

## Report on the Workshop “The Dynamics of Local Knowledge in Peace and Conflict Intervention” at Zeppelin University

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### Executive Summary

Convened by the Peacebuilding and Local Knowledge Network (PLKN) and the Chair of Public Administration and Public Policy (Prof. Eckhard) at Zeppelin University in December 2022, **20 international academics and practitioners collaborated** to discuss the ways in which international organizations engaged in **peace interventions understand, acquire and integrate local knowledge(s) into their operations and decision-making**. Overarching themes from these discussions include: 1) the importance of terminology as it connotes power, agency, and intent with respect to local knowledges; 2) the role of individuals – their competencies, personalities, training and motivations – in determining the pathways for local knowledges to impact organizational processes; 3) the imperative for structural changes within organizations to alter the (dis)incentives for personnel and staff to pursue local knowledge(s) and enable their integration into decision-making; and 4) the need to reconcile the significant and layered gaps between field-level realities, strategic decision-making and academic consideration of prominent themes in the peacebuilding literature, including consultation, partnership, local ownership and local knowledge(s).

### Introduction

This workshop brought together existing and prospective partners of the **Peacebuilding and Local Knowledge Network (PLKN)**, a **collaboration of scholars and practitioners** funded by a Partnership Development Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). It was organized by Prof. Steffen Eckhard from Zeppelin University, Prof. Katharina Coleman from the University of British Columbia, Prof. Sarah von Billerbeck from the University of Reading, and Prof. Benjamin Zyla from the University of Ottawa.

The goal of the workshop was to jointly explore understandings of local knowledge(s) and the dynamics of its acquisition and integration by international organizations (IOs) engaged in peacebuilding interventions. During the two conference days, the participants were involved in three explorative panel sessions, one brainstorming session and a final wrap-up. The following core questions guided conference discussion: 1) What is local knowledge and can we propose a typology of local knowledges? 2) How does knowledge acquisition and filtering in international organizations work? 3) What are the conditioning factors, or the adjustment screws in organizations, where opportunities for change can arise?

The workshop proceeded under Chatham House rules, and as such this report summarizes the discussions, without personal attribution.



### A typology of local knowledge(s)

Despite frequent reference in literature and policy,<sup>i</sup> there is no clear definition of what ‘local knowledge’ means or includes in peace interventions. In fact, it is **more effective to think about local knowledges**, as plural, to capture the complex and expansive range of information denoted by the term.

While typologies are useful for sense making, they do not align with the messiness of the world. A **typology of local knowledges** must

be multi-dimensional and multi-scalar, because knowledges 1) come in different formats (written, oral, vernacular); 2) have different timelines, contexts and philosophies/purposes (transactional, educational, inductive, deductive); and 3) are many and vast (raising issues of information overload and selectivity). Knowledges are simultaneously hyper-local, local, national, international and transnational, as such researchers need to understand where local knowledges originate from, and whether they are derived locally or from elsewhere about local circumstances (e.g. African solutions to African problems).

Knowledge in peacebuilding is not necessarily 'local' knowledge, and there was a lively discussion about whether **interventions need to transition from the idea of local knowledge, to one of 'localized' knowledge**. The former is challenging because it implies community-based knowledge, which can obscure the reality that knowledge is produced by a wide range of actors. Instead, it may be productive to conceive of 'localized' knowledge, meaning knowledge that is proximate to the activities and actors within institutions, connected to routines and opportunities. This alternative framing of knowledges as 'localized', however, risks the agency and perspectives of local actors being subsumed into those of international practitioners.

Often both origins constitute local knowledges – they are the product of many minds, which crosses generations, geographies (i.e. diasporas), and adapts over time. When advancing a typology, scholars must ask, 'whose typology?' and must reflect on the epistemological misalignment between typologies and theories produced by the Global North and the realities of individuals and societies in the Global South.

Social scientists and peacebuilding practitioners **struggle to comprehend the immaterial** (e.g. religious) through their material categories and frameworks. This raises several conceptual questions, including what happens when 'the local' says 'the wrong things' or things researchers do not expect? There are issues of epistemology, hierarchies of knowledge and project/disciplinary path dependency that constrain the capacity of interveners and academics alike to understand and identify many forms of knowledge. Further,

how do researchers and practitioners account for confusion, misunderstanding, miscommunication, (mis)translation, and contradictions in their interactions with local actors? At times rumors and assumptions are a central feature of local knowledges, but how do they fit into a typology? The question is 'when is knowledge information and when is information knowledge?' Verifiability, reliability and credibility all factor into determining when rumors and assumptions are knowledge.

A counterpoint to local knowledges is **local ignorance** – of what is going on elsewhere, of 'the other', etc. – which comes from geographies of fear. Is ignorance knowledge? Are selective remembering and purposeful forgetting forms of ignorance? To what extent is knowledge really knowledge (purposefully learned or acquired information) or simply routine and banal?

Crucially, what is the **purpose of a typology** and how useful is that knowledge for colleagues working in policy? Time can be an important determinant of how international organizations use and value different types of knowledge. Interventions often require and prioritize *fast* knowledge and anticipatory data, which can bias actors against contextual knowledges that require greater time to attain. Ultimately, knowledge is dynamic, and thus may be difficult to capture in a static form, such as a typology.



### Dynamics of knowledge acquisition

The established consensus on the value of local knowledge(s) and situational/contextual awareness in peace interventions,<sup>ii</sup> has not been matched by a clear understanding of how different organizations **gather local knowledge(s)**, through either formal or informal techniques. What are the patterns and blind spots?

**Knowledge brokers** have a distinct role in local knowledge acquisition and transfer, but several dynamics influence which local actors are recognized as knowledge bearers, including layers of privilege and accessibility. Local knowledges are always interpreted, structured and ordered by knowledge brokers, both within the mission and within the local community.

Many organizations **lack a systematic approach to knowledge acquisition**, meaning there are no regulations or guidelines on what local knowledge is or who has it – this deprives the principle of ‘local ownership’ of clear operational meaning. In practice, the acquisition of local knowledges is often personalized, meaning that personnel or leadership turnover can disrupt the relationships that feed and transmit local knowledges into organizations. The extent of this disruption depends on the type of mission and the nature of interactions between international and local actors.

To combat biases and achieve organizational learning, what is known and how it is known must be questioned. Trust and relationships are needed to do that, but trust building takes time and predictability. *Whose* knowledge matters depends on where authority lies – at headquarters or in country offices. Missions should invest in relationships and dialogue in order to bring other people into ‘the decision room.’ Knowledge-sharing is possible only when these barriers to knowledge acquisition are overcome.

Significant training deficits and gaps regarding local knowledges in IOs produce staff that often only ‘fill the forms’ and ‘tick boxes’ regarding local engagement and consultation. In order to talk about knowledge acquisition, one must question ‘what knowledge is for.’ Scholars and practitioners need to distinguish between **knowledge acquisition and legitimacy acquisition**, because the two tend to be conflated. Often consultations are legitimacy-seeking, not knowledge-seeking, which is a product of overly formalizing processes that can be perceived as ‘extractive’ by local actors.

**Different interveners have different definitions** of ‘the local’, different background knowledges, and different incentives around reporting. Fear of negative personal and organizational impacts from failures or limitations in interventions inhibit IOs from

attaining a full picture of the mission. International staff can be opportunistic, leading to a gap between what is being reported and what is happening on the ground – usually, when a mission fails, the field is not surprised, but the headquarters is. Organizations are generally defined by ‘rules,’ but informal and messy spaces without rules exist – local knowledges fit into these informal spaces – and are often governed by biases and randomness. Certain types of local knowledge are thus frequently ignored.

Researchers and practitioners must distinguish between **explicit and implicit knowledges**. *Explicit* knowledge derives from 1) broad and conflict-based analyses, 2) needs assessments; 3) baseline surveys; 4) participatory monitoring; and 5) real-time intelligence work, which requires deep relationships and networks that originate from understanding and trust. These explicit forms of knowledge each have unique gaps, blind-spots and limitations. *Implicit* ‘local’ knowledge derives from domestic staff employed by peacebuilding organizations, implementing partners, government counterparts, and international Western and non-Western staff. The challenge with implicit forms of knowledge is how to arbitrate among these sources.

Ultimately, organizations want local knowledge to achieve their objectives and there is often an assumption that if they only know more, they can do better. However, when information is gathered, it often does not ‘go anywhere’ – information is not systematically gathered or analyzed. **Information overload** and time constraints mean that reports often simplify complexity and ambiguity, and/or go unread by leadership. If the problem is a lack of local knowledge incorporation, the solution might not be gathering more information. Instead, the incentives to absorb the information that is gathered need to be altered, and who is meant to use the information collected must be made explicit. Further, in many interventions there is a lack of analytical capacity to translate information collected into mission development and implementation, impeding an important feedback loop.





## Knowledge filtering and decision-making

While awareness of the need for local knowledge(s) has led to the institutionalization of knowledge gathering mechanisms in many interventions, these have not consistently been matched by formalized processes for knowledge integration into organizational decision-making.<sup>iii</sup> How do foreign actors **convey local knowledge(s) into organizational knowledge** that informs program decisions and peacebuilding actions? What (un)intentional consequences emerge from (not) incorporating local knowledge(s)?

Knowledge acquisition and knowledge filtering are **two phases of the same process**. Knowledge emerges from and functions in service of both security (situational awareness, protection of civilians, prevention of human rights violations and socio-political violence) and peacebuilding (political and peace processes, reconciliation and social cohesion) – the former knowledge tends to be ‘extractive’, while the latter is more ‘consultative’.

**Filtering and decision-making can happen at every point of the knowledge processing cycle.** Filtering occurs as a result of 1) different understandings or perceptions of political priorities and local issues; 2) mismatching of tools or timetables; 3) debate about solutions, their practicality or sustainability, or their alignment with local values and norms; and 4) ‘personal’ reasons, including relationships, trust, and interests.

There are numerous contingencies to decision-making processes, such as *when*, *where* and *by whom* decisions are made. Often decisions are not rational or systematic, nor random or spontaneous, but contingent – **decisions happen in the political space between rationality and randomness**. Due to this

contingency, decision-making processes are not transparent or institutionalized – the ‘decision room’ is dispersed.

During the knowledge filtering phase, there are many **cross-cutting and overlapping reporting lines**. Not all departments interact with each other and not all the information produced by each mission component (e.g. military, police and civilian) ‘travels up’ in a systematic way. The recurring theme that ‘somebody should do something about it’ implies significant vagueness in knowledge filtering. **Decision-making processes are highly reliant on the individual head of field office’s approach**, which can be top-down/hierarchical, compartmentalized, and ad hoc. On the *operational* side, there is a stronger connection between acquisition, processing and decision-making because of the focus on security concerns. On the *strategic* side, missions are much weaker at integrating local knowledges, as planning processes are not conducive to the tempo of acquiring information, processing it and using it for decision-making. Data analysis is often incomplete or provided without decision options, which inhibits decision-makers from integrating local knowledges in more substantive ways. Overall, data quality management requires greater oversight and control. Importantly, reporting feedback loops are necessary to ensure that information does not only flow up to the heads of field offices, but also down into the operational levels.

There are several **systemic barriers and challenges** for local actors to engage in knowledge-filtering and decision-making processes. Firstly, convenience often determines how external actors select local actors with which to engage. In seeking out the ‘right’ actors, interveners forget the importance of the **right selection process** and what they are trying to achieve. Attention must be paid to representation, legitimacy, and the social and political secondary effects that can arise from expediency and convenience in local partner selection. Secondly, local actors are often engaged in the early stages of conflict analysis, but **neglected in project implementation**, leaving them feeling used and isolated from defining and implementing mission priorities. Engaging with local actors for **legitimacy, rather than substantive influence on decisions**, leaves them disempowered. When

local actors perceive a lack of commitment from intervenors, a crisis of consent can result from unfulfilled expectations, misunderstood priorities, and unresolved conflict dynamics. Both of these challenges raise the issue of tokenism, since participation is different from integration.

While mission mandates often reflect ownership issues, international organizations do not pay enough attention to human resources and still recruit personnel who ‘can do the job’ rather than ‘being able to transfer knowledge and skills.’ UN intervenors are often ‘anecdote’ driven, and not data driven, meaning the things they hear tend to confirm their pre-existing assumptions. How to recruit and/or build the talent and skills required for effective local knowledge(s) integration through training requires greater attention in international organizations.



## Prospects for Organizational Change

With varied experiences and established expertise in the study and practice of peace interventions, workshop participants proposed several productive ideas and insights for **transforming organizational approaches to local knowledges in interventions.**

<sup>i</sup> Eckhard, S. (2021). Bridging the citizen gap: Bureaucratic representation and knowledge linkage in (international) public administration. *Governance*, 34(2), 295–314. doi:10.1111/gove.12494

<sup>ii</sup> von Billerbeck, S. (2017). *Whose peace? Local ownership and United Nations peacekeeping*. Oxford University Press. ISBN 9780198755708.

Coleman, K. P. (2011). Innovations in ‘African solutions to African problems’: The evolving practice of regional peacekeeping in sub-Saharan Africa. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 49(4), 517–545.

Cassin, K. & Zyla, B. (2021). The end of the liberal world order and the future of UN peace operations: Lessons learned. *Global Policy*, 12(4), 455–467.

A key constraint to local knowledge(s) integration is the **absence of field-level decision-making** capacity in some international peacebuilding organizations. Overcoming this challenge requires both individual-level and structural-level changes. **Reforms in both recruitment and training of personnel are required**, selecting for individuals with an interest in local ownership and integration, and with the interpersonal skills to support such work. **Empathy and respect** are essential attributes for field-level personnel, and training should be reformed to more closely prepare staff for the realities of field work. Structurally, organizational incentives to reinforce the value and utility of **investing in local knowledge gathering** are essential.

There is a clear linkage between a **high percentage of local staff** in international organizations and effective local knowledge acquisition and integration.<sup>iv</sup> The proactive collection of data and contextual knowledge through monitoring positively contributes to situational awareness, strategic conflict analysis, compliance assessment, and confidence building. Processes must be understood as ‘horizontal’, rather than vertical, carried out in collaboration with local people and staff, to encourage open and active knowledge sharing.

Fundamentally, **the politics of knowledge production must be challenged**: Whose knowledge is accepted and valued? In what forms and formats? Who is an expert? Social positionality shapes people’s identities and affects access to research and knowledge production. Knowledge is inherently politicized: it enters the ‘decision room’ through a political process. In the Global North, knowledge and research need to be decolonized, and knowledge and scholarship from the Global South must be valued.

<sup>iii</sup> von Billerbeck, S. (2015). Local ownership and UN peacebuilding: Discourse versus operationalization. *Global Governance*, 21(2), 299–315. doi: 10.1163/19426720-02102007

<sup>iv</sup> Eckhard, S. (2019). Comparing how peace operations enable or restrict the influence of national staff: Contestation from within? *Cooperation and Conflict*, 54(4), 488–505. doi:10.1177/0010836718815528

Eckhard, S., & Parizek, M. (2020). Policy implementation by international organizations: A comparative analysis of strengths and weaknesses of national and international staff. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*. doi:10.1080/13876988.2020.1813032