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NGOs and romanticisation of the local turn: a (re)appraisal of professional peacebuilding by NGOs in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines local peacebuilding programmes and approaches designed and implemented by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the African context. It highlights the structural and functional shortcomings inherent in peacebuilding NGOs on the continent while interrogating the implications of the romanticised 'local turn' paradigm in peace theory and praxis. Employing an autobiographical approach, I draw on personal experiences and both formal and informal interactions with colleagues in the sector – during and beyond my tenure as a peacebuilding practitioner – to critically assess the professionalised and project-based peacebuilding initiatives undertaken by NGOs. This methodological approach distinguishes the article from existing studies, which predominantly rely on case studies and comparative analyses. The article develops a typology of professional NGO-based peacebuilders – categorising them as ambitious, career-oriented, or sceptical – and utilises this framework to scrutinise the professionalisation and 'NGO-isation' of peacebuilding in Africa. In doing so, it exposes fundamental weaknesses in project-based peacebuilding programmes while also demonstrating how African peacebuilding professionals contribute to the romanticisation of the local turn in peace scholarship. Ultimately, the article underscores the urgent need to critically reassess the intertwined processes of professionalisation and 'NGO-isation' within peacebuilding efforts in Africa and beyond.

Introduction

Prior to securing a position with an international non-governmental organisation (NGO)[1] in early 2014, I had been working with local NGOs across East Africa since 2008. As part of the requirements for my new role as a peacebuilding coordinator, I was mandated to complete more than 10 professional training courses, alongside several elective ones. Among these was a three-day training on peacebuilding programming, held in Tanzania's northern city of Arusha and facilitated by three senior colleagues; an American, an American-based Zimbabwean, and a Filipino. This training covered the principles, guidelines and processes for designing and implementing peace projects, adhering to conflict sensitivity and 'Do No Harm' frameworks. Upon completion of the inaugural training, codenamed *Peacebuilding*

101, my colleagues and I were awarded certificates, marking my formal entry into the realm of professional peacebuilding. I vividly recall a Congolese colleague exclaiming, '*sasa tume-kuwa peacebuilders kamili*' (now we have become proper peacebuilders). It was then that I realised that becoming an NGO peacebuilder required specific qualifications, which were attainable only through designated training programmes, some of which were too rigorous and inaccessible for many of the so-called everyday people. Yet the excitement of my new job, coupled with a naïve enthusiasm to 'build peace', obscured the systemic flaws within the profession I was about to enter.

I went on to become an 'expert peacebuilder', engaging in mentorship, capacity-building and peacebuilding training for nearly five years. Despite my objections, community members I served would routinely address me with titles such as *mwalimu* (teacher), *mkubwa* (boss), or *kiongozi* (leader). These labels reflect underlying power imbalances between NGO-based professional peacebuilders and the communities they serve. However, it requires deep reflexivity to fully comprehend the implications of such power differentials within the theory and practice of NGO-led peacebuilding.

Through autoethnographic reflections on my lived experiences as a professional peacebuilding practitioner in Africa,[2] this article adopts a 'pracademic' approach – bridging theory and practice – to critically engage with the controversies surrounding local peacebuilding on the continent. Specifically, I interrogate the 'careerisation' of peacebuilding, highlighting the structural challenges inherent in the professionalisation of the field. In doing so, I examine how professional peacebuilders inadvertently sustain a dysfunctional peacebuilding system, reproducing forms of structural violence rather than mitigating them. Paralleling David Graeber's (2018) provocative concept of 'bullshit jobs', I argue that the core issue lies not in the individual careers that the system sustains but in the broken nature of the system itself. Much like capitalism, the peacebuilding industry projects an image of functionality while, in reality, fostering career peacebuilders and sustaining a dubious narrative of success.

Beyond a literature review, this article draws from a wealth of knowledge accumulated through multiple oral narratives, complemented by formal and informal interactions with colleagues across the NGO sector during and beyond my career as an NGO-based professinal peacebuilder. These individuals (former colleagues) represent diverse professional backgrounds, nationalities, qualifications, experiences, genders and ages. Many are genuinely committed to peacebuilding yet remain victims of a deeply flawed system that often renders them unable to achieve meaningful change.

At times, I was unsettled by my own positionality as a professional peacebuilder. Over time, I discovered that many of my colleagues shared similar concerns. Occasionally, we would engage in informal discussions, exchanging views on our peace interventions. In 2016, a small group of us jokingly referred to ourselves as 'bandits'. This nickname arose from strained relations pitting me and a colleague against our line managers with whom we disagreed over a peace connector project[3] gone wrong in Kenya's coastal region. The project, aimed at fostering peace between two conflicting communities through a borehole initiative, encountered technical setbacks. The first drilling attempt hit a rock, while the second struck water that was too saline for consumption. As discussions on alternative solutions ensued, community members began suspecting sabotage, given that the owner of the drilling company was from a perceived rival group. Consequently, a water project intended to foster peace had inadvertently exacerbated tensions.

Relying on expert advice from our water and sanitation department, a colleague and I proposed surface water harvesting as a cost-effective alternative. However, our superiors dismissed

this suggestion, arguing that the community had specifically requested a borehole, for which funding had already been secured. Moreover, they insisted that restructuring the project would be unfeasible given the stringent timelines for project closure. As a result, we proceeded with a project that was neither viable nor conducive to peace, reflecting how the rigidities of NGO project design – largely dictated by donor funding frameworks – can undermine peacebuilding efforts.

These challenges are not unique to peacebuilding programmes; they reflect broader sector-wide issues that have fuelled growing critiques of NGO interventions across Africa. In his recent work, Maina (2025) critiques the NGO sector for fostering a paternalistic dependency syndrome, wherein even well-intentioned initiatives stifle local agency, commodify poverty and reinforce systemic inequalities. This critique resonates with Fassin's (2007) analysis of humanitarianism as an industry driven by discriminatory political choices, which ultimately re-entrench hierarchies of human worth rather than challenging them. Under these circumstances, professional peacebuilders, whether knowingly or not, often perpetuate the very structures of asymmetric power they claim to dismantle (Maldonado-Torres 2020).

The frustrations arising from these systemic challenges were a significant factor in my eventual departure from the NGO sector. Yet my experience was far from unique. In November 2019, slightly over a year after I resigned, a former colleague invited me to a training she had organised in Nairobi. After the event – deemed a success by NGO standards – we shared dinner with another colleague, where the conversation took a sombre turn. She confided in us about experiencing burnout, lamenting that despite her extensive efforts, she had achieved very little tangible impact. She hinted at her impending departure from the sector, a decision that both she and the other colleague eventually made.

Through these interactions, a pattern emerged, one of frustration, disillusionment and eventual resignation. Many professionals in the sector grapple with feelings of inadequacy and unfulfilment, ultimately exiting the field. This pattern serves as the foundation for my typology of professional peacebuilders.

It became increasingly apparent that documenting these experiences would provide valuable insights into the realities of local peacebuilding, particularly in Africa. This article, therefore, calls for greater reflexivity among NGO practitioners and a more critical engagement with the systemic and contextual dynamics that perpetuate structural violence while sustaining a misleading narrative of success.

However, undertaking this work was not without hesitation. It took considerable time for me to gain the confidence to author this paper, largely due to concerns that my reflections might be dismissed as the grievances of a disillusioned ex-NGO worker. Furthermore, as an African scholar operating within a Western-dominated global knowledge economy, I am acutely aware of the epistemic hierarchies that shape whose voices are considered authoritative (Ssentongo 2020). The colonial history of knowledge production has positioned scholars from the Global South within a space of structural deprivation (Pingeot 2020), while coloniality continues to render many hesitant to challenge dominant narratives (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2022). Nevertheless, buoyed by ongoing conversations with colleagues and the growing critical discourse surrounding the 'local turn' (Paffenholz 2018; Randazzo 2021), I ultimately adopted a creative autoethnographic approach.

This article critically (re)appraises 'NGO-ised' peacebuilding in Africa, exposing its fundamental flaws while advocating for a re-evaluation of how NGOs conceptualise (theory) and implement (praxis) peace initiatives. Here, 'NGO-ised' peacebuilding refers to donor-funded, project-based interventions undertaken by NGOs – both those dedicated

solely to peacebuilding and those integrating peacebuilding within broader humanitarian and development programmes.

The article is structured as follows: This first section introduces the study. The second section presents a typology of NGO-based professional peacebuilders. The third section critically examines the 'NGO-isation' of peacebuilding in Africa. The fourth section problematises the professionalisation of local peacebuilding. The fifth section explores power differentials and the (mis)conceptions of the 'local turn' in NGO-led peacebuilding. Finally, the sixth section concludes the discussion.

A typology of NGO-based professional peacebuilders in Africa

This paper presents a typology of three main categories of NGO-based professional peacebuilders operating in Africa: ambitious, career, and sceptical peacebuilders. As Stapley, O'Keeffe, and Midgley (2022, 1) note, 'a typology is formed by grouping cases or participants into types based on their common features'. This typology emerges from my lived experiences, observations, interactions, and reflections since I began working as a peacebuilder. It seeks to illuminate the varied motivations, engagements and trajectories of individuals working within the NGO-led peacebuilding industry.

Ambitious peacebuilders

Ambitious peacebuilders are professionals primarily driven by career advancement and the associated benefits of holding various positions within NGOs and beyond. They possess extensive knowledge of their subject matter, technical expertise, wide professional networks and a strong command of the 'right language' used in the sector. Leveraging these assets, they make persuasive cases for funding and attract resources to their organisations. Often, their ambitions extend beyond the NGO sector, aiming for positions of influence in politics, international organisations or global institutions.

For instance, during my doctoral fieldwork, I sought assistance from a contact at the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in Ethiopia. To my surprise, one of my former supervisors, who had since ascended to a senior regional position, was among the recommended informants. She provided valuable support during my research. Similarly, a former senior colleague of mine now holds a managerial position at the World Bank in a West African country. Having worked with these individuals, I can attest to their professionalism, eloquence and dedication to maintaining visibility in the field. Their consistent efforts to build their professional profiles exemplify the characteristics of ambitious peacebuilders.

Career peacebuilders

Career peacebuilders are experienced professionals who diligently fulfil their roles with unwavering dedication. They adhere strictly to established structures, policies and procedures, often assuming that these frameworks are inherently effective in delivering peacebuilding outcomes.

Two examples illustrate this category. One colleague was frequently teased for his fixation on procedural details. Another, during a project design workshop, persistently referenced the official design manuals, even for minor elements. Both demonstrated an unwavering

faith in technocracy and bureaucratic processes. However, their strict adherence to pre-scribed procedures often prevents them from recognising that policies can be flawed or even detrimental. As the Kiswahili proverb *mwenda tezi na homo marejeo ni ngamani* (whether one moves to the front or the back of a boat, one remains at sea) suggests, a career peace-builder may inadvertently contribute to harm despite their best intentions because they function within a flawed system.

Sceptical peacebuilders

Sceptical peacebuilders are professionals who, over time, come to recognise the structural dysfunctions of NGO-led peacebuilding. Their disillusionment stems not only from their awareness of systemic flaws but also from their experiences with ambitious and career peace-builders. Initially, they may remain within the sector, motivated by the hope of gradual transformation or by the belief that even small interventions can make a difference. For example, a colleague once remarked that what sustained his commitment was the knowl-edge that at least some resources ultimately reached the vulnerable communities we served.

Despite their efforts to navigate and reform flawed systems, sceptical peacebuilders find themselves in a precarious position. Critiquing the sector from within invites accusations of being unprofessional, unreliable or even subversive. This tension eventually becomes unsus-tainable, leading many to exit the sector earlier than their counterparts, often transitioning to entirely different careers.

Implications of the typology

This typology enhances our understanding of the dynamics shaping local peacebuilding, particularly in explaining its challenges and failures. It also provides a foundation for further empirical scrutiny. Researchers can assess its conceptual and analytical validity by examining the behaviour of NGO staff and how their actions influence peacebuilding processes and outcomes.

Moreover, this typology is not unique to peacebuilding. Many professions employ indi-viduals who perceive and approach their work differently. In typical work environments, some employees pursue self-actualisation and professional excellence, akin to ambitious peacebuilders. Others exhibit unwavering faith in institutional processes, resembling career peacebuilders. Meanwhile, some develop critical perspectives on their field, paralleling scep-tical peacebuilders. The distinguishing feature of these categories is their conduct in exe-cuting professional responsibilities. While career peacebuilders are staunch adherents to rules, sceptical peacebuilders adopt a more pragmatic approach.

A pertinent question arises: can a professional peacebuilder transition between these categories? This is certainly possible. Individuals may adopt different identities at different times or under varying circumstances. However, the relative permanence of these categories is shaped by personal traits, intellectual capacities, levels of awareness, and individual moti-vations. Unlike 'shapeshifting', which James (2022) describes as a pragmatic response to external pressures, this typology reflects deeper choices rooted in character, morality and ambition.

For instance, sceptical peacebuilders tend to maintain their scepticism until they even-tually leave the sector. Ambitious peacebuilders follow predictable career trajectories,

frequently advancing to leadership roles or transitioning from national to international positions. Career peacebuilders, in contrast, often remain in mid-level positions for extended periods, content with their structured roles as programme officers, managers, or project directors.

'NGO-isation' of peacebuilding

A section of the literature critiques NGO-led peacebuilding (Kappler 2014; Lee 2020; Marchetti and Tocci 2009; Vogel 2016). Nevertheless, the prevailing narrative remains that NGOs play a constructive role in peacebuilding (Desirée 2012; Eschmann and Nilsson 2023; Kew and John 2008; Paffenholz 2014). The assumption underpinning this perspective is that NGOs legitimise and sustain peace by ensuring the participation of ordinary people. NGOs have also positioned themselves as leading proponents of so-called bottom-up approaches to peace, a subject of growing scholarly interest (Annan et al. 2021; Trajano 2020; Van Leeuwen et al. 2020). This dynamic is particularly pronounced in Africa, where the 'NGO-isation' of peacebuilding has become widespread. A phenomenon in which NGOs, either exclusively dedicated to peacebuilding or incorporating it as a key pillar of their work, have come to dominate peacebuilding efforts.

Beyond the professionalisation of peacebuilding – an issue I problematise in the following section – the NGO-isation of peacebuilding in Africa is characterised by four main features.

The first concerns the conceptualisation of 'local peace', which in the African context is largely an NGO construct. Peace projects are almost exclusively the domain of NGOs, with governments rarely initiating peace interventions independently. Even when state actors engage in peacebuilding, they typically do so in partnership with NGOs, which act as the primary implementers. This dynamic extends to religious, cultural and traditional actors, whom NGOs also co-opt into their initiatives. As a result, local peace has become an idea deeply embedded within the NGO sector, with organisations often claiming ownership of and taking pride in their perceived leadership in this domain. For instance, in 2014, I worked with a consortium of NGOs that trained cultural and traditional leaders – including those from the Tooro, Rwenzururu and Bamba kingdoms – as well as state security agencies, on 'local conflict management and peacebuilding' in response to intercommunal clashes in the Kasese district of Rwenzori region in western Uganda. The communiqué I helped draft explicitly declared my organisation as a leading champion of local conflict resolution and peacebuilding in the Rwenzori region and Uganda more broadly. In retrospect, I find it striking that we 'instructed' state and community officers on what local peace should entail, relying on training manuals developed by research fellows at the University of Notre Dame's Kroc Insitutute in the United States. We subsequently claimed credit as champions of local peacebuilding in Uganda, an assertion that, in hindsight, was unfounded, given that conflicts in western Uganda persist. It would be fair to conclude that I was, at best, a failed 'champion of local peace' in the region.

The second characteristic of NGO-led peacebuilding is its project-based nature. Peacebuilding initiatives are typically spatiotemporal, confined to specific locations and bound by strict timelines. The design of peace projects has long been a subject of debate, with scholars raising concerns about what constitutes an effective design (Allen, Iyer, and Ris 2023), the need for the decolonisation of peacebuilding frameworks (Escobar-Tello et al. 2021), and the importance of acknowledging the colonial contexts that continue to shape human experiences, including in peacebuilding (Maldonado-Torres 2020). As discussed

below, integrating a decolonial perspective is essential for critically analysing the 'local' in the so-called local turn in peace theory and praxis. However, there are limitations to rethinking what constitutes the local and indigenous in peacebuilding (Randazzo 2021), as well as questions regarding how, or even whether, peace should be measured (Caplan 2020). Despite these controversies, NGO-led peace projects tend to follow standardised frameworks, such as Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE)'s 'Guidance' and the Alliance for Peacebuilding's 'Guiding Steps'. These frameworks impose rigid, predetermined methodologies for peacebuilding, complete with timed objectives, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms and theories of change (ToC).

The third, and closely related, feature is donor dependence. African and African-based NGOs rely almost entirely on donor funding, which significantly influences their operations. Donor requirements are often strenuous and subject to shifting trends, compelling NGOs to adopt specific tools and language to secure funding. This dynamic can be understood through the concept of extraversion, whereby recipients of donor funding strategically instrumentalise their dependence to further their own interests (De Simone 2022, 8). Extensive research has demonstrated how funding models shape NGO programming, including in peacebuilding (Heideman 2013). Donors tend to allocate funds to NGOs that have professionalised their services and demonstrated 'novelty', 'effectiveness' and measurable 'impact'. However, as Vogel's (2016, 481) case study of Cyprus illustrates, professionalisation does not necessarily equate to responsiveness to local needs. Vogel highlights how 'more professional projects are implemented, [while] more and more locally relevant projects are overlooked if their proposals are not in line with the donor's current priorities'.

NGOs are structured around ideals largely designed and gatekept in the West, which they must adhere to in order to access resources (Kappler 2014; Vogel 2016). This dynamic enables the sector to be 'controlled, governed and "normalized" while at the same time serving as a convenient partner for peacebuilders to transform societies in a controlled way' (Vogel 2016, 480). Moreover, 'in some cases, the activities of civil society groups were frequently co-opted by international watchdogs' (Lee 2020, 26). Despite rhetorical commitments to the local turn, international organisations often permit local actors to participate only insofar as they implement externally driven agendas (Lee 2020; Richmond 2012). They 'treat locals as "customers" who select one of the pre-set options offered' (Lee 2020, 25). As a result, some NGOs have developed 'formalised versions of local agency' (Vogel 2016, 480), strategically instrumentalising the local to align with shifting donor priorities. This phenomenon is highly problematic, as 'developed states and aid agencies have now outsourced the implementation of aid programmes to local and international NGOs while retaining political discretion regarding its overall direction' (Marchetti and Tocci 2009, 204).

Furthermore, NGOs are becoming increasingly technical and specialised, reinforcing a sector that is 'neoliberal in outlook, and middle class in composition' (Marchetti and Tocci 2009, 204), exacerbating intra-NGO fragmentations. In early 2022, for instance, a South Sudanese colleague expressed frustration over what he perceived as a Juba-based 'elite squad' of NGOs that dominated the IGAD-led peace process, marginalising other, arguably more deserving, organisations. Recent research by Magara and Rivers (2024) has examined these fragmentations, highlighting the divide between Juba-based elites and grassroots NGOs in South Sudan. More broadly, inefficiencies within Africa's NGO sector can be attributed, at least in part, to donor-driven dynamics, which severely undermine the effectiveness of NGOs in peacebuilding. This reflects broader power asymmetries in the

humanitarian sector (Fassin 2007), the deconstruction of which requires a decolonial consciousness (Maldonado-Torres 2020).

Finally, there is a peculiar tendency among peacebuilding NGOs in Africa to assert their political neutrality. This claim is not only misleading but also deeply problematic. The notion that peace can be depoliticised is fallacious because peace is inherently political (Idris 2019; Srinivasan 2021). While NGOs should, of course, refrain from engaging in partisan politics, many peacebuilding organisations extend the principle of neutrality to an extreme, undermining their own work in the process. This is particularly evident in NGOs with a high number of expatriate (expat) staff, predominantly from the Global North, who often overemphasise political neutrality. For example, in 2017, I developed a concept note proposing a collaborative initiative between county governments in four Kenyan counties (Homa Bay, Kisumu, Kericho, and Nandi) to address periodic interethnic clashes along their shared borders. My organisation's senior management rejected the proposal, deeming it 'too political' because it involved collaboration with county officials, including governors, in institutionalising mechanisms for conflict resolution. Such an approach is not only misguided but also counterproductive. If NGOs avoid political engagement and refuse to collaborate with state institutions, how can they effectively challenge violent power structures? Moreover, how can peace initiatives be institutionalised and sustained in the long term?

Despite these critical concerns, NGO-led peacebuilding in Africa remains both dominant and romanticised. Various intra-NGO factors contribute to the romanticisation of the local turn in peacebuilding, one of which is the professionalisation of the sector.

Controversies in the professionalisation of peacebuilding

The recurring question of why peace remained elusive – measured even as the minimal reduction of overt violence – in areas where peacebuilding projects were implemented was a persistent theme in my reflections and discussions with colleagues. The apparent failure of peace initiatives became a critical component of my inquiries.

A typology of professional peacebuilders provides a framework for understanding both the failures and the romanticisation of local peacebuilding. Professional peacebuilders operate within highly structured and predictable environments, reporting to duty in a regularised manner. Their personal characteristics, mannerisms, conduct, aspirations and professional ethos significantly influence how NGOs conceptualise, frame and implement peacebuilding interventions.

The narrative of my induction into career peacebuilding, as highlighted in the introduction, serves two key functions. First, it illustrates the making of a 'professional peacebuilder'. Second, it exposes the power asymmetries within a typical African peacebuilding NGO. The rigorous training I underwent at the outset of my role in a major peacebuilding NGO was rooted in externally derived frameworks, largely disconnected from Indigenous African knowledge systems and home-grown peacebuilding methodologies. The training manuals we employed, including those used in Western Uganda, were archetypes of peacebuilding models shaped by externally imposed concepts such as 'evidence-based' approaches and 'best practices'. These frameworks, often dictated by Western donor priorities, were typically designed by expatriate consultants, reinforcing a top-down imposition of peacebuilding methodologies.

Donors play a pivotal role in the professionalisation of peacebuilders. The acquisition of relevant knowledge, skills and tools is a prerequisite imposed by donors, who demand sufficient preparation before project implementation. In my case, I was recruited for the second phase of a project whose initial phase had been dedicated to developing a suite of 'project tools' that I was required to be trained on as part of donor-imposed conditions. As a professional peacebuilder, one quickly realises one's position at the forefront of donor experimentation. Donors frequently engage with emerging trends, and local peace has become particularly fashionable. As Lee (2020, 25) notes, 'donor agencies have since adopted local ownership as a central theme in their policy statements and often as a criterion for reviewing funding applications'. Consequently, NGO practitioners must adapt to these trends, not only because they are in vogue but because their survival depends on them, given that African NGOs are overwhelmingly dependent on donor funding. This dependence shapes decision-making, a dynamic aptly encapsulated by Bächtold's (2021, 504) remark: 'donor love will tear us apart'. Despite widespread evidence of flawed donor programming and priorities (Duckworth 2016, 7), Vogel (2016, 480) rightly observes that 'an increasing number of peace-oriented civil society actors have become dependent on project grants for their livelihoods, and conflict resolution has become their "bread and butter"'.

Learning is central to professional peacebuilding. While it ostensibly replaces rigid donor-driven accountability measures, it ultimately reproduces similar outcomes. The result is a sector dominated by fatigued professionals preoccupied with career advancement rather than substantive peacebuilding. This is evident in the emphasis placed on reporting requirements, career development plans and staff appraisals. Considerable time is devoted to learning for professional development, and as one ascends the career ladder, the associated learning demands and budgetary allocations increase. Over time, it becomes difficult to discern the link between one's professional trajectory and the actual practice of peacebuilding. Many of my international travels, for instance, were centred on attending training sessions, conferences, and other learning engagements, often unrelated to direct peacebuilding efforts. Even more concerning was the frequency of travel for project designs, reviews, and report launches – events that, in retrospect, contributed little to actual peace outcomes.

A former colleague, who has since relocated to Belgium after leaving the sector, remarked on the irony of our work, suggesting that we were primarily engaged in building our own careers rather than fostering peace. The evidence supports this claim. Many NGO budgets reveal stark disproportionalities between staff and activity expenditures. One of my final projects, funded by an American philanthropic foundation, allocated $40,000 for staff salaries while setting aside only $20,000 for sub-grants to two local implementing partners (LIPs). Although donors may mandate that a greater proportion of funds be directed towards activities – sometimes imposing salary caps – NGOs have devised various means to circumvent these requirements. Activities such as 'capacity enhancement' and 'training' are often framed to necessitate the presence of NGO personnel, ensuring that staff continue to benefit financially from activity budget lines. This mirrors the broader trend wherein significant portions of aid funding ultimately return to donor countries through expatriates and consultants. These ethical concerns, though beyond the scope of this discussion, warrant further critical engagement.

Both ambitious and career-oriented peacebuilders contribute to the romanticisation of the local turn and the questionable narratives of NGO success. As NGO professionals, they occupy privileged positions within spaces where peace interlocutions occur. Their access to

resources, sector-specific jargon, and technical expertise enables them to influence peace discourses, including at the global level. Within international forums, the positionality of an African-based peacebuilder acquires a particular prominence, as they are perceived as representatives of the 'local', a category that often encompasses conflict zones in remote parts of the continent.

In 2023, I attended an event at a UK university where a Rwandan NGO-based peacebuilding professional presented on reconciliation in his country. He portrayed his organisation's work as overwhelmingly successful while reducing the Rwandan conflict to a simplistic 'Hutu-perpetrator/Tutsi-victim' binary – a narrative aligned with the official discourse of Paul Kagame's government (Mamdani 2001). Rwanda presents a uniquely challenging case for peacebuilding and research, as its authoritarian regime demands strict adherence to the 'official truth'. Having attempted to implement a peace-related initiative in Rwanda in 2014, I experienced firsthand the challenges of gaining operational clearance, which ultimately led to my relocation to Uganda. My observations over the years suggest that Rwanda does not exemplify genuine interethnic reconciliation but rather a state-imposed calm, maintained through repression. The speaker's romanticised account likely stemmed from a need to align with government narratives rather than a sincere belief in the purported success of reconciliation programmes. Nonetheless, his presentation resonated with the audience, who appeared captivated by yet another 'success story'. Given the challenges of researching Rwanda – including regime brutality and the West's moral predicament regarding its role in the 1994 genocide (Wrong 2021) – Western audiences often lack the critical tools to interrogate such narratives.

African NGO-based peacebuilding professionals also play a critical role in shaping knowledge production within peace scholarship. The controversies surrounding the local turn in peacebuilding can, in part, be traced to the influence of these professionals. Africa continues to be treated as a data extraction site, where researchers from the Global North collect raw data, which is then interpreted through Western epistemological frameworks and disseminated via Western academic platforms (Nhemachena, Mlambo, and Kaundjua 2016; Ssentongo 2020). It is common for scholars to recount their 'gruelling' fieldwork experiences in 'remote' or 'insecure' locations in Africa, mirroring the narratives of NGO expatriates. A Congolese colleague once remarked that expatriates were often too risk-averse to make meaningful contributions in high-risk areas. Joshua Craze (2021) aptly captures this reality by portraying peacebuilders as individuals who merely glance at 'the local' from the windows of airborne aircraft. I recall 'field trips' to Somalia where, due to stringent organisational security policies, we rarely ventured beyond the airport.

The hierarchical and colonial undertones that characterise relationships between African communities and external peace actors persist. In response, scholars increasingly subcontract 'local partners' to bridge this divide. Many researchers rely on NGO professionals to facilitate access to 'data points', reinforcing the latter's role in shaping peace scholarship. As both practitioners and knowledge brokers, NGO professionals have the power to either reinforce the romanticisation of the local turn or critique it. For instance, the influence of sceptical peacebuilders is embedded in critical literature, evident in sceptical appraisals of 'purported successes' (Duckworth 2016, 7) and critiques of research biases that selectively amplify certain narratives while overlooking broader complexities (Lee 2020, 30). This dual function underscores how professional peacebuilders shape not only peace practice but also the academic discourse surrounding it.

Issues of (mis)conceptions and power differentials in local peacebuilding

Why do well-intentioned peace interventions often fail? Perhaps no question is more enduring in the field of peacebuilding. Séverine Autesserre (2021) argues that one of the reasons for such failures is the inadequate responsiveness of peace interveners to contextual factors. There is a general, albeit rhetorical, consensus that NGO peacebuilding projects should be contextually grounded. Reflecting on past experiences, we often sought to achieve this through the integration of so-called conflict sensitivity in peacebuilding programming. However, despite years of conflict-sensitive programming, there is little tangible evidence of success across the myriads of NGO-led peace initiatives in Africa. This raises an urgent question: why does this failure persist? Drawing on the typology of professional peacebuilding in Africa, I argue that part of the explanation lies in the ways NGOs and their personnel – perhaps inadvertently – reinforce misconceptions of the local turn, exacerbating the power imbalances inherent in local peacebuilding.

NGO-based peacebuilding professionals, in their eagerness to promote the concept of the local, frequently overlook the conceptual ambiguities of the term itself and its intricate intersections with historical and contextual factors. The procedural and operational demands of NGO-based peace projects – including M&E, rigorous reporting requirements and donor expectations – often overshadow deeper engagements with local contexts. NGO staff are more likely to focus on implementing and documenting perceivable local initiatives than on critically interrogating the linguistic and conceptual underpinnings of the term 'local'. As previously demonstrated, NGO personnel are tasked with executing time-bound projects under considerable workloads and resource constraints. For example, between 2016 and 2018, I was responsible for overseeing more than 10 peace projects across six African countries. My field visits to project sites typically lasted no more than three days per quarter. Security concerns further constrained mobility, limiting direct engagement with local actors. These structural and functional constraints embedded within NGOs' project-based approaches to peace ultimately undermine peacebuilding efforts and may even generate unintended negative consequences.

In some cases, these dynamics cause more harm than good. The case of my own ethnic community, the Abagusii of south-western Kenya, illustrates the problematic nature of conceptualising the 'local'. While peacebuilding initiatives among the Abagusii have been documented (Ogega 2014; Ombati 2014), these projects are typically categorised as local peacebuilding efforts. However, a complex colonial history complicates the ways in which the Abagusii relate to the notion of the local realities that may be imperceptible to an external observer. Many Abagusii individuals associate the local with distortions imbued with fear, self-doubt and timidity, stemming from colonial histories of repression. This recalls Pingeot's (2020) insights on the complex spaces from which the colonised relate to the world and underscores the necessity of a reflexive decolonial consciousness, as opposed to the opportunistic posturing that often characterises NGOs' saviour complexes (Maldonado-Torres 2020). Absent such reflexivity, peacebuilding interventions, no matter how well-intentioned, risk causing harm.

To illustrate, the Ekegusii language lacks a direct equivalent for the word 'local'. The closest term, *egenka*, is a verb connoting actions performed in a 'home/domestic manner'. However, a combination of colonialism and Christian missionary influences led to *egenka* practices being denigrated as sinful and backward. For example, the Abagusii's renowned

medical and surgical traditions (Asala 2020) were largely obliterated. Similarly, the stigmatisation of Indigenous practices as 'uncivilised' meant that participation in modern schooling required an explicit rejection of *egenka* practices. This historical trajectory has led many Abagusii to regard the local as synonymous with backwardness and shame. A tribesperson describing someone as: '*ogokora ebinto egenka/ekienyeji/egekoro*' (doing things in a local/Indigenous/traditional way) is, in essence, calling them uncivilised. As a result, many Abagusii have adopted Indigenous practices surreptitiously, which in part explains persistent narratives of alleged rampant witchcraft among the community (Mbula 2022). This context suggests that members of some African communities, including the Abagusii, may resist the notion of 'local peace' due to the pejorative connotations it carries. Failing to consider such nuanced dynamics risks producing misleading narratives of success in local peacebuilding efforts.

Furthermore, power differentials and structural violence exist within local settings, often overlooked in dominant NGO peacebuilding discourses (Paffenholz 2018; Van Leeuwen et al. 2020). Peace interveners may, consciously or otherwise, become embroiled in local contests for power and legitimacy (Leonardsson and Rudd 2015; Richmond 2009). Yet, based on my experiences, NGO-based professional peacebuilders frequently ignore these local power dynamics while championing the local turn, which has become something of a 'buzzword' (Lee 2020, 25). As previously noted, the emphasis on local peace has gained significant traction within the NGO and donor communities. I concur with Van Leeuwen et al. (2020, 279) that overemphasising the significance of the local risks obscuring the political choices NGO professionals make when (dis)empowering certain assumedly local actors, institutions and practices.

For example, in 2017, I participated in an NGO forum aimed at promoting alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms in Kenya. Among the participants were representatives of the *Njuri Ncheke*, the council of elders of the Ameru community in central Kenya, renowned for its ADR practices (Nyamweru and Chidongo 2018). Speaker after speaker at the forum lauded the Njuri Ncheke model, urging its replication in other communities. Some NGOs in Kenya actively promote such Indigenous mechanisms as exemplars of local peace. While this approach appears commendable in theory, it disregards the exclusionary nature of such councils. Like many traditional councils of elders, the Njuri Ncheke is an exclusive body composed of elderly men, systematically marginalising women and youth. Endorsing such initiatives without a critical lens risks entrenching existing structures of localised violence and exclusion. However, NGOs, driven by the pressures of donor expectations and the quest for demonstrable impact, often lack the institutional reflexivity necessary to navigate these complexities.

The preceding examples illuminate the often-invisible ways in which the professionalisation and NGO-isation of peacebuilding in Africa contribute to (mis)conceptions of local peace and reinforce power differentials. In their pursuit of promoting local peace, NGOs risk exacerbating pre-existing inequalities. Professional exigencies often prevent NGO personnel from fully grasping the deep-seated historical and contextual intricacies that shape the ways in which different communities interact with the world (Chadwick, Debiel, and Gadinger 2013; Pingeot 2020). The cases of the Abagusii and Njuri Ncheke demonstrate how NGOs and their staff may unwittingly perpetuate relational asymmetries and violent power structures in the name of promoting local peace. Ultimately, the professionalisation and

NGO-isation of peacebuilding are implicated in the romanticisation of the local turn and the reproduction of misleading narratives surrounding the success of local peacebuilding initiatives in Africa.

Concluding remarks

The local turn in peacebuilding emerged both as a critique of and an alternative to liberal peacebuilding. However, it has since created a problematic international–local binary (Randazzo 2016, 1351), which inadvertently reproduces violent power asymmetries (Chandler 2010). Increasingly, the local turn is subject to scrutiny on two interrelated fronts – conceptual ambiguities and operational deficiencies – particularly concerning the role of NGOs in the practice of local peacebuilding.

This article advocates for caution in NGO-led peace initiatives, as well-meaning interventions can, paradoxically, cause more harm than good. This is especially pertinent in Africa, where NGOs have become the dominant actors in local peacebuilding. Drawing on autoethnographic reflections from my experiences as a 'recovering' professional peacebuilder, I identify key factors that undermine the efficacy of NGO-led peacebuilding in Africa. By developing and applying a typology of NGO-based professional peacebuilders – the ambitious, the career-driven and the sceptical – this article offers a framework for reassessing the effectiveness of 'NGO-ised' peacebuilding.

The categories of professional peacebuilders in this typology should not be viewed through a binary lens of good versus bad or right versus wrong. Rather, they serve to highlight how the positionalities and actions of different types of peacebuilders shape local peacebuilding practices in Africa. This typology further exposes fundamental flaws in the design and operation of peacebuilding NGOs on the continent. To mitigate risks of failure and harm while enhancing the effectiveness of NGO-led peacebuilding in Africa, this article proposes three interrelated measures.

First, given the role of NGOs in romanticising the local turn in peacebuilding, scholars, researchers, policymakers and students of peace in Africa must critically reassess their assumptions, positionalities and engagements with NGO-based collaborations – in both implementing peace initiatives and conducting research. The case of the Abagusii people illustrates how historical and contextual factors can undermine the very concept of the local. Similarly, as demonstrated through the example of the Njuri Njeke, even well-intentioned efforts to promote Indigenous peace mechanisms can inadvertently reinforce violent power structures. If these complexities are not carefully identified and navigated – something that NGO staff are rarely equipped to do – local peacebuilding efforts risk exacerbating existing inequalities rather than fostering genuine peace.

Secondly, peace is an inherently fluid and pervasive concept that does not neatly conform to rigid project-based approaches. This necessitates a fundamental re-evaluation of the project-based model in favour of embedding peace as a cross-cutting theme across all sectors of public life. NGOs should explore innovative ways to integrate peacebuilding efforts into broader social service and public goods delivery. While this approach has been discussed for some time, it has yet to gain traction, partly due to the commercialisation of peacebuilding, where 'peace sells'. It is time to shift focus towards long-term structural change by constructively engaging governments on wider governance and development issues that contribute

to sustainable peace. Kenya's recent governance initiatives underscore the potential efficacy of state-led approaches to peacebuilding. As Paffenholz (2021, 370) notes, transformative change has often occurred through mechanisms not explicitly labelled as peace processes, including political reform movements, constitutional amendments, and anti-corruption initiatives. Unlike Gibson Maina's (2025) radical call for the abolition of NGOs, my argument is not for eliminating NGOs but rather for moving away from ineffective project-based local peace initiatives and towards reimagining peacebuilding in a more holistic manner. Ultimately, within the prevailing state system, governments remain the primary custodians of peace in its maximalist sense.

Finally, peacebuilding NGOs should reconsider their engagement with political processes in the regions where they operate. Many NGOs have adopted policies that ambiguously prohibit political involvement, due to either cynicism or a misrepresentation of politics. However, this aversion to political engagement is problematic and significantly undermines the impact of peacebuilding efforts. By distancing themselves from critical political issues such as governance, human rights and social justice – issues that are fundamentally linked to peace – peacebuilding NGOs risk rendering their work ineffective. For instance, one of the greatest threats to peace in Kenya is the electoral process. By choosing to disengage from electoral matters on the grounds that they are 'too political', peacebuilding NGOs ultimately weaken their peacebuilding role. Furthermore, this political aversion fosters fragmentation within the NGO sector itself. It is not uncommon for peacebuilding NGOs to distinguish themselves from human rights organisations, despite the inextricable link between peace and human rights. While there may be various reasons for NGOs to remain politically neutral, genuine and sustainable peace cannot be achieved without addressing the underlying governance structures that shape societal order.

In conclusion, peace is not merely the absence of violence but is deeply intertwined with governance, resource management and social justice. These issues cannot be effectively addressed through the depoliticised, short-term peace projects that dominate the NGO sector. Instead, NGOs must adopt a more integrated, politically conscious approach to peacebuilding that engages with broader governance and societal structures. Only then can they hope to contribute meaningfully to sustainable peace in Africa.

Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. I refer to NGOs whose core mandate or a major part of their work involves conflict resolution and peacebuilding, broadly understood. I adopt a definition of NGO by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) which defines it as a private, self-governing, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to the service and protection of those sectors of society that tend to be unserved or underserved by governments. See: https://www.usip.org/guide-participantspeace-stability-and-relief-operations-65.
2. Between 2008 and 2018, I was directly involved in designing and implementing NGO-led peacebuilding projects in parts of Burundi, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda, Niger, and Nigeria. During this period, I had numerous first-hand encounters with many peacebuilding practitioners and peacebuilding initiatives across Africa and beyond.
3. More broadly, peace connector projects are social economic initiatives collaboratively designed and implemented by conflicting parties as spaces for collaborations with a view to opening channels of communication and reducing animosities. The late Bishop Corenelius Korir (a Kenyan catholic bishop) is credited for being at the forefront of peace connector projects across Kenya's Rift Valley region.

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