and seeks the engagement and entitlement of each unit feeling affected by the issues which a peacebuilding action might address. Representativeness and diversity are thus key factors in the conceptualization of ownership, since the latter appears to be by definition inclusive towards a community in its whole. A similar mindset might open space for the agonism described by Peterson (2013), which can be facilitated by the diffusion of peace discussions and the multiplicity of engaged perspectives, and for de Coning's adaptive peacebuilding (2018), with its focus on a feedback-based endogenous process. However, attention must still be paid to the implications of inclusivity: while the terms "grassroot" and "community" have been mentioned frequently in the collected data, they might appear rather vague. It has been suggested, indeed, that grassroot activism is rather complex and varies greatly in its agenda and tactics (Schmid, 2021; Van Leeuwen et al., 2020), and that self-organized groups can represent a platform for contestation and interest-based struggles rather than unquestioned cohesion (Nganje, 2021). Hence, the achievement of high representativeness, especially in a (post)conflict, deeply divided environment, requires methods and infrastructures capable of dealing with the intricacy of community-level power structures and political discussions, which an attempt to validate diffused ownership should not overlook or simplify. It further follows that claims of representative knowledge should be



properly contextualized in the constituency of reference, and their larger applicability to a supposed community or grassroots society could be treated carefully.

The third narrative significantly shifts the attention on the partnership itself, making a strong case for a relational approach to localization: in fact, it reclaims how outcomes are shaped less by the singular features of the entities involved and more by the relationship which they establish with each other. Notions of co-dependency and mutualism (for instance, as described by Hunt, 2017) are interesting concepts in this case: an idea of entangled complementarity can be useful to observe how organizations with a diverse set of powers negotiate fluidly in the elaboration of beneficial outcomes, which is especially suggested by the acknowledgement of added values and of the potential benefit of any contribution. Therefore, interaction and sharing are deemed capable of establishing a collective reflection and learning process, in which an interplay of feedback and common experiences can produce horizontal power dynamics and in which the agency of each entity can mold the relationship's shape and thus influence eventual results. As observed above, a similar vision makes the distinction between local and international irrelevant, since inputs are defined according to the extent to which they contribute to the common effort towards a shared goal. On the one side, this generates a movement towards greater integration and merging, which posits the organic convergence of an enlarging number of contributive entities. On the other, however, it might raise questions regarding potential exclusionary results: while the emphasis on positive relationships risks resulting in the prediction of an unproblematic natural cooperation as originally assumed in the first local turn, thus neutralizing strong disagreement, the dichotomy local/international might simply be replaced by that between compatibility/incompatibility, with questionable results on the diversity of engaged actors. Indeed, the first narrative is useful to remind of structural biases and inequalities, which might render absolute flatness unrealistic on a larger scale. Crucially, the picture of civil society emerging from this case study appears uniformly peaceful and devoted to positive improvements: a wider enlargement of such discourse might stand in a problematic relationship with the presence of less peace-oriented actors, which has been noted as a recurring struggle in localization debates (see Belloni, 2008). Indeed, the question remains how to move beyond the tendency to either ignore or actively exclude dissenting (including corrupt and politicized) opinions, and to rather recognize they play a role in the discussion of peace processes. If they are simply deemed incompatible, opportunities might be missed to understand and address crucial societal dynamics. If integration could ideally be extended to more controversial groups, the issue would still remain of who would be empirically willing to take such step, especially in highly divided settings.

Taken together, then, the three identified discourses reveal the interplay of a variety of considerations in the definition of localization processes, which suggests the relevance of both structural problematics and individual and collective agency, while also highlighting the existing discrepancy between top-down and bottom-up conceptualizations. Chesterman's definition of ownership as either active participation in a policy's development or as a policy's adequacy to contextual circumstances (2007) appears especially relevant, as it might be applied to, respectively, a first narrative centered on decision-making and a second one focusing on effective thematic priorities. However, the literature on ownership has often defined it in terms of external actors' strategies, criticizing imposition in validating bottom-up, emancipatory contributions (Thiessen, 2011). The addition of the third narrative suggests

the necessity to rethink ownership in terms of purposeful collaboration, thus accounting for the intentional merging of different interests and overcoming more unilateral perspectives. The next paragraph will then consider how such multiple factors and understandings allow the assessment of ownership in different stages and aspects of a localized program.

## *2. Practical dimension*

Overall, the practices described by the data reveal a constant tension between the emergence of mutual co-ownership over a democratic elaboration of peace and the constraints provided by the decision-making faculty retained by a back donor. While several behaviors and mechanisms point toward an emancipatory form of collaboration, in fact, they appear to rest on individual agency and willingness rather than on a solid structure facilitating their establishment.

For instance, an analysis of the partnership itself and of the relations it has fostered suggest the prevalence of intimate mutualism based on a multilaterally normative-oriented ownership, at least between PAX and its Lebanese partners (notably, the MFA does not appear to be explicitly included in such relationship): the entities involved choose each other because they spontaneously perceive shared beneficial opportunities, and because they elaborate a common value system in which visions are shaped through constant dialogue and feedback. As positively regarded by Cohen (2014) in an assessment of good practices in North-South peacebuilding partnerships, the relationship between PAX and its partners involve genuine reciprocity, trust and transparency in communication. Such tendency appears compatible with Richmond's argument that a contextualized renegotiation of mainstream liberal peacebuilding should be founded on cooperation and interaction (2007), as well as with the emphasis on a collective, reflexive learning path (Bargués-Pedreny, 2015). Importantly, it confirms the usefulness of a relational theoretical lens, as the satisfaction and perception of horizontality described by virtually all interviewees suggest that power and feelings of involvement are not simply dependent on resources and procedures, but rather on the quality of interrelations. As suggested above, the description of the partnership between PAX and the concerned Lebanese NGOs resembles to the mutualism described by Hunt (2017), since it implies complementarity and mutual support. However, while relational theories point to un-purposeful and unpredictable agency determined by evolving encounters (Randazzo & Torrent, 2021), this case study suggests a more voluntary and conscious choice of molding personal attitudes and practices for the aim of developing a fruitful and sustainable relationship. In this sense, cooperation is possible because actors perceive its usefulness for their compatible goals, and decide to work together in the long-term towards the elaboration of shared understandings, agreed procedures and respectful methods. Hence, the appreciation of purposeful, strategic plans directed at improving the ability of a partnership to produce relevant outcomes might offer the potential to overcome the limits of relationality noticed by Brigg (2013): rather than having a reductive influence on self-reflexivity, a relational lens can emphasize transformative mutual behaviors capable of overcoming sterile categorizations by increasing the perception of complementarity.

Such perception appears also relevant when considering the extent of involvement in the various stages of a project's development. It is indeed interesting to notice how, despite the concerns and challenges expressed by several PAX officers with regards to their ability of

ensuring fully participatory mechanisms, respondents from Lebanese NGOs highlighted their feeling of ownership over the whole design and implementation process, since they considered the project as appropriately based on their inputs and ideas. In this sense, the relationship they established with PAX seem to ensure enough horizontality for programs to be receptive to contextually based contributions notwithstanding externally derived constraints. Such consideration, however, should not minimize the impact of inadequate structures: the comparison between PAX and other INGOs demonstrates the former as an exception rather than the norm, so that in cases where a partnership based on solidarity and mutuality has not been created the practices of channeling funds and elaborating programs are rather considered coercive and culturally insensitive. Even within PAX, despite the strive for a maximalist approach to localization, most officers struggle to sustain their commitment to dialogue and communication in front of the schedule and framework required by the back donor. Hence, if design and implementation are to be considered the locus of friction and adaptation, such space appears necessarily delimited by a top-down delineation of deadlines, themes, assumptions, and reporting. In this sense, for instance, the flexibility displayed by a major donor influences the extent to which it is possible to shape the project in a more contextually relevant way, to experiment new approaches, or even to spend time discussing and collecting more ideas.

The same notion applies to the project's feature, as the broadness and vagueness appreciated by PAX seem to be again contrasted by a larger scenario in which donors' priorities effectively silence new voices and approaches by focusing on the same, recurrent and inadequate themes. From this perspective, ownership over priorities is confirmed to be often a rhetorical one, which does not account for empirical dynamics but is based on foreign conceptions of what peacebuilding should look like. On the contrary, as might be suggested by the utilization of broad objectives by PAX officers, the appreciation of different methodologies, ideas and activities, however unconventional or incoherent with one another, can not only be a valid contribution to peacebuilding but also enable ownership however such ownership is understood. Interestingly, a similar vagueness can be linked to the general difficulty of defining peacebuilding in itself: despite the emergence of recurring ideas, the concept has proven consistently difficult to summarize. This is consistent with the wide range of activities that scholars such as assign to peacebuilding (Barnett et al., 2007; Cutter, 2005), with claims about the uncertain usefulness of the term. However, the same generic nature causing problematic categorizations appears here as a potential opportunity which can be employed to avoid the exclusion of innovative practices and methods, actually enabling their proponents to reclaim their space in promoting their communities' demands. Such instance is thus applied to the practice of involving the larger target population in offering feedback and suggestions, so as to ensure the engagement of the rightful owners of change (as indicated by the second narrative): the described mechanisms of consultations, participative research, physical and emotional presence within the community are deemed capable of ensuring a decentralized inclusivity in the elaboration of peace, consistent with Thiessen's call to let peacebuilding be built through existing social processes (2011) and with de Coning's conception of peace interventions as facilitators of endogenous popular processes of variation and selection (2018).

As especially evident in the case of involvement stages and project's feature, the role of the back donor seems that of setting counterproductive parameters which constrain the

effectiveness of localization as well as the realization of an ideal form of ownership. Indeed, while the literature on localization could be enriched by the appreciation of micro-practices challenging structural power dynamics through intentional adjustments (thus expanding the notion of the critical “everyday”), the extent to which such effort is capable of producing change on a large scale is still dependent on a back donor’s parameters. In this sense, it still appears true that, as noted by scholars as Richmond (2012) and Ejodus (2017), donors have the faculty to decide over the definition of ownership and localization strategies, as they delimit the area within which it is possible to promote transformative action. It appears then crucial for donors to shift the homogenizing tendency of their programs as well as the strict frameworks and requirements they entail, so as to better appreciate diversity and contextually based inputs. However, as will be shown by the next paragraph, the institutional features of a European, democratic countries as the Netherlands appears to demand working methods which are inherently averse to flexibility and experimentation.

### *3. Contextual dimension*

In the field of public policy, the set of rules, mechanisms and meanings defining the context in which innovations are promoted defines the constraints and opportunities through which such innovations are translated into local institutional practices (Campbell, 2004). In the case of localization, the role of contextual realities appears functional to explain the emergence of different narratives around power and ownership, as well as the practical difficulties in enacting such narratives on a larger scale.

Importantly, mistrust seems to be a recurring mechanism common to the context of all entities involved in the analyzed peacebuilding program: the recognition of donors’ political-economic preoccupations rather than purely human ones destabilizes faith in genuine interest towards change, while the same financial concerns prompt donors to look cautiously towards unknown entities. Such environment is inevitably unfavorable to a widespread fostering of mutual, honest cooperation, as it places risk at the forefront of opportunity assessments. It is crucial that, as noticed in the previous paragraph, the frameworks required by major donors are capable of drawing a limited area for translation and negotiation: such condition allows internal institutional dynamics to determine the extent to which it is possible to innovate in localization, reducing the possibilities of enlarging diversity, ensuring flexibility, or engaging communities. Indeed, the Parliamentary scrutiny at the end of each year requires tax-based expenditures to be considered efficient, which increases the political risk of financial loss: hence the liberal emphasis on autonomy and responsibilities, capacities and accountability, clear time schedules and measurable indicators, which prevent both the constitution of genuine relationships and a fully emancipatory validation of knowledge-based power. Such notion recalls Campbell’s recognition that internal mechanisms of funding institutions pose significant practical challenges to localization (2020), and questions the ability of current donors to facilitate effective change.

In fact, the risk averse attitude of a governmental donor cannot but be opposed to a mutual engagement with a high-risk, constantly changing fragile environment: however, it is also incompatible with a complete reduction of Western-based actors’ roles. If on one side the MFA appears incapable of a direct partnership with informal, community-based groups, on the other side a conflict-affected context cannot usually provide the necessary education for

entities to acquire the demanded capacities, so that a buffering presence of more established INGOs promoting capacity-building programs cannot realistically be retracted. Hence the tension identified in the literature between the high-level statements favoring autonomy and the reluctance to allow a target population to be self-managed (Bargués-Pedreny, 2015): in a similar institutional context, none of the three narratives on ownership seem to have a chance at emerging empirically, unless in exceptional cases based on individual effort. The reflection on institutional obstacles constraining localization strategies (and thus indirectly shaping the conceptualization of ownership) offers the opportunity to avoid using discourses on the topic as sterile, hypocritical tools as warned by Wong (2013). While displaying how emancipatory forms of engagement are not compatible with the current peacebuilding infrastructures, this insight explains the political reasons for such discrepancy and thus elucidates the difficulty of promoting a change on a large-scale, structural level. The appreciation of such subtle dynamics can then be built on to form the basis for deeper reform, thus overcoming mere self-reflection and colonial accusations.

## Chapter V Conclusion

This research has attempted to assess how localization is understood and practiced in a peacebuilding program through the aggregated insights of the main involved organizations. Figure 3 summarizes the research findings.

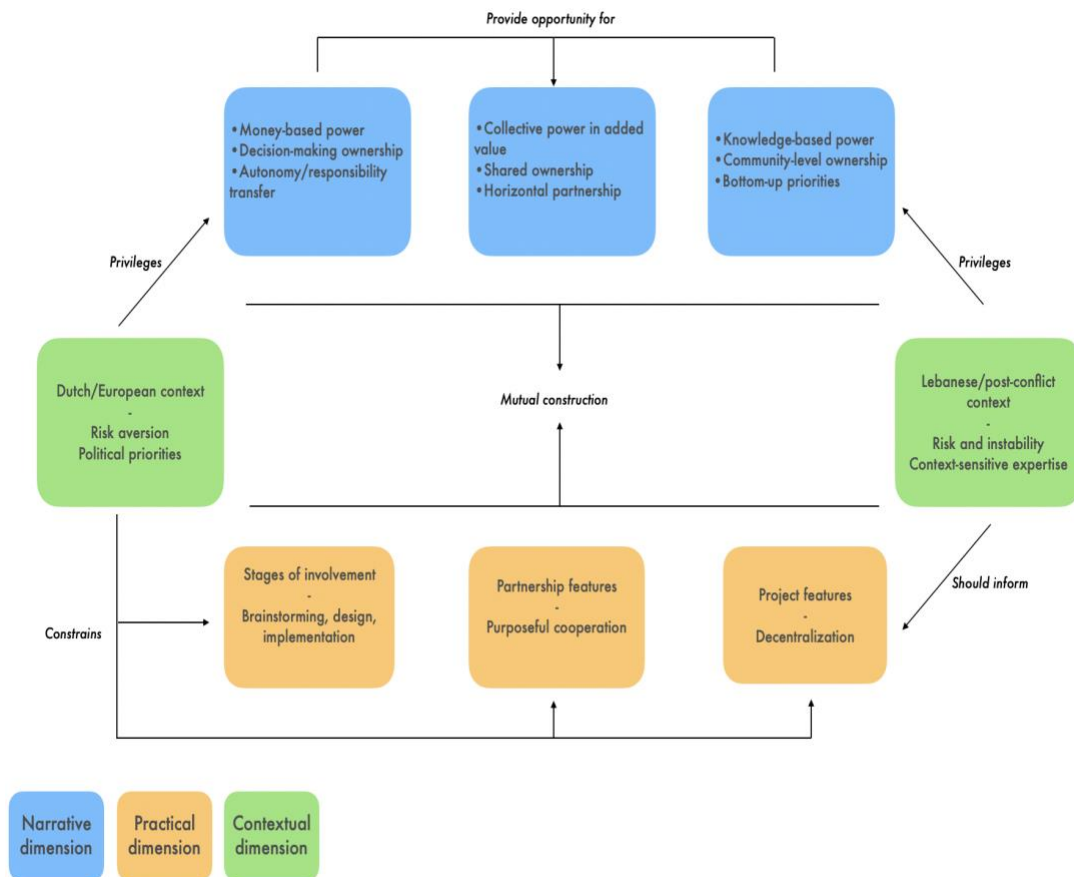


Figure 3. Summary of themes and relationships. Source: Author

The findings detect a threefold conceptualization of ownership, which is associated with a top-down power transfer, a knowledge-based community engagement, or a purposeful shared contribution to common goals. These understandings are translated into perceived ownership facilitated by specific practices in various facets of the program, including the different phases in which decisions over the projects are taken, the characteristics of the established partnership, and the themes and participatory features of the implemented activities. As suggested in the analytical and methodological framework, the narrative dimension of ownership and the practical forms of localization stand in a process of mutual construction: for instance, assumptions regarding power and ownership can prompt attention to specific actions took (or to be taken) in appropriate fields, while varying opportunities to facilitate the exercise of a determinate set of power might mold the idea of ownership so as to be better recognized in other sites and forms. In particular, it is noted how a purely money-based autonomy and a strict knowledge-based faculty might overcome their exclusionary implications and provide the opportunity to identify added value and build a

more collaborative, horizontal shared ownership. The role of the context appears crucial to shape the translation of ownership into localization strategies. First, the risk-averse behavior and political influences of the Dutch government seem compatible with a gradual, responsibility-oriented power transfer, while preventing the constitution of trust-informed, cooperative relationships with less structured entities. At the same time, the lack of externally demanded expertise in a more unstable area as Lebanon entails the impossibility of locally based organizations to autonomously access most funding channels: hence, the emphasis shifts on alternative meanings of ownership, with a major value attributed to context-sensitive knowledge and to the possibility of informing projects' content and frameworks.

### *1. Implications*

The localized program investigated reveals a tension between the calls for openness and decolonized practices emerging from the second local turn and the difficulty of dismantling the set of assumptions and unproblematic structures on which the first local turn has developed. In this sense, this research seems to sustain pessimistic views about the potential decline of liberal approaches to peacebuilding, reinforcing concerns about both inequality-driven co-option (Mac Ginty, 2008) and the difficulty of creating structural changes (Belloni, 2012).

On the one hand, a mutual effort to identify similarities and develop a respectful, equal collaboration can challenge contextual and institutional obstacles by fostering horizontality and shared contribution. The individual commitment to the establishment of equity-based partnership, which is evident between PAX and its Lebanese partners, might prompt a rethinking of the concept of the "everyday" described by critical scholars: from a set of micro-practices of resistance against imposition (Richmond, 2016), it might be enlarged to an intentional fostering of transformative networks which, disentangled from its specific local characterization, challenges hierarchical structures. Crucially, it posits the necessity to rethink relationality from a non-purposeful dynamic of casual encounters (Randazzo & Torrent, 2021) to the transformative exercise of intentional behaviors to improve cooperative relationships. The action of individual translators is indeed of particular relevance, in that they are capable of purposefully orienting their behavior towards trust and cooperation, moving within pre-established schemes so as to capture and create chances for more fruitful partnerships. Crucially, such intentionality appears capable of redefining peace processes as the expansion of peace-oriented networks, in which agency is co-produced on the basis of shared experiences: such vision stretches to overcome distinctions between local and international, echoing calls to disentangle peacebuilding and peace actors from narrowly defined territoriality (e. g. Mac Ginty, 2015).

On the other hand, evident from this inquiry is the inadequacy of existing financing mechanisms to reproduce positive behaviors on a large scale: the exceptionalism of PAX in this regard reveals how effective localization currently relies on genuine individual effort rather than being facilitated by the current aid system. Such system appears indeed especially limiting, with a prevailing external definition of assumptions and themes and with a varying acceptance of flexibility. Hence, role of institutional donors in setting priorities and dictating criteria contradicts calls for localization and requires careful problematization. The question, then, is how to reform the peacebuilding structure itself so as to facilitate the enactment of such efforts by more than one person or one organization. Necessarily, this kind of reforming

needs to address the current aid channels with a holistic and transformative approach as well as with a strong political component, thus not limiting itself to problem-solving adjustments but aiming at rethinking the underpinnings, entities and assumptions of the current aid system. It might be fruitful to redefine the idea of a simply rhetorical localization described by scholars as Wilén (2009) and Chesterman (2007): a deeper acknowledgement of the institutional mechanisms resulting in ineffective practices can refocus the discussion towards a wider debate on the political nature of peace intervention, which necessarily entails a set of explicit but also more subtle interests and concerns. As the identified rhetoric and neo-colonialism of mainstream localization appear entangled with the implicit functioning of donors' institutions, exactly such roots should not be left out of the picture, but rather subjected to accurate scrutiny.

An emergent model of ideal localization appears to be diffused, diverse and collective: if applied to the identified parameters of operationalized ownership, it requires a high representativeness (the representativeness currently deemed absent by authors as Hellmüller & Zahar, 2018, von Billerbeck, 2015), horizontality and complementarity in the relationship (thus requiring a more purposeful exercise of relational considerations), and a collaborative involvement at each relevant stage (as in maximalist approaches described by Donais, 2015). It has a strong normative orientation, in that the elaboration of agreeable visions and contextually relevant understandings is presented as superior to constraining frameworks and institutionalized procedures. It is useful here to note that, given the emphasis on mutual strengthening on one hand and community-based relevance on the other, representativeness further needs to be problematized, and an appreciation of the different features of each actor allows not only to understand its relationship with surrounding constituencies. For analytical facilitation (as suggested by Millar, 2017) the Lebanese NGOs have been treated as one collection site for the purpose of tracing overall dynamics in their position towards external actors. However, the variety of their dimensions, location, strategies and mandate suggests that their understandings of peace and ownership are informed by multiple attitudes and practices: for instance, as noted at p. 61, different reactions have been noticed when dealing with coercive donors, and the broadness in stated objectives appears exactly functional to the inclusiveness of different, also incompatible, methodologies. Such consideration supports claims of authors such as Millar (*Ibid.*) and van Leeuwen et al. (2020), who argue for the recognition of complex dynamics of contestation, debates and opinions. It is evident in this vein the necessity to enlarge the scope and timeframes of peacebuilding programs, with more openness to discussion, variety and contestation. A critical issue remains in particular the engagement with the non-civil actors or practices noted by Belloni (2001): despite the dangers deriving from their complete exclusion, none of the organizations involved in internationally funded peacebuilding appears willing and able to appeal to incompatible factions of the population. This reflection prompts careful consideration of the relations established with a wider constituency than formal NGOs, and questions how to ensure an effective representation of interests and power struggle in the discussions promoted by peacebuilding projects.

## 2. Recommendations

A first implication is that the peacebuilding architecture needs a profound internal reform, focused on challenging risk-averse attitudes and restructuring the parameters for the



constitution of partnerships. It follows that major institutional donors should reassess their adequacy in financing peacebuilding, understanding which internal mechanisms are constraining their choices and how to best approach them. Political debates in the field of foreign policy should be addressed at how to overcome risk-averse behavior so as to broaden the scope of peacebuilding programs, and how to build democratic and participatory infrastructures to engage actively and genuinely with a fragmentation of diverse (potentially controversial) voices. The political and economic nature of peacebuilding should be addressed with more openness and transparency, through a far-reaching communication capable of fostering recognition of both diverging interests and commonalities. In this respect, the whole debate around localization should be enlarged to a wider constituency of participants: the narrative described by this inquiry appears indeed far from homogeneous, and in order to address power and ownership it is necessary to appreciate each facet of the relevant concepts through a rich and diverse variety of perspectives. At the same time, it is necessary to reconsider the role of bureaucratic procedures and fixed indicators in determining projects' efficacy, allowing openness to wider timeframes and more flexible, highly adaptive frameworks, while also revisiting requirements so as to enhance donors' accessibility.

As for NGOs, both external and locally based ones, communication and trust-building prove essential tools to develop horizontal, mutually agreeable practices: it is then crucial to purposefully direct each employee's attitude and behaviors towards ensuring fruitful collaboration, empathy and respect. In order to do so, more resources should be directed to maintaining long-term contacts, while transparency and the comfortable expression of concerns should be institutionalized as standard practices. Simultaneously, special care should be attributed to the relationship established with a project's target population: each phase of an activity's development should be receptive to a range of inputs from a variety of different entities, and more creative methods of participation should be encouraged to engage each faction of society. Especially INGOs could then rethink their connection with their back donor, carefully mapping areas for improvement and re-evaluating the necessity of constant financial flow in front of the validation of innovative, locally driven demands.

Future research should continue investigating the meaning and implications of power and ownership, gaining inputs from a larger number of participants and comparing the results of different studies to acquire a more comprehensive picture. Specifically, more attention should be attributed to the role of a project's target population in co-producing outcomes, and to the relationship created between such population and the entities which are developing and implementing activities. Similar insights would be especially useful in assessing the possibility and impact of multiple degrees of decentralization, thus enriching the significance of localization. Additionally, a more quantitative approach could be suitable to explore the correlation between different partnership arrangements and the quality and reach of peacebuilding outcomes. The debate on localization could then be further enriched by the contribution of political science in explaining the institutional production of constraints and opportunities to decentralization, so as to avoid essentializing the causes and actors of ineffective strategies.

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# Annex I – Themes overview

The following overview displays the construction of the themes and categories used during the analysis process, and reflects the final version of the coding template.

Themes	Main codes	Relevant sub-codes
<b>Power</b>	Money Knowledge  Added value	Handling/allocating funds Local knowledge of context Collective work
<b>Ownership</b>	Being heard Thinking partnership together Genuine engagement Bottom-up priority assessment Community level Collective work Empowering marginalized voices Decision-making power Validation of inputs	Handling/allocating funds
<b>Localization strategies</b>	Context sensitivity Acquiring knowledge Aligning objectives Capacity-building/strengthening Pragmatism Communication Participation methods Flexibility Learning process Listen to partners' desires Discussions Diversity  Organizational capacities Self-reflection Horizontalty	Creativity          Social background diversity Not well-established  Trust

<b>Partnership features</b>	Alignment of objectives	Aligning
	Type of relation	Non-aligning Horizontality (trust; personal bonds) Hierarchy
	Organizational capacities	Well established Not well established
	Duration	Long-term Short-term
	Accountability	Upward Downward
<hr/>		
<b>Involvement stages</b>	Theoretical assumptions	
	Establishment of priorities	Handling/allocating funds
	Decision to apply	
	Design	Translation
	Implementation	Proposing changes Flexibility Upward Downward
<hr/>		
<b>Project features</b>	Accountability	Upward Downward
	Diversity	Geographical diversity Approach diversity Social diversity
	Scope	Broadness
<hr/>		
<b>Post-conflict context</b>	Challenges	
	Capacity-building	
	Disagreement	
	Flexibility	
	Local priorities	
	Peacebuilding	
	Risk	
<hr/>		
<b>Dutch/EU context</b>	Donors' lack of knowledge	
	Non-fitting approaches	
	Donors' influence	
	Top-down requirements	
	Dutch policymaking	
	Donors' foreign policy interests	

# Annex II – Interview guides

## 1. Interview guide: PAX perspective

### 1.1 Introduction

Introducing myself. Remarking that participation in the interview is voluntary and that the participant can choose to opt out at any stage of the research process. Reminding the content of the informed consent form, by describing the purpose of the study and asking confirmation that recording is permitted.

### 1.2 Warm-up questions

Q1: Who are you and what is your role within PAX?

- In which projects are you involved?

Q2: Can you say something about your experience working with local partners?

- In which occasions do you interact with them?
- For which purposes?

Q3: Can you say something about your experience working with your donor?

- How does it influence your work?
- Can you give an example?

### 1.3 Ideas

Q4: How would you define peacebuilding?

- How do you perceive PAX's role in pursuing peacebuilding?
- How do you perceive the role of local NGOs?
- How do you perceive the role of donors?

Q5: Do you feel your local partners and your donor have an idea of peacebuilding similar to the one PAX has?

- In what way is it similar or different?
- Do you think this influences the projects you work on? How?

Q6: We know the idea of local ownership is coming up more and more in peacebuilding practice. How would you define it?

- How is this idea practiced within PAX, can you give an example?
- What does local ownership look like in PAX's projects?

Q7: What do you think local ownership will or should look like in the future?

- Do you think it will impact the role of an INGO like PAX?
- And how will it impact the work of local partners?

### 1.4 Projects and mechanisms in place

Q8: How are local partners usually selected?

- Has any potential partner ever been rejected? If so, why?
- How are partnerships created (ex. Is there a standard contract, what are the mutual obligations)? How long does a partnership usually last? Who takes the initiative to start one?
- If you think these methods can be improved, how would you change them?

Q9: Looking more specifically at the projects you are working on, can you tell me something about how have they been developed?

- How are decisions made?
- How are the projects designed and implemented? Is there an exit strategy in place?
- How would you describe the role played by PAX and by the program's donor?
- How do local partners participate in the projects?

Q10: Which challenges did you experience in working with local partners?

- How did you overcome them?
- Did you experience similar or different challenges in working with your donor?
- If so, how did you overcome them?
- How does the role of the donor influence your work with local partners?

Q11: Power dynamics: who has decision-making power? What power do LP have to influence the current program?

- If you think they can be improved, how would you change them?

Q12: Accountability: Towards whom do you feel accountable when something doesn't go as planned?

- If you think it can be improved, how would you change it?

Q13: To sum up, how would you describe the participation of local partners in your projects?

- From which factors (or actors) is it influenced?
- Can you give an example?
- If you think the levels of participation can be improved, how would you change them?

### *1.5 Concluding questions*

Q14: Moving back to a more generic question, which are according to you the strengths and the shortcomings of your partnerships, and on the current state of local ownership in general?

- Can you give an example?

Q15: Is there anything you would like to add to this conversation?

### *1.6 Closure*

Thank you greatly for taking the time to participate this interview, I really appreciate it. Your contribution is highly valued and will surely improve the quality of my research.

Do you have any feedback for me? Do you have any question or remark?

If any question or remark arise later, you can send me an e-mail. I will leave you my contact details. You can also have my academic supervisor's email address, if you'd like to have a contact within my university.

In case any further question arises from my side, could I contact you again?

## **2. Interview guide: Lebanese NGOs' perspective**

### *2.1 Introduction*

Introducing myself. Remarking that participation in the interview is voluntary and that the participant can choose to opt out at any stage of the research process. Reminding the content of the informed consent form, by describing the purpose of the study and asking confirmation that recording is permitted.

### *2.2 Warm-up questions*

Q1: Who are you and what is your role within your organization?

- In which projects are you involved?

Q2: Can you say something about your experience working with PAX?

- In which occasions do you interact with them?
- For which purposes?

Q3: Have you ever interacted with the program's donor?

- In the context of which projects?
- Was the interaction useful/Would an interaction be useful?

### *2.3 Ideas*

Q4: How would you define peacebuilding?

- How do you perceive the role of your organization in pursuing peacebuilding?
- How do you describe the role of an international NGO like PAX in pursuing peacebuilding?

Q5: Do you feel PAX has an idea of peacebuilding which is similar to yours?

- In what way is it similar or different?
- Can you give an example?

Q6: In international peacebuilding, there is increasingly this idea of local ownership, so of having a greater involvement of local partners. What is your feeling about this movement?

- How do you see it in your partnership with PAX and with other INGOs?
- Do you feel PAX has an idea of ownership similar to yours? In what way is it similar or different?



- Q7: How do you envision the future developments of local ownership?
- Did you already notice any change in the role of your organization?
  - How could the role of INGOs like PAX change?

#### *2.4 Projects and mechanisms in place*

- Q8: How did your partnership with PAX began?
- What are your obligations towards PAX?
  - What are PAX's obligations towards you?
  - Is there anything you would like to change?
  - Is your partnership with PAX different from that with other NGOs? How?

Q9: Looking more specifically at the projects you are working on, can you tell me something about how they have been developed?

- How are decisions made?
- To what extent has PAX been involved in the project?
- To what extent has your organization been involved in the project?
- Does the role that PAX plays differ from that of other INGOs?

Q10: Which challenges did you experience working with PAX?

- How did you overcome them?

Q11: Power dynamics: who has decision-making power? How can you influence the project?

- If you think they can be improved, how would you change them?

Q12: How does accountability work? To whom do you feel accountable when something doesn't work?

- If you think it can be improved, how would you change it?

Q13: To sum up, how would you describe your ownership over the program?

- By which factors (or actors) is it influenced?
- Can you give an example?
- How can INGOs and external donors better support the role of your organization?

#### *2.5 Concluding questions*

Q14: Moving back to a more generic question, which are according to you the strengths and the shortcomings of the current state of local ownership in peacebuilding?

Q15: Is there anything you would like to add to this conversation?

#### *2.6 Closure*

Thank you greatly for taking the time to participate this interview, I really appreciate it. Your contribution is highly valued and will surely improve the quality of my research.

Do you have any feedback for me? Do you have any question or remark?

If any question or remark arise later, you can send me an e-mail. I will leave you my contact details. You can also have my academic supervisor's email address, if you'd like to have a contact within my university.

In case any further question arises from my side, could I contact you again?

### **3. Interview guide: donor's perspective**

#### *3.1 Introduction*

Introducing myself. Remarking that participation in the interview is voluntary and that the participant can choose to opt out at any stage of the research process. Reminding the content of the informed consent form, by describing the purpose of the study and asking confirmation that recording is permitted.

#### *3.2 Warm-up questions*

Q1: Who are you and what is your role in the MFA?

- In which departments or countries are you involved?

Q2: Can you say something about your experience working with the (I)NGOs that the MFA is funding?

- How often and for which purposes do you interact with them?

Q3: Did you ever have contact with the local organizations implementing projects, like PAX's local partners?

- In which context, for which purposes?
- What did such contact look like?
- In case of a negative answer: do you think contact with them would be useful?

#### *3.3 Ideas*

Q4: How does the MFA define peacebuilding?

- As a donor, how would you describe your role in pursuing it?
- What about the role of INGOs like PAX, and of local organizations?

Q5: Do you feel PAX and the program's local partners have an idea of peacebuilding similar to yours?

- Have there ever been a dialogue on it with PAX?
- In what way is it similar or different?
- How does it impact your decisions when funding a project?

Q6: In the field of peacebuilding, humanitarian aid and development there is increasingly this notion of local ownership (ex. Grand Bargain). Can you tell me something about your perspective on these developments as a donor?

- How does the MFA specifically define local ownership?
- What do you think are the advantages of a greater involvement of local organizations?

- How do you perceive your role in pursuing local ownership?
- What are the main strategies and practices in place?

Q7: How do you envision the future developments of local ownership?

- Which challenges do you see, and how can they be overcome?
- What is the role of a donor in overcoming them?
- How do you see the role of INGOs in this context?
- And the role of local organizations?

### *3.4 Projects and mechanisms in place*

Q8: According to which criteria do you finance PAX's programs?

- Where do they derive from?
- Who is involved in their design?
- What is the function/purpose of such criteria?
- Is there any relevant regulation that you can think of right now?

Q9: Can you tell me something more about working with PAX?

- What are your mutual responsibilities and obligations?
- How does monitoring and evaluation of the programs you are funding work?
- Is there any accountability mechanism in place, how does it work?

Q10: What do you think are the strengths and shortcomings of the mechanisms you described?

- If you think they can be improved, how would you change them?
- Do you think they play a role with regards to local ownership, how?

Q11: According to your experience and opinion, which features of the funds you manage (flexibility, length, scope, conditionalities...) impact the participation of local organizations?

- How?
- Can you give an example?

Q12: Considering the mechanisms you mentioned, how would you describe the role of the local organizations involved in the program?

- What do you think is (or should be) their value?
- If you think the current situation could be improved, how would you change it?

### *3.5 Concluding questions*

Q13: To sum up, how would you describe the role of the MFA in relation to PAX and its local partners?

Q14: Is there anything you would like to add to this conversation?

### *3.6 Closure*

Thank you greatly for taking the time to participate this interview, I really appreciate it. Your contribution is highly valued and will surely improve the quality of my research.

Do you have any feedback for me? Do you have any question or remark?

If any question or remark arise later, you can send me an e-mail. I will leave you my contact details. You can also have my academic supervisor's email address, if you'd like to have a contact within my university.

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