



## **The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: The Role of Funders in Conflict**

November 2014

### **OVERVIEW**

In 2014, the Peace and Security Funders Group (PSFG) hosted three panel discussions that brought together funders and practitioners to discuss how funders can more effectively contribute to conflict prevention, conflict mitigation, and peacebuilding in conflict and post-conflict settings. Borne from a collective interest in identifying practical tools for positive funder engagement in light of continued conflicts around the world, including Syria, Iraq, Ukraine, and the Central African Republic, the panel discussions aimed to spark dialogue and draw out lessons learned.

This white paper reviews the key takeaways and recommends next steps for advancing the conversation to further improve the efficacy of funders working in these challenging conflict and post-conflict settings. Next steps include forming the Conflict and Atrocities Prevention Working Group; including multi-lateral donors in these conversations; hosting a series of off-the-record dialogues on failure; and exploring a workshop to offer best practices for new funders in this space.

### **KEY TAKEAWAYS: GOOD PRACTICES FOR FUNDERS**

The panel discussions were held at three major funder conferences in the United States and Europe: the PSFG annual conference, the European Foundation Centre's annual meeting, and the International Human Rights Funders Group bi-annual conference.<sup>1</sup> By conducting similar discussions across three different groupings of funders, PSFG hoped to elicit concrete best practices and lessons learned in the pre-, mid-, and post-conflict stages. Participants at these conferences were primarily private and public foundation staff. Because only a handful of multi-lateral donors, UN agencies, and government donors were present, the below lessons and recommendations are principally reflective of the experiences of one sector of the funding community.

Focusing on concrete lessons learned and drawing upon best practices from real case studies, the highly interactive panel sessions included diverse viewpoints from both experts working directly in conflict settings and foundation staff. The panels and subsequent discussion sessions aimed to address these basic but complicated questions:

- What type of grantmaking is best in a pre- and post-conflict setting (e.g., rapid response, multi-year, general support)?

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<sup>1</sup> For details on each panel, please see the Comparison Chart.

- What is the appropriate role for foundations and philanthropists? Are there ways in which like-minded funders can better collaborate in a fast-changing and difficult environment?
- What do advocates and experts on the ground need?
- Are there ways that funders *hurt* peacebuilding efforts?

From the conversations there emerged several common lessons learned and recommendations for improving the efficacy of funding in pre- and post-conflict settings. Overall, funders acknowledged that funding in conflict and post-conflict settings is inherently risky. **Funders must be willing to assume some degree of risk when engaging in these settings.** While the risk of failure is real, the rewards may be great: funders that are flexible, creative, and willing to take risks can play an important role in preventing and mitigating conflict.

To minimize the potential for failure, or worse, the potential to inflict harm, an **in-depth knowledge of the context is fundamental.** Prior to engaging in a conflict or post-conflict setting, funders must understand the context, the drivers of conflict, key conflict issues, potential spoilers, and constituencies for peace. Participants stressed that funders can have the greatest impact in areas where they have experience and knowledge.

There was also agreement that **more resources need to be devoted to conflict prevention.**

Additionally, there was a great **emphasis on supporting locally-led initiatives.** When supporting local efforts, funders should consider the interplay between local, national, and international efforts and leverage their ability to connect local actors with national and international players. Some participants also cautioned that funders should do their homework before selecting their partners to ensure that they are not supporting organizations with little interest in peace.

**Establishing relationships and partnerships with grantees and other key stakeholders** is also important. By staying connected with partners and grantees, funders are able to stay on top of the situation and build networks for peace.

Finally, **peacebuilding work is long-term and requires a long-term commitment.** When engaging in a conflict area, funders should think about long-term strategies for building and maintaining peace. While a long-term commitment is important, **flexibility is also critical.** Changes in the context may result in situations in which the best option for funders is to disengage. Knowledge of the context, flexibility, strong partnerships, and continued evaluation, allows funders to make informed decisions about when to change their strategies or when to disengage.

## **NEXT STEPS: FROM PANELS TO IMPROVING PRACTICE**

While the panels took place at three different conferences, with three different groups of funders, the conversations were similar. Overall, there seems to be agreement amongst funders on several key foundational principals for funding in conflict and agreement that there needs to be more focus on conflict prevention.

How do we go from *discussing* practice to *improving* practice?

First, PSFG will seek to weave in larger donors (e.g., multi-lateral organizations, UN agencies, World Bank Group), most of whom were not included in these discussions, for additional conversations to see if there are additional lessons that can be learned from these donors.

Second, based on the information garnered from these panel discussions, PSFG will explore developing a workshop (either in person or on YouTube) for funders new to the peace and security field. With the aim of improving donor practices, the workshop could offer advice, good practices, and things to avoid.

Third, PSFG can help advance the conversation on improving donor practices in conflict and post-conflict settings by facilitating a conversation on failure. We believe this conversation is critical, but needs to be structured in such a way as to truly elicit introspection and honest criticism, as well as a positive way to learn from these failures and share these lessons learned with others in a non-threatening way. In 2015, PSFG will launch a series of small-group, off-the-record dialogues to create the space for this type of learning.

Finally, in partnership with the International Human Rights Funders Group, PSFG recently launched the Conflict and Atrocities Prevention Working Group. The group's purpose is to be a space for learning, information-sharing, and collaboration, as well as a place for a dedicated group of funders seeking to draw others into this important, yet under-resourced space. Please contact Alexandra Toma ([atoma@peaceandsecurity.org](mailto:atoma@peaceandsecurity.org)) if you'd like to join this working group.