CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION IN PRACTICE

FROM PARTNERSHIP TO AUTONOMY:
CPI's Localization Approach in Peacebuilding

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1. Introduction 1

1.1. CPI's Approach to Localization and reciprocal partnerships 3

1.2. Alignment with SDC's Locally Led Cooperation Strategy 4

2. Case Study: DAAC Nigeria 5

3. Comparative Insights from Other Contexts: Friends of Peace 8

4. Mutual Learning and Institutional Transformation 11

5. Lessons Learned and Recommendations 11

6. Conclusion 13

7. Bibliography 13

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the localization agenda has become increasingly central to debates in the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sectors. Following the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and the commitments established through the Grand Bargain, increasing attention has been directed toward strengthening the role of local actors across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, including through greater access to resources, leadership opportunities, and decision-making authority. Concurrently, scholars and practitioners have drawn attention to the limitations of traditional international NGO models, which frequently position local organizations as implementing partners rather than as autonomous actors capable of shaping strategies, influencing policy, and directly accessing international funding. As Mulder argues, "[a]lthough they are often framed as 'partnerships', these collaborations tend to be

hierarchical in nature, with strategic direction, funding and monitoring primarily coming 'from above' and implementation, reporting and compliance primarily coming 'from below"' (Mulder, 2023, p. 2).

Numerous scholars and practitioners contend that localization only becomes meaningful when it is grounded in equitable partnerships that enable the sharing of capacities, knowledge, and decision-making authority among all actors involved (Barbelet, 2018; Roepstorff, 2020; Manandhar, 2026). Manandhar (2026) emphasizes that localization is undermined when local actors bear implementation risks without corresponding decision-making power, when accountability mechanisms prioritize upward reporting over community accountability, and when international organizations maintain strategic control while transferring operational responsibilities. In this regard, the concept of complementarity is central to effective localization. Barbelet (2018, p. 17) defines complementarity as "an outcome where all capacities at all levels – local, national, regional, [and] international – are harnessed and combined in a way that supports the best humanitarian outcomes for affected populations." This definition underscores the need to recognize and leverage the comparative advantages of actors at different levels to achieve more effective humanitarian outcomes.

Within this context, the Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (CPI) has developed an accompaniment-based approach aimed at strengthening the institutional autonomy and sustainability of local peacebuilding organizations operating in fragile environments. For CPI, institutional autonomy refers to the ability of local organizations to independently design, implement, manage, govern, and resource their peacebuilding initiatives while maintaining accountability to their constituencies.

Rather than functioning solely as an operational international partner, CPI positions itself as a technical advisor, mentor, and facilitator supporting local actors in building sustainable organizational structures, governance systems, and technical peacebuilding capacities.

This paper presents CPI's approach of reciprocal partnership through the example of the Dar Al Andalus Centre (DAAC)[1] in Nigeria, while briefly referring to similar experiences in East Africa. It argues that meaningful localization in peacebuilding requires long-term investment in institutional strengthening, governance, technical accompaniment, and

[1] https://daralandalus.org.ng/

network-building in order to support the emergence of resilient local organizations capable of independently leading peacebuilding initiatives.

1.1. CPI's Approach to Localization and reciprocal partnerships

CPI's localization approach is based on the principle that sustainable peacebuilding can only emerge through strong local ownership and locally legitimate institutions. Rather than limiting partnerships to project implementation, CPI has progressively developed a model centered on institutional accompaniment and long-term reciprocal capacity transfer. CPI prioritizes collaboration with local actors that share its core values of dialogue, inclusion, non-violence, and locally led conflict transformation, while demonstrating strong community legitimacy and a commitment to long-term peacebuilding. In some contexts, CPI has gone beyond traditional partnership models by actively supporting the emergence and institutional development of local peacebuilding actors. For example, the founders of the Dar Al Andalus Centre (DAAC) in Nigeria were involved in earlier peacebuilding initiatives supported by CPI, which encouraged the creation of a locally led organization dedicated to dialogue, reconciliation, and conflict transformation. This reflects CPI's broader commitment to strengthening local peacebuilding ecosystems and fostering sustainable local leadership in the contexts where it operates.

CPI's accompaniment model is intentionally adaptive. While the core principles of mutual learning, institutional strengthening, and progressive leadership transfer remain constant, the specific forms of support are tailored to each partner's institutional maturity, priorities, and operating environment.

This approach combines several dimensions. First, CPI emphasizes continuous mentoring and "learning-by-doing" methodologies. Weekly coordination meetings, thematic workshops, and joint strategic planning sessions allow local teams to progressively strengthen their capacities while directly applying new tools and methodologies within ongoing projects.

Second, CPI supports the development of operational and institutional systems necessary for organizational sustainability. This includes project cycle management, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), financial management, procurement procedures, donor compliance, reporting systems, and governance structures. Rather than imposing external

templates, these tools are jointly designed and adapted to local realities and organizational cultures.

Third, CPI provides technical accompaniment in conflict transformation methodologies, particularly in Muslim-majority contexts where religious legitimacy and faith-sensitive approaches are essential. Drawing on experiences from the Sahel, East Africa, and the Middle East, CPI supports local partners in designing dialogue, mediation, reconciliation, and peace education initiatives rooted in local sociocultural realities.

Finally, CPI seeks to strengthen the long-term sustainability of local organizations by supporting donor engagement, visibility, strategic networking, and institutional positioning. Localization is therefore understood not simply as operational delegation, but as a progressive process of organizational empowerment and transfer of leadership.

1.2. Alignment with SDC's Locally Led Cooperation Strategy

CPI's accompaniment model closely aligns with the principles of the SDC's Locally Led Cooperation Strategy, particularly regarding institutional strengthening, equitable partnerships, and progressive transfer of leadership.

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

The SDC supports locally led cooperation, arguing that it is "deeply engrained in Swiss values and the principle of subsidiarity", which holds that communities should have a direct role in shaping the decisions that affect them. The SDC aims to "ensure that action is by default determined by local actors themselves and appropriately supported by international partners only where necessary".

- **As a direct donor to local actors**: The SDC seeks to strengthen locally led cooperation by increasing direct, flexible, and accessible funding to local organizations, supporting their institutional development, promoting equitable partnerships, and involving them throughout the entire project cycle.

- **As a donor to intermediaries**: The SDC promotes fair and empowering partnerships by embedding equitable partnership principles in contracts, ensuring flexible and high-quality funding as well as adequate overhead coverage, prioritizing the meaningful involvement of local partners in project design, and systematically questioning situations where local actors are not directly engaged.

2. Case Study: DAAC Nigeria

The partnership between CPI and the Dar Al Andalus Centre (DAAC) illustrates how long-term accompaniment can contribute to the emergence of an autonomous local peacebuilding organization. Operating in Northern Nigeria, DAAC works on intra/inter-faith dialogue, reconciliation, prevention of violent extremism (PVE), and community mediation in conflict-affected areas including Northeast Nigeria and the Middle Belt.

Since the beginning of the partnership, CPI has supported DAAC not only in project implementation but also in institutional consolidation. A comprehensive capacity strengthening process was progressively established through workshops, mentoring sessions, field visits, and joint strategic reflection. CPI supported DAAC in developing implementation strategies, monitoring and evaluation systems, financial management procedures, procurement mechanisms, and donor reporting tools.

An important enabling factor in this process was CPI's dedicated Project Officer based in Nigeria. This in-country presence helped bridge the geographical and institutional distance between CPI and DAAC, facilitating regular, informal, and in-person exchanges alongside formal coordination mechanisms. The close proximity made it possible to identify needs and challenges early, provide timely support, and maintain continuous dialogue around both project implementation and institutional development. It also strengthened the reciprocal nature of the partnership: the Project Officer was not only a channel for CPI's technical accompaniment, but also an important conduit for DAAC's contextual knowledge, feedback, and locally grounded perspectives to inform CPI's own approaches and programming. This proximity therefore helped both organizations benefit more fully from the complementary expertise and resources they brought to the partnership.

Over the course of the partnership, DAAC significantly strengthened its institutional systems and human resources capacities. More than thirty organizational tools, standards, and procedures were developed and adapted jointly, including financial management procedures, monitoring and evaluation frameworks, procurement systems, human resources terms of reference, and internal operational guidelines. In parallel, four key staff members benefited from continuous training and mentoring in project management, financial management, M&E, reporting, and donor compliance.

A key dimension of this accompaniment was the strengthening of DAAC's technical expertise in conflict transformation and faith-based peacebuilding. CPI organized workshops on mediation, negotiation, conflict analysis, "do no harm" approaches, and Sulhu-based reconciliation processes. Particular attention was given to supporting DAAC facilitate sensitive intra-faith and interfaith dialogue initiatives rooted in Islamic principles of coexistence and reconciliation. At the same time, the partnership significantly enriched CPI's own approaches and methodologies. Through its close collaboration with DAAC, CPI deepened its understanding of the social, religious, and political dynamics shaping peacebuilding efforts in Northern Nigeria. DAAC's expertise on intra-faith engagement, religious legitimacy, and locally grounded reconciliation mechanisms provided important insights that informed CPI's programming and analytical frameworks. This exchange strengthened CPI's ability to design context-sensitive interventions and further reinforced the principle that capacity development within partnerships is reciprocal rather than unidirectional. This approach also resonates with the principles articulated in the Africa Charter for Transformative Research Collaborations[2], which promotes more equitable, reciprocal and locally grounded approaches to knowledge production and research collaboration between African and international actors. While CPI is not a signatory to the Charter, its principles are closely aligned with CPI's approach to action-research collaboration. In its work with partners, CPI seeks to endorse the spirit and purpose of the Charter by promoting co-creation, mutual learning, locally grounded knowledge, and the recognition of Southern partners as contributors to knowledge production rather than solely recipients of external expertise.

Beyond technical capacities, CPI also accompanied DAAC in its broader institutional development. Steering Committee meetings and strategic workshops created spaces for reflection on governance structures, staffing needs, sustainability strategies, and long-term organizational vision. CPI additionally facilitated introductions to international organizations and donors, contributing to DAAC's growing visibility and credibility within the peacebuilding sector. The results of this accompaniment are reflected in DAAC's increasing institutional autonomy. Today, DAAC independently leads project design and development, activity coordination, project management, monitoring and evaluation, as well as narrative and financial reporting. This evolution has

[2] https://parc.bristol.ac.uk/africa-charter/

also enabled DAAC to access direct international funding. Most notably, DAAC secured a significant direct grant from the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), marking an important milestone in its institutional development and donor engagement capacity.

Beyond institutional strengthening, DAAC also contributed to shaping CPI's own understanding of locally led peacebuilding. Through joint program design, field engagement, and strategic reflection, joint program design, field engagement, and strategic reflection, DAAC brought valuable perspectives that reinforced the importance of grounding peace-building interventions in local religious, cultural, and social realities. This continuous exchange encouraged CPI to place greater emphasis on co-creation, local leadership, and adaptive programming within its broader portfolio.

This long-term accompaniment contributed to DAAC's evolution into a legally registered Nigerian NGO with strengthened governance systems, dedicated finance and M&E capacities, and increasing autonomy in managing donor-funded projects. Today, DAAC is capable of independently implementing complex peacebuilding initiatives while maintaining strong local legitimacy through its engagement with religious scholars, women, youth, and community leaders.

A concrete illustration of this progress is DAAC's leadership of the *Path to Peace* project in Northeast Nigeria. Building on previous efforts in alternative narratives, prevention of violent extremism, and reconciliation, DAAC now manages the project with a high degree of autonomy, leading program design, implementation, coordination, monitoring, and reporting processes. This demonstrates how long-term accompaniment can contribute to the emergence of local organizations capable of independently leading complex peacebuilding initiatives while maintaining strong local ownership and legitimacy.

The experience demonstrates that localization in peacebuilding cannot be reduced to the transfer of project implementation responsibilities alone. Sustainable institutional empowerment requires long-term investment in governance, technical accompaniment, organizational systems, and strategic positioning.

Area	**Results Achieved**
Institutional Systems	More than 30 standards, procedures, tools and management systems developed and transferred
Human Resources	4 staff members received continuous mentoring and capacity strengthening
Governance	Strengthened governance structures, strategic planning processes and accountability mechanisms
Financial Sustainability	Direct FDFA grant secured (CHF 375,000)
Project Management	Full autonomy in project design, implementation, coordination and reporting
M&E	Independent development and management of M&E frameworks
Program Development	Capacity to design and lead peacebuilding program independently
Flagship Project	Autonomous implementation of the Path to Peace project in Northeast Nigeria

The partnership also illustrates how localization can strengthen international organizations themselves. Working alongside DAAC enabled CPI to refine its accompaniment model, adapt its methodologies to locally identified priorities, and develop a deeper appreciation of the role that religious legitimacy and local ownership play in sustaining peacebuilding efforts. As a result, CPI's approach to localization evolved from a capacity-strengthening perspective toward a model based on mutual learning, complementarity, and shared leadership.

3. Comparative Insights from Other Contexts: Friends of Peace

Friends of Peace (FoP) is an NGO based in Tanzania dedicated to fostering and promoting peaceful dialogue in East Africa and more specifically in the Swahili-coast. It "serves as a platform where individuals from all walks of life can come together, share their perspectives, and work

towards building a more harmonious world"[3]. FoP and CPI began their collaboration in 2015, when CPI and the SDC conducted an exploratory mission in Zanzibar. At the time, FoP was still operating under its former name, Friends of Zanzibar. Since then, the two organizations have collaborated on numerous projects, most notably an initiative to prevent electoral violence and promote alternatives to violence (2019–2020) in Zanzibar. Following this project, FoP underwent significant organizational development to meet the growing demand for peacebuilding in Tanzania and the wider region. In 2021, the organization was rebranded from Friends of Zanzibar to Friends of Peace, as its board was expanded to include trustees from Swahili-speaking countries across East Africa, reflecting needs in the region and requests for peace work by the NGO.

Beyond their collaboration on projects, as with DAAC, CPI supported FoP in institutional strengthening through several key components.

While the overall accompaniment philosophy remained similar, the modalities of support differed according to each partner's level of institutional maturity, needs, and operating environment. CPI therefore adapted its accompaniment model rather than applying a standardized capacity-strengthening approach. In the case of Friends of Peace, support focused primarily on mentoring, exposure to professional networks, and learning-by-doing methodologies, reflecting the organization's existing capacities and regional experience.

First, as with DAAC, CPI accompanied FoP in strengthening their technical expertise in conflict transformation and peacebuilding. CPI invited the NGO to participate in training sessions and workshops throughout the project, while also providing access to tailored training designed to address FoP's specific needs.

Second, CPI assisted FoP in organizational development. Unlike the support provided for DAAC, CPI did not offer workshops or training sessions to strengthen FoP's capacity in areas such as monitoring and evaluation, financial management, and donor reporting. Instead, CPI supported FoP in these areas through mentoring and "learning-by-doing" methodologies. Through consistent presence and ongoing availability, FoP gradually developed stronger skills in organizational development. This same approach was applied to workshop management: by involving

[3] https://www.fop.or.tz/

FoP in the organization of workshops, the NGO gained new skills in organization and logistics through hands-on experience.

Third, CPI introduced FoP to its network. In doing so, CPI facilitated the establishment of new partnerships for FoP with Swiss peacebuilding actors and institutions, such as the ICRC, Geneva Call, CSS ETH Zurich, NRTP and other European peace actors. These strategies also helped FoP gain greater international visibility.

As a result of this long-term accompaniment, Friends of Peace strengthened its organizational structures, expanded its governance framework, and consolidated its position as a recognized peacebuilding actor in East Africa. The organization progressively transitioned from a Zanzibar-focused initiative into a regional platform with an expanded board representing several Swahili-speaking countries and a broader mandate covering peacebuilding and dialogue across the Swahili Coast. Today, Friends of Peace operates across East Africa Community countries and has established partnerships with a range of international actors and other peacebuilding institutions. Its regional engagement also extends to neighbouring and historically interconnected countries, including Malawi, Zambia, and Mozambique, reflecting a broader geographical scope beyond the Swahili-speaking countries and the East African Community. Building on this growth, the organization is increasingly positioning itself as a regional hub for mediation, dialogue, and conflict transformation in East Africa.

The collaboration with FoP proved highly beneficial to CPI, significantly enhancing both its knowledge base and operational capacities. Most notably, it strengthened local ownership of CPI's projects while deepening CPI's understanding of the local context. FoP's contribution was particularly valuable in this regard, as it brought extensive knowledge of the situation in Tanzania and the broader Swahili region, along with a well-established regional network. This partnership also sharpened CPI's cultural sensitivity, helping it navigates challenges more effectively. Furthermore, the collaboration bolstered the confidence of local actors, thereby reinforcing a broader dynamic of trust and mutual engagement. Beyond these operational benefits, the exchange proved intellectually fruitful, contributing to the development of new concepts within CPI's work. The collaboration with Friends of Peace further illustrates how CPI's partnerships have evolved into spaces of joint learning and knowledge exchange. FoP's in-depth understanding of the Tanzanian and wider Swahili context, combined with CPI's peacebuilding experience and

international networks, has enabled both organizations to learn from one another and jointly refine approaches to peacebuilding. This reflects the broader principles underpinning CPI's engagement with African partners, including the spirit of the Africa Charter for Transformative Research Collaborations: valuing locally grounded expertise, fostering equitable knowledge exchange, and recognizing African partners as active contributors to the development of knowledge and practice.

Overall, the partnership between CPI and FoP evolved from a project-based collaboration into a long-term strategic relationship characterized by mutual learning, trust, and complementary expertise. This evolution enabled Friends of Peace to move beyond its original Zanzibar focus and increasingly assume a regional role in supporting dialogue, mediation, and peacebuilding initiatives across East Africa.

4. Mutual Learning and Institutional Transformation

The experiences of DAAC and Friends of Peace demonstrate that localization is not solely a process of strengthening local actors. It is equally a process of transformation for international organizations. Through these partnerships, CPI refined its accompaniment methodology, strengthened its understanding of locally rooted peacebuilding approaches, and deepened its engagement with faith-based actors and religiously grounded conflict transformation mechanisms. The close collaboration with DAAC enhanced CPI's understanding of intra-faith dialogue, religious legitimacy, and reconciliation processes within Muslim communities, while the partnership with Friends of Peace strengthened its knowledge of community-led peacebuilding dynamics and regional networks in East Africa. These experiences encouraged CPI to move beyond traditional capacity-strengthening approaches and place greater emphasis on co-creation, mutual learning, adaptive programming, and shared leadership. Localization therefore emerged not as a one-way transfer of knowledge and resources, but as a process through which all partners contribute expertise, shape methodologies, and strengthen one another's institutional capacities.

5. Lessons Learned and Recommendations

The experience of CPI's reciprocal local partnership highlights several important lessons for localization in peacebuilding:

Localization requires time. To achieve meaningful and sustainable impact, it is essential to engage with local NGOs through long-term partnerships. Localization should be considered a long-term investment that supports capacity strengthening, fosters mutual learning, and enables the sustainable development of local organizations.

Accompaniment ≠ Subcontracting. By accompanying local NGOs, organizations help strengthen their ownership, leadership, and independence. Local NGOs are engaged throughout the full project cycle and play a central role in decision-making. They are not merely implementing partners; they are equal stakeholders who co-create, shape, and lead the project alongside their partners.

Donors must invest in institutional development. Supporting partners through technical and institutional development requires significant time and resources that are rarely entirely covered by project budgets. It is essential that donors recognize the value of this work and ensure it is adequately funded. Dedicated funding in this area would meaningfully strengthen partners' capacities and resources, ultimately accelerating and improving the localization of knowledge and competency transfer to local actors.

Local legitimacy matters. Local NGOs bring valuable expertise, contextual knowledge, and ownership to a project. They have a deep understanding of local needs, priorities, and realities, which enables them to design and implement more relevant and effective interventions. They also enjoy greater legitimacy and trust among local stakeholders and communities, as they are often the first point of contact and maintain long-standing relationships with beneficiaries.

True partnerships are built on reciprocity and alignment of core principles. Localization is also a process of institutional learning for international organizations. While local partners often benefit from technical accompaniment and access to international networks, international organizations equally benefit from local partners' contextual knowledge, social legitimacy, cultural understanding, and innovative practices. Effective localization therefore requires recognizing that expertise flows in multiple directions and that stronger peacebuilding outcomes emerge when all actors are positioned as contributors to a shared learning process. Collaboration between Southern and Northern NGOs thrives when both parties contribute equally, bringing complementary knowledge and expertise that together ensure the long-term sustainability of shared projects. As stated by Barbelet, "recognising that capacity does not necessarily flow one way – from the international to the local – would

better reflect the more complex reality in most contexts and allow capacity to be more effectively strengthened." (Barbelet, 2018, p.16).

Sustainability needs governance support. CPI's experience with partners such as DAAC and Friends of Peace demonstrates that organizational sustainability depends not only on technical expertise or access to funding, but also on strong governance systems. Supporting local organizations in developing boards, steering committees, strategic plans, internal policies, and accountability mechanisms enables them to make informed decisions, manage risks, and maintain institutional continuity beyond individual projects or staff members. Governance strengthening is therefore a critical but often overlooked component of localization, helping local actors build resilient institutions capable of independently leading peacebuilding initiatives over the long term.

6. Conclusion

CPI's experiences with DAAC in Nigeria and Friends of Peace in Tanzania demonstrate that meaningful localization requires more than the transfer of resources or project implementation responsibilities. Sustainable localization is a long-term process of institutional accompaniment, mutual learning, and progressive leadership transfer that enables local organizations to strengthen their autonomy while maintaining their legitimacy and contextual relevance. At the same time, these partnerships contribute to the evolution of international organizations themselves, fostering more adaptive, collaborative, and locally grounded approaches to peacebuilding. Localization should therefore be understood as a continuous process of shared ownership, complementarity, and institutional transformation.

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CPI is an independent non-profit organization, working on violence prevention and peace promotion. CPI aims to enhance theoretical and practical conflict transformation resources and has extensive experience in West Asian and African contexts. CPI promotes a methodology adapted to and accepted by local communities, conflict parties and peace actors. Since 2002, it has developed unique access and networks in the countries where it works. CPI's outlook is inspired by the Andalusian city of Cordoba: a renowned medieval center of inter-faith dialogue, and by Geneva: a modern center of international dialogue and exchange between peoples. CPI has Special Consultative Status with the United Nations.