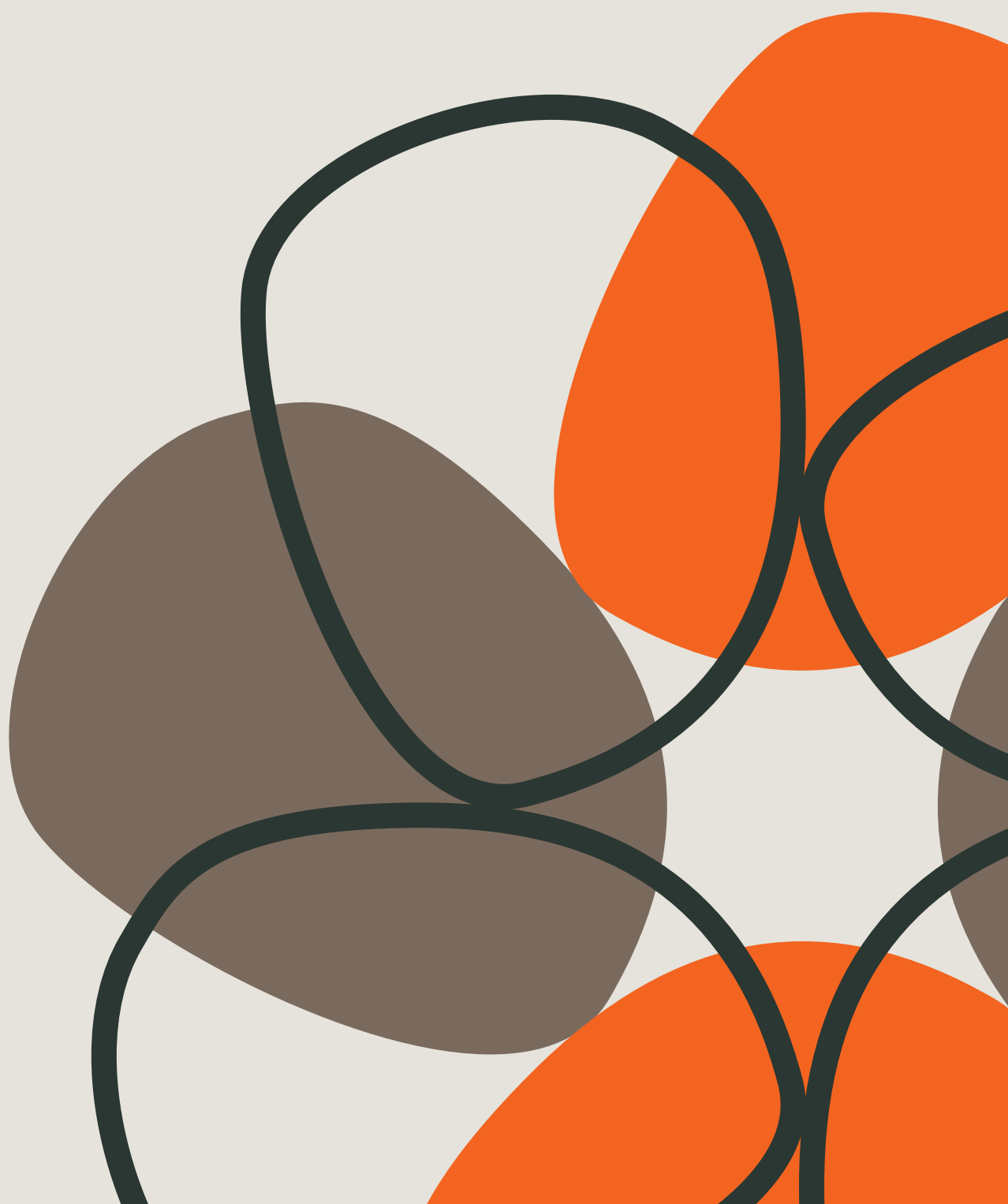




CONCILIATION
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EQUIPPING MINDS, MANAGING EMOTIONS: PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS AND SUPPORT FOR PEACEBUILDING AND PEACEBUILDERS

Prof. Dr. Irene Bruna Seu



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Disclaimer

The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Humanity United or Conciliation Resources. The author's views are based on participants' opinions and comments they expressed during the interviews and feedback groups, which have been reported as accurately as possible.

About the author

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2022, psychosocial empirical research examined how psychology can enhance peace mediation, for both mediation practitioners and parties to conflict. The *States of Mind in Conflict* research project¹ identified a worrying lack of recognition of and investment in the psychological and emotional dimensions of peace mediation and peacebuilding.

This pilot study explores in greater depth the specific needs of peacebuilders themselves, in terms of their own wellbeing and the desired psychological skills and tools, to identify the broad and specific interventions needed in the field.

Overarching observations

At the heart of peacebuilding work lies a psychological and emotional journey.

However, peacebuilding practitioners in international peacebuilding organisations feel that they are not adequately prepared or resourced to understand and manage the psychological and emotional aspects of their work. As a result, they face significant personal and professional challenges in emotionally demanding environments.

For peacebuilding efforts to be effective and sustainable, it is essential that:

1. practitioners are supported in maintaining an appropriate, healthy, and sustainable emotional involvement in their work.
2. practitioners become better equipped to understand, engage with and manage parties' and partners' states of mind and emotional states.

This requires a cultural shift in the peacebuilding field and a more expansive reframing of peacebuilding practice that encompasses the psychological and emotional influences and impacts at play.

In addition, it is vital to engage with donors/funders to raise awareness of these needs. It is important that, through funding calls and application requirements, funders encourage an engagement with and help resource the psychological and emotional aspects of peacebuilding.

Key findings

1. Interviewed peacebuilders felt inadequately equipped to manage the psychological and emotional demands of their work.
2. Many participants believed that they do not receive sufficient support in addressing these challenges.
3. Although there is a growing awareness within peacebuilding organisations of the emotional needs of staff, efforts to address these are significantly limited by insufficient funding and are often handled in a reactive, fragmented, and uncoordinated manner.
4. Many peacebuilders expressed dissatisfaction and frustration with the current peacebuilding models and training, which tend to focus on technical and substantive elements while neglecting psychological aspects.

Recommendations to NGOs and donor organisations

1. **Psychoeducation:** Provide training and opportunities for practitioners to develop psychological awareness and skills relevant to their work.
2. **Psycho-facilitation:** Establish methods and spaces for practitioners to recognise and process the emotional aspects of peacebuilding work.
3. **Psychosocial support:** Offer dedicated and multi-level support to address practitioners' mental health and their broader psychosocial needs.
4. **Reframing:** Encourage a shift and expansion in perspectives to enhance the effectiveness of peacebuilding by integrating psychological insights and approaches.

1. See: <https://www.c-r.org/learning-hub/states-mind-conflict>

INTRODUCTION

The *States of Mind In Conflict* research project² identified a worrying lack of recognition of and investment in the psychological and emotional dimensions of peace mediation and peacebuilding, both in terms of how peacebuilding is conceptualised, framed and understood, and the mental health impacts of dealing with conflict for both conflict parties and peace practitioners. Particularly problematic is the lack of psychological support for all parties involved in peacebuilding.

This pilot study explored in greater depth the specific needs of peacebuilders themselves, in terms of their own wellbeing and the desired psychological skills and tools, to identify the broad and specific interventions needed in the field.

This report aims to:

1. raise awareness in civil society organisations engaged in peacebuilding of the psychological impact of their work on staff and partners, and of the skills and technical input they need.
2. inform donors of these concerns to ensure that these dimensions are recognised as essential in peacebuilding and included in project proposals and budgets.
3. map out the broad and specific interventions needed in the field and make practical recommendations.

Methodology

The objective of this work was to focus specifically on peacebuilding, rather than on high-level mediation or other forms of peace mediation.

Six international peacebuilding non-governmental organisations³ agreed to participate in the study, which consisted of semi-structured interviews and feedback groups with a total of 28 practitioners. Each participant was invited to consider the overarching question of whether, and in what ways, psychological insights and tools might enhance the effectiveness of peacebuilding work.

Participants were prompted to reflect on two central themes. First, they were asked to identify the psychological skills they believed would enable them to be more effective in their roles, with particular emphasis on their capacity to understand and support both parties affected by conflict and partners engaged in peacebuilding activities. Second, the interviews explored the personal impact of peacebuilding work on practitioners' wellbeing, as well as the types of psychological support they felt were necessary to sustain their work and address their psychosocial needs.

It is important to note that the findings draw on a range of experiences, and they are not limited to any single organisational perspective or context.

Data were analysed thematically following Braun & Clarke's⁴ model, and clustered around four categories:

1. Psychological knowledge, skills and tools: practitioner perspectives
2. Understanding others through engaging with one's emotions
3. Need for multi-level and multi-factorial psychological support
4. Tensions and challenges in contemporary peacebuilding practice

2. Ibid.

3. Berghof Foundation, Build Up, CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation, Conciliation Resources, Life and Peace Institute, Search for Common Ground.

4. Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021) *Thematic Analysis – a practical guide*. London: Sage

FINDINGS

1. Psychological knowledge, skills and tools: practitioner perspectives

When interviewees reflected on the psychological knowledge, skills and tools they felt would enhance their peacebuilding effectiveness, their responses fell broadly into two groups: those relating to understanding conflict parties, and those supporting the peacebuilding process itself.

1.1 Knowledge and techniques needed to understand conflict parties

“It’s not easy when you come in as a peacebuilder and you pretend you’re bringing in some tools that can allow people to come together with each other, move away from confrontation and violence to collaboration and reconciliation processes, while you’re unable to read what they’re going through internally.”⁵

States of mind and mindsets⁶

Practitioners highlighted the importance of understanding the states of mind and mindsets of parties involved in conflict. They emphasised the need to grasp how the mind and brain function, and to clarify the relationship between mindsets, expectations, identity and narratives. This included learning about how mindsets shape investment in conflict and the processes by which mindsets can shift.

Psychosocial complexity of victimhood

Interviewees expressed a need for a psychological understanding of and tools to manage the nuanced tension between recognising and acknowledging victimhood, and the potential for its weaponisation within conflicts.

Emotions

Practitioners stressed the significance of understanding parties’ emotions, particularly rage and anger – their origins and roles in conflict dynamics – but also parties’ states of mind as they shift in group settings.

For example, one experienced practitioner recounted feeling unprepared when facilitating a volatile group dialogue, recognising the impact of trauma on participants’ emotional states but lacking the skills to manage the situation within practical constraints.

Individual and group psychology

There was consensus on the need for deeper knowledge of both individual and group psychology, including the shifts that occur between these modes.

Trauma awareness

Understanding trauma – its dynamics, impacts and the necessity for trauma-informed practice – was identified as essential. Practitioners called for methodologies that are communal and culturally adaptable, such as those suited for African contexts, while also based on evolving scientific knowledge.

“We would find people in the communities sharing [their experience] and breaking down and the teams we had sent would come back and say: ‘What do we do? Do we just say, OK, the dialogue is over, go!’ So, they would challenge us and say: ‘Why do you not have counsellors?’ And of course [...] it wasn’t in the budget. You know, the donors did not, do not allow it.”

Psycho-soma continuum⁷

Central to these insights was an urgent need to comprehend the psycho-soma as an integrated continuum – how the body and mind are connected – recognising the interplay between psychological and physical experiences.

Psychological language

Participants expressed a wish to gain a better understanding of what they observe in their work in psychological terms and to better scaffold their work through psychological concepts. Some practitioners noted that a lack of psychological language and understanding can lead to self-doubt and self-blame when facing challenging situations.

5. Quotes have been shortened for brevity. The chosen sections have been selected to illustrate the specific point they refer to.

6. A **mindset** is a *long-term, relatively stable* way of thinking or a framework through which we interpret the world. It is an enduring orientation based on experience, values and beliefs, and acts as a lens or filter that influences our decisions, behaviours and reactions over time. Mindsets are hard to change. A **state of mind** is a *temporary mental or emotional condition* we are in at a given moment. It is fluid, can shift quickly depending on circumstances, mood or environment, and affects immediate reactions. States of mind are short-term, fluctuate according to context, and can be accessed and shifted.

7. The **psycho-soma continuum** refers to the understanding of the human being as an integrated unit of mind (psyche) and body (soma), where mental and physical processes exist on a spectrum rather than as separate, opposing entities. This concept emphasises that mental states can manifest physically and vice versa.

1.2 Skills to support the peacebuilding process

Relational dynamics

Interviewees identified the importance of better understanding the psychology of relational dynamics, including how to nurture relationships and build trust to foster meaningful dialogue and credibility. Creating emotionally 'safe spaces' for parties was seen as vital, although there were questions about how such spaces are defined and understood.

Preparedness

Practitioners suggested the need to complexify the concept of parties' preparedness, moving beyond power dynamics and transactional concerns to consider the meaning, purpose and temporality of preparedness – and to develop a toolkit for preparing participants for peacebuilding processes. In particular, many referred to the damage caused by *"unlocking trauma when participants are still vulnerable"* and the related need for practitioners to be trained to assess that.

Stabilising states of mind

There was a clear need for skills to stabilise volatile, distorted, hopeless or unstable states of mind among parties.

Narrative shifts and rehumanisation

Practitioners sought techniques to support shifts in conflict narratives, particularly those that facilitate the rehumanisation of perceived enemies.

Letting go of emotional investments

Supporting parties in letting go of emotional investments in conflict was recognised as a key skill for peacebuilders.

Psychological techniques

Specific psychological tools needed by practitioners included paraphrasing, mirroring, modelling, holding, containment, grounding and emotional regulation.

It should be noted that, although there was general consistency in the identification of these themes across interviews, variation existed among practitioners regarding the extent of psychological skills they already possessed and/or applied intuitively. Junior practitioners, unsurprisingly, tended to demonstrate greater hesitancy and showed a more pronounced need for further skill development and psychological support.

2. Understanding others through engaging with one's emotions

This set of findings compiles a range of observations and thoughts highlighting the critical need to understand and manage the intricate, shifting boundaries between the states of mind of practitioners and those of parties involved in conflict or peacebuilding partners.

The comments focused on three main areas:

a) practitioners' self-awareness of what they inadvertently bring into their practice; b) their ability to be mindful of and reflect on ostensibly irrational or inappropriate responses from parties, partners and themselves during peacebuilding processes; and c) the various psychological skills and support needed to effectively manage general emotional reactivity and volatility in order to benefit the process.

2.1 Practitioners' self-awareness and its role in peacebuilding

Personal resonances in peacebuilding engagement

Practitioners feel it is important to *"debunk the fantasy that peacebuilders are immune"* to the emotional charge of the processes they facilitate. Many reported experiencing resonances from their personal history during peacebuilding processes, *"particularly when it triggers something from past experiences"*, or powerful emotional reactions. Lacking the tools to psychologically understand and manage their own responses, however, they feel confused, uncertain and self-doubting, all of which are unhelpful to the process.

“ Now we are more and more recognising in peacebuilding that [...] neutrality doesn't exist. You will feel your personal emotions engaged in what you're dealing with because you hold some identities and you always connect one part of your identity to what you're dealing with.”

Practitioners' increased mindfulness of their own emotions, and a careful management of boundaries are also needed to avoid the emergence of a 'saviour's complex': practitioners assuming disproportionate responsibility for the outcomes, over-identifying with participants or demonstrating heightened empathy. Practitioners expressed a desire for deeper awareness of the *"raw and unprocessed emotions"* they experience, and to be supported in understanding and managing the unavoidable emotional entanglement in their work.

Knowing oneself and understanding resilience

Practitioners concurred that a key element of successful peacebuilding is the principle of 'know thyself',⁸ especially through greater self-reflection regarding their own motivations. Practitioners often struggle to appreciate and validate their own emotional distress or override signs that they've reached the limits of their resilience. Several interviewees reported dismissing their own need for support due to guilt over their privilege and safety compared to those directly impacted by conflict. This dynamic may be intensified further when there is an institutional lack of validation which "*gets internalised and turns into self-gaslighting*".

By cultivating this self-awareness and acting accordingly, practitioners are better equipped to maintain their wellbeing and sustain their involvement in challenging peacebuilding contexts.

“ In terms of people understanding themselves better, I’m a fond believer that you cannot give what you don’t have. So, you create a lot of harm if you do not have this very strong self-awareness.”

Self-awareness as a bridge to understanding others

Several practitioners shared personal stories of feeling suddenly out of their depth, having uncontrollable and disproportionate reactions, or being overwhelmed by strong emotions that seemed to come "*out of nowhere*", which left them feeling ashamed, confused and deskilled. On reflection, they concluded that these were reactions to the "*raw emotions*" and unprocessed dynamics in the group processes they were leading, but with no mechanism or space to learn from their reactions and use them to inform their practice.

The process of enhancing self-awareness does not only benefit the practitioner; it also serves as a foundation for deeper understanding of others. Some view this as a process of 'self-humanisation', enabling practitioners to humanise themselves and participants, fostering a relational dynamic that includes the broader process, partners and even opponents.

“ This is a key role for psychology to play in terms of helping people to understand themselves better, and I think that if that happens it can also be a strong tool for prevention – not just for the aftermath of conflict. But I think one of the reasons why we have conflict is exactly that people do not understand themselves at individual level or at community level.”

This reciprocal recognition underpins empathy and facilitates constructive engagement.

Understanding types of 'not knowing'

Practitioners wish to understand better the pervasive and varied states of 'not knowing' that can arise during peacebuilding. These may stem from uncertainty intrinsic to the process or from insufficient understanding of the psychological dimensions. Both are psychologically challenging, but distinguishing between these types is essential, as each requires a specific kind of support and intervention to address effectively.

Distinguishing between 'to sit with it' and 'to sit on it'

Peacebuilders referred in various ways to struggling with frustration and uncertainty in peacebuilding processes. Some needed support 'to sit with it', which refers to a facilitative stance wherein practitioners tolerate frustration and refrain from forcing the pace of the process.

In contrast, others recognised in themselves and colleagues, on occasion, a tendency to 'to sit on it', which denotes a more defensive posture, characterised by avoidance or suppression of difficult emotions. Over time, participants observed, this defence mechanism may develop into a propensity for excessive rationalisation or even cynicism. Recognising and managing these approaches is critical to maintaining a constructive and supportive environment within peacebuilding processes.

When practitioners gain greater insight into their own emotions and reactions they are better equipped to comprehend the reactions of others and the processes they are facilitating. This process contributes to developing oneself as an instrument for peace and is closely related to psycho-facilitation.

8. 'Know thyself' is an ancient Greek aphorism which serves as a call to self-reflection, urging individuals to understand their own limitations, strengths and character. It is used today as a call for self-awareness, personal growth and emotional intelligence.

3. Need for multi-level and multi-factorial psychosocial support

“The team would come back and said ‘we are overwhelmed with the stories we are hearing, with the things we are hearing. We don’t know how to process it. We are not sleeping at night, or we can’t stop thinking about it.’”

Throughout all interviews, participants openly described the significant effects that peacebuilding work has had on their own wellbeing and that of their colleagues. Their personal accounts revealed that the impact is both deep and far-reaching, extending beyond the practitioners themselves to affect their families and the broader work environment; for example, overreacting in family settings and, in extreme cases, domestic abuse.

Among the most frequently mentioned symptoms were sleeplessness, heightened anxiety, chronic stress, depression, physical (somatic) symptoms including prolonged illnesses and a weakened immune system, burnout, and a profound sense of isolation. Participants spoke of the toxic effect of having no downtime and being in a “*constant heightened emotional state*”. This buildup of emotional impact of peacebuilding work was described as “*boiling water*” and a process that “*eats you alive*”. These experiences were reported with notable consistency and regularity throughout the interviews.

Without the necessary psychological support as a self-protective strategy, practitioners may become “*emotionally numb*”, detached from their work and desensitised. Participants expressed concern that this impairs the ability for human, empathic connection which is necessary to peacebuilding work.

In addition to these common symptoms, several practitioners reported experiencing secondary trauma, low motivation and existential doubts. These latter effects were not universally experienced, but they were particularly recurring among those working in frontline peacebuilding contexts.

Participants consistently voiced the need for psychosocial support for practitioners, both as individuals and within teams, arguing that it is essential to both enhance their wellbeing and sustain their effectiveness in their work. Support needs to operate at multiple levels and address various factors influencing wellbeing. The specific type and extent of support required seems to depend on whether practitioners sought it for themselves – in the form of self-care, particularly when working on the frontline – or to strengthen their ability to help others, described as the ‘oxygen mask’ approach.⁹

Providing support to practitioners enables them to build and maintain resilience in their daily work as they endure demanding and emotionally taxing circumstances, particularly when their roles involve supporting others in high pressure situations.

The overflow and spillover

While many of the adverse effects on wellbeing have been documented in prior research, this pilot’s interviews highlighted a previously unreported phenomenon: the emotional spillover of peacebuilding work into professional relationships and interactions between institutions and individuals. This dynamic was found to intensify individuals’ challenges and their experiences of isolation.

“You hear colleagues talk about, ‘oh, this work is stressful or, oh, I don’t feel good about this, oh, this environment is toxic’. But then you wonder, what made it that way? I think it’s the pressure of not addressing or talking about these things, so peacebuilders are expected to be the solution, but nobody thinks about what the peacebuilders themselves need [...] we then burn out, don’t treat each other very well.”

As a symptom of this spillover and the sector’s general disconnection from the emotional dimensions of peacebuilding, participants reported a “*disturbing disconnect from senior management*”, controlling, unsympathetic or abusive management style, or feeling that practitioners are “*left on their own when we need most support and care.*”

These instances, and in general the nexus between peacebuilding processes and interpersonal/intra-institutional dynamics, warrant further examination, as it underscores the significant influence of unaddressed psychological factors emerging from peacebuilding processes, which can extend into other contexts with negative consequences.

Need for appropriate forms of psychosocial support

Professionals identified a recurring challenge in delivering effective psychosocial support: ensuring that the provider is the right psychosocial fit for the recipient’s needs. It is essential to have a clear understanding and ongoing assessment of what type of support is needed, as these needs may change over time and differ according to specific circumstances.

9. The oxygen mask metaphor is widely used in peacebuilding and mediation training and refers to the idea of ensuring one’s own wellbeing in conflict work before helping others. It has been directly or indirectly used by John Paul Lederach and William Ury, among others.

There was consensus among practitioners about the necessity to recognise and value existing, culturally-specific forms of support – such as a hug, drumming, or broader community support in African contexts – while acknowledging the limitations of these approaches. Often, those who offer support may lack formal training and instead rely on their own personal experience, which can be insufficient or even detrimental.

Participants expressed concerns regarding local leaders' limited formal training, particularly when those affected by conflict require specialised expertise. They also cautioned against the risks of unresolved trauma biases in 'wounded healers', remarking that support providers who are themselves traumatised and experiencing interpersonal conflicts may inadvertently cause additional harm to victims.

“ Leaders and decision-makers, especially in fragile contexts, have high levels of internalised, not-dealt-with trauma, even undiagnosed PTSD, which may impact decision-making and political processes, and perpetuate various forms of violence, including structural violence.”

Some argued that because of these reasons, support is often most effective when delivered by individuals who are removed from the immediate situation. If the support provider is too close to those they are helping, it can cloud their judgement and lead to confusion, ultimately diminishing the effectiveness of the support being offered. This applied to both practitioners receiving support from within their own organisation, and partners and parties affected by trauma.

In short, insufficient shared experience may lead to a lack of contextual understanding and relevance, thereby diminishing the emotional containment and support required. Conversely, excessive closeness to the problem – where the provider shares too similar an experience with the recipient – may compromise objectivity and boundaries, which could be detrimental to both parties involved.

While it is important to utilise existing resources and established practices, there is also an urgent need to establish an international roster of psychosocial experts specifically for practitioners. Interviewees emphasised that such support should be provided by professionals who are external to the practitioner's own organisation, in order to reduce anxiety and prevent resistance to seeking help.

4. Tensions and challenges in contemporary peacebuilding practice

During the interviews, practitioners identified the emotional impact of additional tensions, outlined below; these were mentioned spontaneously, rather than as answers to specific questions. The tensions referred to both ongoing challenges intrinsic to the field of peacebuilding, how these were compounded by the specificity of this historical moment, and how they added to practitioners' emotional challenges. The responses highlighted the material and emotional impacts of current peacebuilding models, frameworks and roles, and their constraining effects, and further evidenced the need for integrating psychological and emotional considerations into current models of peacebuilding.

The common thread was how these unaddressed tensions resulted in the silencing or marginalisation of vital human aspects of peacebuilding work.

Dissatisfaction with silos and the domination of a conflict resolution framework

Many expressed frustration at how a focus on conflict resolution without a psychological lens leaves unaddressed key aspects of peacebuilding and of what makes us human. There was consensus that the 'action-oriented' nature of peacebuilding processes, the priority given to rationality, and the domination of the emergency model with its reactive 'problem-solving' orientation, all militate against reflection and connection, with both oneself and others.

“ We tend to work on the level of the head and knowledge and [...] discard the effects the rest of humanness basically has on our capacity to support. [...] we very often leave out the somatic aspects, the emotional aspects and everything else that makes the human, besides the knowledge part. [...] we have workshops, we have trainings and I have heads in the room and not humans in the room and we connect as heads, but we don't connect as humans.”

Similar constraining effects were identified in programming, the pressures of having to deliver, and the dangers of compartmentalisation of roles and mandates.

“ I feel like we are stuck in the programming and delivering on projects and not in humanising ourselves and getting to know each other better so that we can be better individuals to each other.”

There was also a sense that people's basic needs are ignored because of a dominant focus on conflict resolution.

“ One of the things that I struggle with at a personal level is going into a community, calling them for a dialogue when they don't have a single drop of water or haven't eaten food for days, but because I am not a humanitarian worker, and because donors have siloed the three spaces... so, you're either humanitarian or development or peacebuilder.”

There is a clear demand for more expansive peacebuilding frameworks, and for organisations and donors to support more flexible and human-centred approaches that view partners and parties more holistically, recognise the central role of practitioners' and parties' emotions, acknowledge the fundamental need for reflection, and embed these changes into policy. Practitioners feel that this is urgent, even when acknowledging that organisations' willingness and ability to address these needs are severely hampered by reduced funding and the adverse impact of the current geopolitical climate.

Additional pressures from the current geopolitical climate

Current events, the shifting global order and escalating conflict are creating additional challenges and affecting the morale of peacebuilders. Practitioners reflected on the increased pressures they face in navigating the familiar demands inherent in peacebuilding work while simultaneously adapting to the unique circumstances shaped by the current historical context – for example, an increase in conflict globally together with a shift of funding away from peacebuilding and towards defence – which presents them with new layers of difficulty. Practitioners experience the pressure as “*relentless*” and commented that “*everything feels urgent*” at a time when their own and their organisation's resources are being stretched further. These challenges place additional strain on peacebuilders' capacity to deliver effective support, and on their wellbeing.

Tensions between the vocational and professional nature of peacebuilding

The challenges mentioned above compound the tensions inherent in the dual nature of peacebuilding work, which is highly professionalised while also built on relationships with partners cultivated with care and over time. The vocational model in peacebuilding relies on deep personal investment often going beyond job descriptions. Although this mode of working drives and sustains practitioners, it also blurs personal and professional boundaries, leading to tensions around time, commitment, rest and relationships.

Increased bureaucratisation contrasts with this intrinsic motivation, while growing global conflict and reduced resources intensify challenges around funding shortages and anxiety over programme stability. These pressures cause institutional stress, pressure peacebuilders to take on extra tasks, and amplify urgency due to geopolitical instability. Persistent intersectional issues, such as gendered empathy burdens on women practitioners, remain.

This intersection of ongoing and context-specific challenges emphasises the importance of targeted psychosocial and psychological support and skills development within the sector, which are needed to sustain practitioners' wellbeing and effectiveness over time. It further highlights the urgent need for donors' and funders' support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings point to the need for several multi-level, practical measures to be activated:

1. *institutionally*, within organisations, particularly in conflict-affected contexts
2. *systemically*, in NGO institutional policies and practices, and
3. *conceptually*, by expanding peacebuilding models.

The recommendations are grouped under the broad categories of **psychoeducation**, **psycho-facilitation**, **psychosocial support**, and **reframing**. These practical recommendations are intended to be interconnected, each influencing and reinforcing the others, all contributing to a shift in the field's culture. They involve a variety of interventions, including briefings, debriefings, support for individuals and teams, training, upskilling and coaching.

The recommendations are most impactful when carried out across all these levels; however, given the current scarcity of resources, targeted context-specific interventions are much needed and can be impactful on their own. Emotionally intelligent and supportive leadership is essential in turning these principles into practice, as is the practical support of donors.

1. Psychoeducation – training and upskilling

Although the recommendations for training and upskilling are based on a relatively small group of interviewees, there was notable agreement regarding the necessity of training to enable practitioners to:

- establish a solid foundation in psychological terminology and concepts.
- develop an ability to interpret what they observe in psychological terms.
- increase their capacity for self-awareness and ability to manage and utilise their emotional responses in the service of their work.
- develop proficiency in psychological techniques that support mediation and exchanges.

2. Psycho-facilitation – supervision, coaching, team and individual work

Thinking and processing spaces are clearly urgently needed. It is critical that these opportunities are established and incorporated as good practice into planning to enable individuals and teams to reflect, process and learn. The format needs to be flexible and adaptable to circumstances in order to scaffold peacebuilding processes and cultivate an ongoing, integrated awareness of the psychological and emotional aspects of the work.

3. Psychosocial support

Based on interview findings, five distinct levels of psychosocial support are recommended:

3.1 Psychosocial briefing

A psychosocial preparatory briefing is essential, particularly for new or younger peacebuilders, both as part of induction as well as prior to deployment. This briefing should highlight the central role of emotions within peacebuilding work, raise practitioners' awareness of the potential impact of the work on their emotional wellbeing, and underscore the necessity for ongoing psychosocial orientation throughout their careers.

3.2 First aid

Psychosocial first aid is designed to help peacebuilders endure, process and contain the emotional challenges inherent in their work. This support is vital for enabling practitioners to effectively manage the psychological dimensions of their roles while maintaining clarity in their thinking, and could involve, for example, one-to-one counselling support or specialists on call to respond to emergencies.

3.3 Individual and team support

Support at both the individual and team levels is necessary across organisations and programmes. Such support strengthens wellbeing by fostering collaboration and shared resilience among practitioners, allowing them to draw on collective resources and experiences. Additionally, it can provide a safe space in which to process and learn from the emotional dimensions of the process they are supporting.

3.4 Debriefing

Current approaches to debriefing are often perceived as perfunctory, with practitioners feeling compelled to merely “tick the box” rather than genuinely feeling heard. This tendency, sometimes used as a defence mechanism, leads practitioners to focus primarily on substantive aspects of conflict resolution rather than addressing emotional and psychological aspects of the experience.

Based on the interviews, a new form of debriefing should be introduced – one that is less siloed, more open and flexible, and tailored to individual practitioners and contexts. This psychosocial debriefing, offered by a psychosocial specialist together with an experienced peacebuilder, should be normalised and fully integrated into practice, offering space for reflection and meaningful connection.

3.5 The 3 Rs: rest, recover, reflect

Practitioners emphasised the importance of rest, recovery and reflection, often facilitated through retreats and opportunities to ‘zoom out’ from their work and ‘zoom in’ to themselves. These practices are critical to peacebuilders’ ability to recharge and maintain their emotional wellbeing, in turn supporting sustained engagement in demanding environments.

3.6 Embed support principles in practice

To empower practitioners to identify the specific support they need at different stages of their work, it is vital to integrate these principles into peacebuilding practices and to normalise them. This is not just a matter of providing access to a targeted form of support, such as one-to-one mental health first aid, but of systemically and systematically combating stigma, actively acknowledging the emotional impacts of the work, and normalising practitioners’ need for support. Creating conditions that allow practitioners to access available resources and support systems is essential for sustaining their wellbeing and effectiveness over time.

4. Reframing

“ People tend to see any issue through the lens of their background. When you come in as a conflict transformation expert, you tend to see everything related to peacebuilding as conflict transformation. Sometimes it’s a lack of awareness. At the beginning, that was my case.”

Beyond the practical recommendations, practitioners expressed a wish for a more expansive framing of peacebuilding, urging an approach that recognises it as an emotional journey, and for the role and impact of emotions to be centred more in peacebuilding practice.

This recommendation involves an important cultural shift. It implies that acknowledging the emotional and psychological aspects of peacebuilding is key to, rather than an optional addition to, effective peacebuilding. It means moving beyond silos, towards a holistic psychosocial appreciation of parties, partners and those affected by conflict. As articulated in the quote above, this recommendation centres on the application of the emotional/psychological/psychosocial aspects of the work as a lens to inform all aspects of peacebuilding; not as an add-on, but as integral to analysis, programming and implementation of peacebuilding work. Such a lens is particularly vital in enabling practitioners to design multimodal facilitation processes that are flexible enough to accommodate complex and contextually relevant peacebuilding.

The previous three recommendations – psychoeducation, psycho-facilitation and psychological support – simultaneously facilitate, support and embed the cultural shift recommended here.

CONCLUSIONS

“ [I was working in] South Sudan two years back and I remember talking to these people [...] about their life from childhood. And people really wanted to talk about this, and it became a very emotional moment. And what was most revealing for me was they said ‘no one ever asks.’ Because when we are working in this field, we are expected to deliver. Nobody wants to talk about emotions and feelings and experiences, but then they shape who we are in very powerful ways.”

It is clear from this extract, and reiterated throughout the interviews, that peacebuilding is fundamentally a psychological and emotional journey. Given the significant personal and professional challenges experienced by peacebuilders in emotionally demanding environments, it is urgent that practitioners are upskilled and supported to meet these challenges. Equally, the application of a psychologically informed lens to their practices can better support and enable conflict parties and peacebuilding partners too. In addition to multi-level, practical measures, the study emphasises the need for a cultural shift, integrating psychological and emotional considerations into a more expansive understanding of peacebuilding.



Conciliation Resources is an international organisation committed to stopping violent conflict and creating more peaceful societies. We work with people impacted by war and violence, bringing diverse voices together to make change that lasts.

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