Intersections ✣

MCC theory & practice quarterly

Localization

A moral quandary faces the international aid sector: how can it adequately respond to the pressing needs of the more than 130 million individuals (and counting, according to the 2023 UN Humanitarian Appeal) facing displacement, armed conflict, extreme poverty and food insecurity, while also disentangling itself from the legacies of colonialism in which it finds both its origins and its current financing? Colonization, as a process, violently imposed external political, cultural, economic and social values and practices on communities in order to facilitate the transfer of vast resources from those communities to the colonizing powers. These often centuries-long systematic practices altered forever communities' sense of identity, knowledge and cultural practices and form the foundations of today's global power structures. Moreover, the process of colonization rendered many affected communities more vulnerable to disasters and humanitarian emergencies through the extraction of resources and the external imposition of political and social systems. The former colonizing powers are the primary funders of most aid responses (spanning the humanitarian relief, development and peacebuilding spectrum), giving them disproportionate power over the design and prioritization of programming. Today, a growing movement led by Global South-based organizations calls for the decolonization of the aid industry.

While certainly not synonymous with decolonization, localizing humanitarian action—commonly referred to simply as *localization*—is one way that humanitarian actors have sought to disentangle the aid that they distribute from the deep and unjust hierarchies inherent in the architecture of the humanitarian system. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines localization as the process of recognizing, respecting and strengthening the leadership by local authorities and the capacity of local civil society in humanitarian action, in order to better address the needs of affected populations and to prepare national actors for future humanitarian responses. In 2016, the world's largest humanitarian donor governments, multi-lateral organizations and international aid agencies convened at the World Humanitarian Summit. Their discussions, which were sparsely attended by local and national actors (LNA), resulted in the so-called "Grand Bargain," an agreement which sought to make humanitarian action more efficient and "level the playing field where all meet as equals" (see "Frequently Asked Questions").

The Grand Bargain had nine thematic workstreams, two of which were exclusively focused on localizing humanitarian action. Workstream 2, for example, called for more support and tools for local and national responders and set a target of channeling 25% of aid directly to those local and national actors by 2020. Workstream 6 called for a "participation revolution" to include people receiving

Learn more

"Frequently Asked Questions on The Grand Bargain." Available at https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/node/40191.

Alliance for Empowering Partnership. "WHS Five Years On—National and Local Actors: Voices in the Humanitarian Wilderness?" Dhaka: A4EP, 2021. Available at https://www.alnap.org/help-library/whs-five-years-on-national-and-local-actors-voices-in-the-humanitarian-wilderness.

Baguios, Arbie. *Localisation Re-Imagined: An Essay Series*. ALNAP. 2021. Available at https://www.alnap.org/insights-0/essays.

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aid in humanitarian action. Yet, years later, little progress has been made towards localization. The 2020 Global Humanitarian Assistance report shows that more than four years after the Grand Bargain, donor agencies allocated only 2.1% of their funding to local and national responders, a far cry from the targeted 25%. Now, a 2.0 version of the Grand Bargain agreement has been signed with an even greater focus on localization—yet progress is still stalled. Underpinning this reluctance to truly localize aid work is an existential crisis: what role will exist in the future for organizations that have grown accustomed to wielding so much power over the design and implementation of relief, development and peacebuilding work?

Local and national actors have argued that global localization efforts do not take seriously the need to dismantle historical power structures that have unjustly concentrated material resources in the hands of the Global North. Instead, efforts such as the Grand Bargain and Grand Bargain 2.0 only feebly encourage those with power to share that power and resources with LNAs. Shockingly, in a bid to access the resources that have been allocated to LNAs, some INGOs are seeking to "localize" themselves, further perpetuating systems of inequality that make it challenging for true LNAs to access high-quality, sustainable funding. Moreover, relationships between INGOs and LNAs have become increasingly more transactional as INGOs are forced to partner with LNAs to access funding from their traditional bilateral or multilateral donors. Instead of true partnerships (or, to use the language from the Grand Bargain, "a level playing field where all meet as equals"), INGOs contract LNAs to administer some project outputs without meaningfully involving them in the project or program design, let alone following the lead of LNAs and local communities in determining what, how and why interventions are implemented.

This moral quandary is particularly pressing within Christian relief organizations that, in addition to the legacies of colonialism, must also contend with the often-violent histories of imperialism in the name of Christ. Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) takes these concerns seriously and has long been grappling with the issues of power, oppression and the legacy of colonialism and its long-enduring hierarchies. MCC's operating principles—or core values—include directives to MCC staff to *accompany the Church and other partners* and to *dismantle systems of oppression*. These commitments form the basis of MCC's desire to truly localize its work. In fact, MCC staff often say that MCC is partner-led, meaning that the programmatic work is designed, directed and implemented by local partners with MCC playing a supporting role, such as a facilitator or connector.

In this issue of Intersections, authors reflect both on MCC's long journey towards a more localized approach to relief, development and peacebuilding as well as on the successes and challenges of some more recent transitions to local partnerships. A consortium of local organizations in Rwanda rightly argues that they are stronger together, and, as local organizations, they uniquely understand the needs of their communities' members. One author proposes that localization by itself is not the answer but that *glocalization* is the way to address the challenges facing those living in complex humanitarian crises. Another author demonstrates that investing in local organizations is the best way to be prepared for a rapid onset humanitarian emergency, like the crisis in Ukraine. All these articles demonstrate that at the heart of MCC's desire to accompany local partners is a yearning for authentic relationships, mutual transformation and true localization.

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A long history of MCC's localized work

In 1984, I started an MCC assignment in a brand-new barrio outside of Santa Cruz, Bolivia. The barrio had been created only a year earlier after a flood had flattened communities who lived on the banks of the Piraí River. In my first three-month report, I wrote, "I have struggled to find the correct role for myself. . . . I would like barrio members to take more control over their destiny as a barrio . . . I have said a number of times . . . that now the responsibility for the upkeep of the barrio lies in their hands. Nevertheless, anytime something breaks I am presented with the problem and am expected to do something about it. Therefore, I have to continually throw the ball back into their hands."

At a very micro level, the sentiments I expressed in my three-month report sum up the current discussion on localization within the humanitarian sector almost 40 years later. The 2016 Grand Bargain commitment to provide more funding directly to national and local agencies pushed to the top of humanitarian discourse a topic that has always concerned any person or agency reflecting seriously on the challenges of helping: how to give aid, an action that inherently gives influence to the giver, in a way that strengthens the agency of the recipient. The paradox of exercising donor power while simultaneously returning power to local recipients has confounded generations of aid workers. The current focus on localization is the humanitarian sector's latest—and perhaps most explicit—way of coming to terms with this paradox.

MCC has struggled with the humanitarian paradox for decades. In the 70s and 80s, one focus of MCC was on appropriate technology. I remember learning about many innovative ways to plant crops, store water and till the ground during the Cross-Cultural Seminar, a three-week joint training effort by MCC and Mennonite colleges that many MCC workers participated in as part of their orientation. From the perspective of hindsight, the emphasis on appropriate technology can seem somewhat paternalistic. Poor farmers may have preferred to be given tractors rather than improved horse-pulled plows. However, the impulse behind appropriate technology was to give aid that helped farmers increase control over their livelihoods.

While the term localization was unheard of in humanitarian circles in those years, my orientation to MCC work drilled into me the idea that control over decision making in development or humanitarian projects must be in the hands of aid recipients. Even as I gradually became aware of how incredibly challenging it was for donors to allow recipients decision making power, this idea remained at the core of what I understood as MCC's work ethos.

The March 1991 issue of *Newsletter on the Americas*, a former MCC publication that focused on Latin America issues and work, featured program plan excerpts that highlighted a concern for the core issues at the heart of today's push for greater localization:

- "Our goal is not to just promote our programs [in Bolivia], but also to listen to what the people tell us regarding their health problems." (MCC Bolivia, 6)
- "Build an authentic partnership with the Honduran Mennonite Church . . . in effort to respond to human need in the Honduran population through development programs and emergency assistance." (MCC Honduras, 5)

Learn more

Fabre, Cyprien. *Localising the Response*. Paris: OECD, 2017.

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Robillard, Sabina, Teddy Atim, and Daniel Maxwell. "Localization: A 'Landscape' Report." Boston: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, 2021.

Roepstorff, Kristina. "A Call for Critical Reflection on the Localisation Agenda in Humanitarian Action." *Third World Quarterly* 41/2 (February 2020): 284–301. Abstract available at https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1644160.

Yoder-Bontrager, Daryl. "World Events Add to Sense of Powerlessness." *Newsletter on the Americas* 4/1 (March 1991): 2-3.

- "Provide encouragement and assistance for alternative service planning as requested by Central American Mennonites and others. Give major attention to this issue in Honduras, since Mennonite . . . churches are taking initiative and seeking assistance." (Peace Portfolio, 4)
- "Build ecumenical relationships with groups working toward peace." (MCC Guatemala, 3)
- "Accompany residents in their quest for attention by municipal governmental bodies." (MCC Brazil, 10)

The language used in these program plans—listen, authentic partnerships, build relationships, encourage, accompany—and the work that operationalized this vocabulary foreshadowed contemporary definitions of localization like this one published by the OECD in 2017: "A process of recognizing, respecting and strengthening the leadership by local authorities and the capacity of local civil society in humanitarian action" (Fabre, 1).

Another way in which MCC tried to acknowledge and follow local priorities during the 80s and 90s was by emphasizing a ministry of *presence*. Being present was a way to participate in the lives and work of the people MCC wanted to assist, without taking control of project initiatives. The language of presence communicated a learning stance as much as a helping one. As one MCC worker wrote in 1991, "sometimes it would be easier to live far from the people we intend to work with, but to want that is to wish for ourselves blindness instead of true sight" (Hertzler, 7). Just as MCC's language of presence in the 80s and 90s communicated humanitarian work as a two-way street, the updated Grand Bargain 2.0 strategic objective strives to work for "better humanitarian outcomes for affected populations . . . in the spirit of quid pro quo as relevant to all constituencies" today (IASC Grand-Bargain structure).

Starting already in the mid-1980s and accelerating in the 1990s and early 2000s, MCC moved toward implementing work through local partners rather than carrying out its own work. It was an effort to put the work directly in local partners' hands, rather than in the hands of MCC, an external agency. The change put less emphasis on MCC staff working and living alongside people involved in MCC-funded projects. Nevertheless, MCC continued to emphasize relationships, striving to make bonds between MCC and its partners that were as mutual as possible.

Healthy relationships and lessening the donor/recipient gap are widely recognized as important. Even so, current humanitarian discourse is filled with data demonstrating that even an immense international emphasis on localization cannot easily overcome the structural obstacles inherent in the humanitarian project (Robillard, et al; Roepstorff). Most international humanitarian aid does not meet localization standards. From a donor perspective, the ideal of providing aid that puts control into receivers' hands remains risky.

In 1988, at the end of my first MCC term, I wrote that "throughout the project, MCC emphasized the need for community participation in all the decisions that were made. Barrio leaders, and often, the community as a whole, were involved in all planning that was done and did much of the organizing themselves. . . . [MCC partner] ASEB and MCC lost control of some of the project and had to live with some of the mistakes of the community." Looking back, I recognize that we never thought to ask if what

we saw as mistakes, which complicated some aspects of our version of project implementation, were also seen as mistakes by those who had made the decisions.

Control is at the heart of the humanitarian aid paradox; it is the thing that makes localization so difficult. My editorial accompanying program plan summaries in the March 1991 *Newsletter on the Americas* commented that "control is one of the key issues which MCCers confront. Whether it is in reforestation projects or health work or communicating back home, care must be taken to keep working toward increasing the people's own self-determination. Some projects have succeeded better at it than others. Given that the powerful do not easily relinquish power, it is a task that will not soon be completed" (Yoder-Bontrager, 4).

Thirty years after that was written, the humanitarian aid sector is using localization language to press the international community to do more to give decision-making control to those who will be living with aid use decisions for years to come. MCC is fortunate to be able to draw on a long history of grappling with localization's underlying questions as it makes its own current decisions.

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The Ukraine crisis: a localized response

The invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, by the Russia military took many by surprise. Up until that point, the humanitarian community's presence in Ukraine was limited to areas in the southeast of the country along the non-contact line between government and non-government-controlled areas. This limited geographic scope left international humanitarian actors ill-prepared for a humanitarian response on a national scale across Ukraine. Most international humanitarian organizations scrambled to scale up their operations or, in many cases, establish a new presence in the country. Many of these organizations could not feasibly access communities who were most in need of humanitarian aid. MCC, on the other hand, had longstanding Ukrainian partnerships. In response to the invasion, MCC quickly activated an effective humanitarian response tailored to community-identified needs and priorities on the foundation of these partnerships.

Through MCC staff based both in Ukraine and in neighboring countries, MCC closely accompanied partners through the initial days, weeks and months of the response to mobilize immediate provision of assistance and develop plans for the short- and medium-term needs of communities. Other international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) started from ground zero in Ukraine, undertaking a typically long process of identifying, vetting and assessing the capacity of local organizations. These due diligence processes are normally required for local NGOs to be eligible to receiving funding from INGOs and their bilateral and multilateral donors. These processes imposed an additional challenge on local organizations working under serious pressure to meet the sudden explosion of needs in their communities, with little time to fill forms and gather the necessary documents to meet international standards with which they had little or no previous knowledge of or experience.

In December 2022, children play at one of the events that MCC partner Fire of Prometey hosts for children in a village near Uzhhorod, Ukraine. These events include both children from displaced families and from the village. Fire of Prometey also works with parents to provide training on reducing stress, communications skills and managing emotions to help keep good family relationships amidst the conflict. (MCC photo/Emily Loewen)

Meanwhile, MCC's established approach of supporting project implementation by long-term local partners allowed it to move forward on the basis of existing partnerships and knowledge of local partners' strengths and capacity. In some cases, the ability of MCC's partners to respond was immediate as they had pre-existing funds on hand for previously approved project activities that were now no longer possible to carry out or were no longer relevant given the circumstances. MCC worked quickly to approve those humanitarian response activities that partners carried out with existing funds and capacity to provide immediate support to those affected by and fleeing the conflict.

Long-standing partner relationships also allowed MCC to adopt a phased approach and work with partners to take incremental steps towards improved policies and procedures in areas like procurement, particularly where existing partners were beginning to work outside their normal scope and scale.

From the outset, MCC's response was built on community-prioritized needs as they were identified by each of its long-term partners. These Ukrainian partners continued to serve the communities they had already been serving. Response activities were designed to utilize and expand on partners' existing capacity and strengths. For example, multiple MCC partners in Ukraine had previously received and distributed shipments of material resources to address humanitarian needs. To capitalize on their experience, MCC staff worked with those partners to develop and execute plans to distribute locally available items when normal shipping processes were no longer functional.

Another partner that had previously coordinated effectively with city authorities to receive referrals for assistance during their COVID-19 response utilized those connections both to identify those in need of assistance and to inform people arriving to the city about the assistance they were offering. Other MCC partners had existing outreach programs for some of the most vulnerable and marginalized people in their communities, such as people living with disabilities, the elderly and Roma communities.

MCC support to those partners ensured that the most vulnerable community members would not be forgotten and could receive assistance tailored to their specific needs. One MCC partner with day programming for children living with disabilities connected families to specialized medications and supplies required by their children, supplies that would either be outside of items typically provided by other INGOs or unavailable to purchase in the locations displaced families they were staying.

Where partners were less experienced in providing the type of assistance that was now needed within the new conflict context, MCC resourced them with tools, recommendations and coaching to ensure the safe provision of assistance. For example, many partners were able to offer the use of their church buildings or community spaces as transitional shelters for those displaced by the fighting to the western parts of Ukraine. However, those partners had less experience in providing the range of services people might need or in setting up shelters in a way that the assistance was safe and accessible. MCC supported partners in analyzing different risks of harm and in arranging sleeping spaces, providing safe access to shower and washroom facilities and establishing ways to refer people to services partners might be unable to provide, such as trauma support.

As MCC and partners worked together through the initial few months of the conflict and as response planning became clearer, MCC also had to consider how best to support the humanitarian response over the longer term. Partners rapidly expanded their efforts from pre-invasion levels, while churches and civil society organizations that previously had not carried out humanitarian initiatives now shifted to respond to humanitarian needs. This rapid expansion necessitated additional human resources for partners to carry out their growing programs. The ever-changing landscape of war required MCC's partner organizations to be adaptive in their programming. With the war in Ukraine ongoing, partners have been and will be constantly adjusting their programming to respond to shifting circumstances. MCC's commitment localization will, in turn, mean a commitment to flexibility and adaptation as MCC accompanies its Ukrainian partners in their humanitarian outreach.

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Glocalization: a possible model to durable, locally-led peace in DR Congo?

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has long drawn the attention of the world due to its abundance of natural resources. Large international players, including governments and multinational corporations, exploit the country's natural resources, among them timber, gold, diamonds, coltan, cobalt, zinc and fresh water. For all that these actors extract, they give little to DRC in return. Despite the presence of hundreds of international humanitarian, development and peacebuilding organizations in DRC, an overwhelming majority of people in the country live in abject poverty, with many in communities characterized by violent insecurity.

DRC has one of the densest concentrations of international non-governmental organizations among the countries of the world. Yet, after decades of work aimed at reducing poverty and conflict, one sees little progress, especially throughout the eastern region of the country, where insecurity, poverty and injustice reign. Many Congolese would agree that in DRC "aid is dead." The death of aid does not mean that aid is not important, but it does mean when aid does not empower the targeted people and instead creates a violent cycle of dependency, then it is dead. As the situation in DRC demonstrates, when local ownership decreases, human insecurity increases, as those who are affected directly by the problem are unable to find solutions to it.

The situation in Congo calls for an approach to increase the capacity of local and international actors to deliver services effectively to end violence and indiscriminate killings, increase justice and put the country on the path to true peace and development. In this article, I propose "glocalization" as an approach to consider. According to Hampton, glocalization means "thinking globally and acting locally" (4). Linking the global and the local, Amartya Sen adds that "there are, happily, many different signs that can be seen right now which point to a growing commitment across the world to confront inequality and insecurity with greater global solidarity" (6). Glocalization emphasizes that global services or interventions have a higher chance of succeeding when they are adapted to local needs, conditions, practices and cultural contexts, not as a slogan, but in practice.

Learn more

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Sen, Amartya. *Why Human Security?* Presentation at the International Symposium on Human Security in Tokyo. July 2000. Available at https://www.ucipfg.com/Repositorio/MCSH/MCSH-05/BLOQUE-ACADEMICO/Unidad-01/complementarias/3.pdf.

A glocalization approach involves international actors, operationalizing multi-stakeholder partnership to benefit internal and external constituencies. Glocalized initiatives require international actors to trust local actors and to work with them to foster the ownership and participation in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of peacebuilding and development initiatives.

Most sicknesses have cures, but INGO staff are limited in our knowledge of appropriate cures for some of the social diseases that exist in the contexts in which we operate. As a result, we recommend inappropriate medicines based on our limited intelligence and experience. There are many medicines on the market globally which do not address the root cause of sickness; yet those medicines are present in pharmacies around the world. The same principle applies to the medicines prescribed to treat the DRC's humanitarian, development and peace crises. For centuries, the medicines prescribed have not been effective and have done little to treat the underlying sickness, and in some cases have done harm rather than good.

One of the ineffective medicines prescribed in DRC is the United Nation's peacekeeping force in the country, MONUSCO. Since 1998, the annual budget for MONUSCO has averaged around US$1 billion. MONUSCO is supposedly present to keep the peace, but in eastern DRC alone, there are more than 100 armed groups, and none of them have been dismantled by MONUSCO. Since March 2022, a rebel group, Movement of 23 (M23), took over Bunagana in the province of North Kivu where the United Nations peacekeeping mission is heavily present. This area is also technically under a state of emergency declared by the Congolese government in May 2021. Recent demonstrations against MONUSCO are evidence that this medicine is not working for DRC because the prescription is wrong. The right prescription would include adapting the response to the local context and needs in genuine partnership with locally-led peace organizations and civil society. With proper and updated solutions, MONUSCO would be able to stop the killings of hundreds of people each month throughout eastern DRC.

MONUSCO could build roads as part of its post-conflict reconstruction program and create jobs. It could provide other physical infrastructure, and it could contribute to local capacities for peace. Yet, MONUSCO does not do so. One wonders why? The same question applies to many international humanitarian and development organizations who have been established in the country for years. To be sure, these organizations have contributed to saving and improving lives. They have provided essential educational, health and livelihoods opportunities, but their efforts have not been enough to end the suffering and human insecurity that impoverished people face and to put the country on the development trajectory. Some element is clearly missing.

Local ownership of the situation in DRC is limited because glocalization is absent. Lack of local ownership of relief, development and peacebuilding initiatives can be traced to five reasons. First, there is lack of genuine consultation by international actors with Congolese actors and communities. During my doctoral research in 2012, one respondent from Uvira shared with me that "approaches used by the government and international organizations were not appropriate [in an ex-combatants reintegration program] because communities were neither consulted nor involved in the planning of strategies and approaches and their implementation." Even where consultation happened, those recommendations were not necessarily implemented. Decisions were top-down.

Second, the approaches and services deployed by international actors are not adapted to the Congolese context and needs. As one government official in Goma told me in 2012, "for more than a decade these organizations work for demobilized combatants but the impact of their activities is far from being visible because their socio-economic conditions remain catastrophic despite means made available in this area of life."

Additional reasons behind the lack of Congolese ownership or relief, development and peacebuilding initiatives include: failure to empower communities members to ensure continuity of services in the absence of external support, partly because of absence of exit plans; weak and insufficient follow-up by international actors and their Congolese partners with community members about trainings and other project activities; and, finally, insufficient attention to supporting Congolese organizations and communities to identify how to generate resources locally and to manage those resources for the sake of ongoing sustainability.

For the operationalization of local ownership, a glocalization approach offers numerous advantages: (i) it is neither top-down, as is usual with international organizations, nor bottom-up; (ii) it allows a more effective and mutual participation of both local and external actors and will improve communication and collaboration around a shared vision; (iii) it seeks the empowerment of Congolese actors to meet local needs while satisfying external actors' interests; (iv) establishing an agreed upon exit plan for outside organizations to ensure effective continuity of the action after the exit; and (v) in response to the many problems facing DRC, glocalization presents an opportunity for brainstorming alternative solutions and new approaches. When local ownership increases, human insecurity decreases, with more abundant resources and with greater ability to adapt initiatives to address community-identified priorities and changing realities.

Glocalization requires reconciling top-down and bottom-up strategies with the aim of increasing the local ownership and human security in DRC. The top-down approach currently in use has shown its limitations, demonstrated by the lack of sufficient progress on the economic development and human security fronts. The participation of multiple stakeholders through genuine engagement has potential to increase the effectiveness of relief, development and peacebuilding efforts by empowering local actors, which will in turn improve service delivery and thus contribute to better lives for all. Adopting a glocalization approach will also go a long way toward addressing disagreements among policy makers on how to best address community needs. A glocalized approach could lead the United Nations to channel funds from peacekeeping to peacebuilding through local partners with strong track records. Glocalization does not mean discarding international assistance or removing international actors, but it does require listening to Congolese organizations and communities about the relief, development and peacebuilding policies and processes that make sense in their contexts.

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In partnership with the Church of Christ in Congo's Ministry of Refugees and Emergencies in North Kivu and support from the Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB), MCC provides food, seeds, agricultural tools and training on agricultural techniques and conservation agriculture to displaced people and host families in Shasha village. (MCC photo/Mulanda Jimmy Juma)

Arakuaarenda, or "Place of Wisdom": building a strategic partnership in Bolivia

Through much of its 62 years in Bolivia, MCC has been recognized by the national government as well as by national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs/INGOs) as a highly capable implementing partner in education, health and agriculture. Today, MCC provides funding support to and accompanies Bolivian partners engaged in implementing numerous community development initiatives. Around the world, MCC gradually began a multi-decade shift towards a partnership model starting in the mid-to-late 1980s. The MCC Bolivia program began this process of building new strategic local partnerships in the 2000s. This strategic focus on partnership with Bolivian organizations has not simply been about implementing relief, development and peacebuilding projects, but also about strengthening organizational capacity and fostering community empowerment.

A new MCC project with Fundación Centro Arakuaarenda is an example of MCC Bolivia's relatively recent transition from direct implementation to working through local partners. *Arakuaarenda* in the Guarani language means "place of wisdom." Fundación Arakuaarenda is an agriculture training institute that also carries out food security projects in southeastern Bolivia. In additional to working in food security, Arakuaarenda affirms and reinforces the cultural values in the region's Guarani communities and strengthens local capacity by training young people from the area to live and work in their region rather than migrating to other parts of the country.

MCC initially built a relationship with Arakuaarenda through another training institute in southeastern Bolivia. MCC collaborated with the training institute to provide practicum opportunities for students who were finishing their studies for an advanced technical degree in horticulture production. These students accompanied participants in a food security vegetable and fruit production project MCC was directly implementing in the region as part of completing the field experience portion of their degree. Arakuaarenda coordinated with the other training institute, offering its facilities to these students for research purposes. As the partnership with MCC grew, MCC saw in Arakuaarenda the potential for a strong food security partnership.

Since 2009, MCC has accompanied both Guarani communities and Low German Mennonite colonies in southeastern Bolivia to MCC carry out water and food security initiatives. Starting with building water wells, these MCC-supported initiatives have also included water distribution systems, rainwater harvesting, irrigation and, finally, vegetable and fruit production. Without its local partnerships in southeastern Bolivia, MCC would not be a part of meaningful change for the people. By partnering with Arakuaarenda, projects will not just be about food security but about engaging a larger process of strategic engagement in the region. Creative energy of project development and vision are in the hands of a local partner with technicians that speak Guarani and are from the same villages and towns of the region where projects are implemented.

In August 2022, Fundación Centro Arakuaarenda agriculture technician Adimir Rosado (left) and MCC Bolivia rural program coordinator, Patrocinio Garvizu, get water from a manual pump well in Yapiroa. Households use water from these wells to meet household needs, including irrigating vegetable gardens. (MCC photo/Nathan Toews)

An encouraging example of this strategic engagement is reflected by the experience of Adimir Rosado, a young professional whose practicum work was supported by MCC and is now employed as an agricultural technician with Arakuaarenda. Adimir is from Iguazurena, a village whose name means "place of water." Adimir's interaction with project participants in the Guarani language strengthens community understanding and ownership of new water and food security approaches. By ourselves, we at MCC do not have the *arakuaarenda*, the wisdom of a place and of a people, that Bolivian-run organizations owned and supported by people of the region have.

MCC's partnership with Arakuaarenda challenges power norms that develop between INGOs and local NGOs. Rather than MCC designing and implementing projects, Arakuaarenda has the autonomy to develop and carry out projects that it sees are pertinent to the communities with which it works and that fit within the Guarani worldview. Sometimes INGOs can inadvertently pressure local NGOs to design projects according to what they see as important. The power imbalance between funding agencies and implementing partners can pressure local NGOs to design projects according to funders' criteria, even if the starting intention had been for local NGOs to take the lead role in project design. MCC's focus on relationship building with partners allows us to break down barriers of communication and misunderstanding. Relationships are not built overnight. The process of getting to know one another is time-intensive, but that time investment in relationship building results in increased trust between MCC and its partners like Arakuaarenda, so that when it is time for project development and implementation, MCC can provide appropriate accompaniment without inadvertently pressuring partners like Arakuaarenda to adopt approaches that they might not identify as relevant and appropriate.

Commitment to accompaniment means that MCC not only operates as a funding agency, but also stands ready to provide institutional support that partners highlight as desirable. Building on partner-identified priorities, MCC offers accompaniment in the form of technical support regarding safeguarding, diverse agricultural methods and in planning, monitoring and evaluation support during project development, implementation and reporting. Strengthening the partner's capacities in these areas allows for increased sustainability as communities and local organizations take more ownership of the project. MCC's partnerships with organizations like Arakuaarenda allow MCC to contribute in more effective and contextualized ways to the changes envisioned by Bolivian communities.

Patrocinio Garvizu is MCC Bolivia's rural program coordinator. Nathan Toews is MCC representative for its Bolivia and Paraguay programs. They are based in Santa Cruz, Bolivia.

Pan-African peace training tests a localized approach

The great potential for "localization" is widely accepted amongst the international relief, development and peacebuilding communities. Yet international actors have often fallen short in into adopting what they advertise as best practice. International NGOs are hesitant to decentralize programs, fearing the risk of losing control of what is already a resource-strapped industry. Furthermore, they are obligated to a spectrum of donors with biases and expectations of how to spend the money. COVID-19 is both

> **MCC's partnership with Arakuaarenda challenges power norms that develop between INGOs and local NGOs. Rather than MCC designing and implementing projects, Arakuaarenda has the autonomy to develop and carry out projects that they see are pertinent to the communities with which it works and that fit within the Guarani worldview."**

Trainees at the Africa Peacebuilding Institute (API) held in 2018 in Johannesburg, South Africa. (MCC photo/ Zacarias Zimba)

One of MCC's core values is to dismantle oppression "so that all may participate in our program design, decision-making and implementation." By creating the learning pods, API further empowered and supported locally-led peacebuilding initiatives. Providing space for participants to train where they lived removed gendered barriers, such as traditional caretaker responsibilities for women which previously presented obstacles to women joining in-person residential trainings. With this new model, API saw a greater representation of women in the learning pods (46%) than the virtual training (33%) and residential training (45%). In addition, the design allowed participants a richer experience, as they could better process the lessons into contextualized action plans.

The learning pods were not immune to the challenges of virtual trainings, such as internet instability and power cuts. The facilitator and trainees could not socialize and learn from one another over meals and in the evenings. Similarly, the cross-cultural exchanges that typically occurred at API's residential trainings could not happen in the same way through virtual trainings.

Despite these challenges, the hybrid localized approach was successful. When protests caused power outages in Chad, the point person in N'Djamena was there to continue the discussion in the facilitator's absence. Wanting to connect theory to practice, Nigeria's point person organized a trip to a nearby memorial site that marked a herdsmen attack that resulted in over 300 deaths in the community. For the participants, visiting the memorial site highlighted the need to promote peace and reconciliation to prevent future attacks. They felt a sense of urgency to take up peacebuilding because the violence had happened in their own backyard.

The localization model showcases one way that international NGOs can share capacities in a way that is mutually transformative. MCC contributes to the capacity strengthening of partners by playing the roles of counterpart, facilitator, connector, mentor and teacher. As a project of MCC, API acts as a counterpart when learning from participants through the classroom and follow-up surveys and interviews. API acts as a facilitator by offering the peace training to partner participants. API facilitates informal partner exchanges and is a connecter of MCC's Africa-based peacebuilding partners. Like-minded peace practitioners from across Africa come together every year to learn and equip one another. Lastly, MCC staff often facilitate courses at API, acting as mentors and teachers at API.

Mutual transformation is the greatest value in the localization model. API is presently exploring options for increased localization. It may soon register as an NGO so that its implementation is no longer solely MCC's responsibility. Partnering with an academic institution to gain accreditation and administrative support could further API's localization. Importantly, API has realized the benefits of more localized approaches to its training and will continue to include learning pods in its method of delivery for the foreseeable future. Learning pods are directly related to the increase in participation of female students, decreased travel concerns and more contextually appropriate linking of theory to practice. Localization is advantageous in API's mission to equip peacebuilders throughout the African continent.

Melinda Norris Mdluli is the project officer for the Africa Peacebuilding Institute and is based in Johannesburg, South Africa.

to blame and to thank for a forced shift in reimagining how one project reaches its international stakeholders. In 2022, Africa Peacebuilding Institute (API) tested a more localized approach with great success.

Africa Peacebuilding Institute (API) is an MCC peace education project. Its vision is to foster an alliance of people equipped to build peace across Africa. API was first delivered in Ndola, Zambia, in 2001, and more recently has met in Johannesburg, South Africa. For over 20 years, API has successfully offered peace trainings for Africa's religious and civil society leaders. A majority of its more than 600 alumni come from MCC partner staff, so that peacebuilding trainings have had organizational in addition to individual impact. API's niche within the peacebuilding training sphere is that it offers pan-African perspectives for practitioner participants, with Christian roots branching out into interfaith engagement. Prior to COVID-19, participants would travel to a venue and fellowship for the duration of the training (typically one month). The closure of international borders and strict social measures during the initial months of the pandemic meant that participants could no longer travel to a residential training. This sudden lockdown forced API to cancel the 2020 annual training and restructure its courses for an online platform. In 2021, API hosted the first virtual training in its 20-year history.

Dissatisfied with a single virtual training, API attempted another 'first' in February 2022. It offered a single course in the form of a "learning pod." This hybrid-style of training allowed select few participants to gather safely in adherence with local COVID-19 requirements. Three learning pods were formed with the help of local point persons: one each in Chad, Nigeria and South Sudan, The course's instructor joined remotely from Zimbabwe, facilitating the training entirely on Zoom. API removed international travel concerns by localizing the training, thus training an additional 28 participants that year.

> " Localization is advantageous in API's mission to equip peacebuilders throughout the African continent."

> " MCC contributes to the capacity strengthening of partners by playing the roles of counterpart, facilitator, connector, mentor and teacher."

Learn more

Learn more about the Africa Peacebuilding Institute at https://africapeaceinstitute.org/

When the five PDN organizations came together under one network, we gained the power to impact many more than we would have as individual organizations. Through collaborative action, we have been able to learn from each other more holistically and intentionally, and to correct each other's errors in the form of accountability. This commitment to working together has paid off. PDN member organizations have each acquired more funds for programming than before and have enjoyed greater visibility from Rwandan authorities and international partners, increasing each organization's voice in their area of programming.

Today, PDN as a consortium is working in five districts across Rwanda: Burera, Gicumbi, Kayonza, Bugesera and Ruhango. Each district is occupied by one organization that represents the consortium's goals in the local communities. The activities of each organization are different, but they are complementary. The projects' goals are to engage in different peacebuilding activities aimed at fostering reconciliation, unity and peace among Rwandans.

The findings of a 2009 MCC-sponsored situation assessment showed that conflict around ethnicity was no longer the main issue facing Rwandans. Instead, hunger and poverty were the main causes of conflicts within the country. Based on these results, we decided as a consortium to pivot our interventions towards food security, focusing on conservation agriculture and village savings and loans associations (VSLAs). Between 2015 and 2020, we have impacted 8,435 direct participants and 25,327 indirect participants through conservation agriculture training and accompaniment and 27,775 direct participants and 119,432 indirect participants through the VSLAs. The testimonies of participants reveal how the projects helped to improve their socioeconomic status, contributing in turn to the reduction of societal conflict.

Even though MCC is an international organization, MCC has played a significant role in accompanying us during our initial consolidation process, and they contributed significantly to forming the Peace and Development Network. MCC assisted the member organizations in obtaining the necessary documents to operate legally within the country through its accompaniment approach. On a day-to-day basis, the MCC-funded projects empowered PDN to afford a single head office, hire qualified staff and run the daily operations of the organization. Over the years, with the support of MCC and the Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB), PDN has strengthened our organizational leadership, project management, financial mechanisms, networking reach and government relationships. Ultimately, PDN has contributed significantly to the welfare of Rwandan society. Because of the accompaniment of MCC and the intentional partnership of the five local member organizations, PDN has blossomed. Now, Rwandan and international organizations throughout the country—including the World Food Program—are requesting that PDN, with the support of MCC, train them on conservation agriculture techniques.

Readers may wonder how five Rwandan organizations agreed to bring their efforts together to help their people. The answer is simple. We were all brought together by a deep love and passion for and commitment to helping our own people build a strong nation with values of peace. Thanks to these shared commitments and the humble accompaniment of MCC, we have been able to make significant progress towards this overarching goal.

Hodari Twizerimana is a communications officer for PDN. Richard Makuza is an MCC program officer. Both are based in Kigali, Rwanda.

Graduates of Mwana Nshuti–Bugesera pose with their diplomas after the graduation ceremony in October 2018. Mwana Nshuti is a vocational training school run by Friends Peace House, a MCC partner organization, located in Bugesera and Kigali districts of Rwanda. (MCC photo/Owen McCullum)

Collaboration for durable peace in Rwanda

A Rwanda saying holds that "peace is a group effort," meaning that peace can only be attained when everyone is at peace. The Peace and Development Network (PDN), an MCC partner, is comprised of five locally-registered Rwandan organizations working collaboratively as a single consortium with a joint mission to see a durable peace develop throughout Rwanda.

The Transformational Leadership Center (TLC), Mission des Jeunes pour Christ Internationale (MJCI-Shalom), Peace and Durable Development (PDD), Collectif des Artisans de Paix et la Réconciliation (CAPR) and Friends Peace House (FPH) were each formed in response to the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. Due to Rwanda's history, many local organizations were founded with the aim of promoting peace and unity amongst the divided Rwandan society; likewise, many international organizations came to do the same. We have found, though, that peace is a group effort, particularly amongst those who are most affected by the absence of peace: local communities and organizations. That is why after nearly two decades of work as individual local organizations, we decided that together we would be stronger. We decided to form a single consortium—Peace and Development Network—to leverage the strengths of each of our individual organizations, working together to create synergy, increase visibility for our activities and bring about accountability and unity. We do this all as we search for durable peace in Rwanda.

> **We decided to form a single consortium—Peace and Development Network—to leverage the strengths of each of our individual organizations, working together to create synergy, increase visibility for our activities and bring about accountability and unity. We do this all as we search for durable peace in Rwanda."**

Learn more

Learn more about Peace and Development Network (PDN) at https://pdnrwanda.org/

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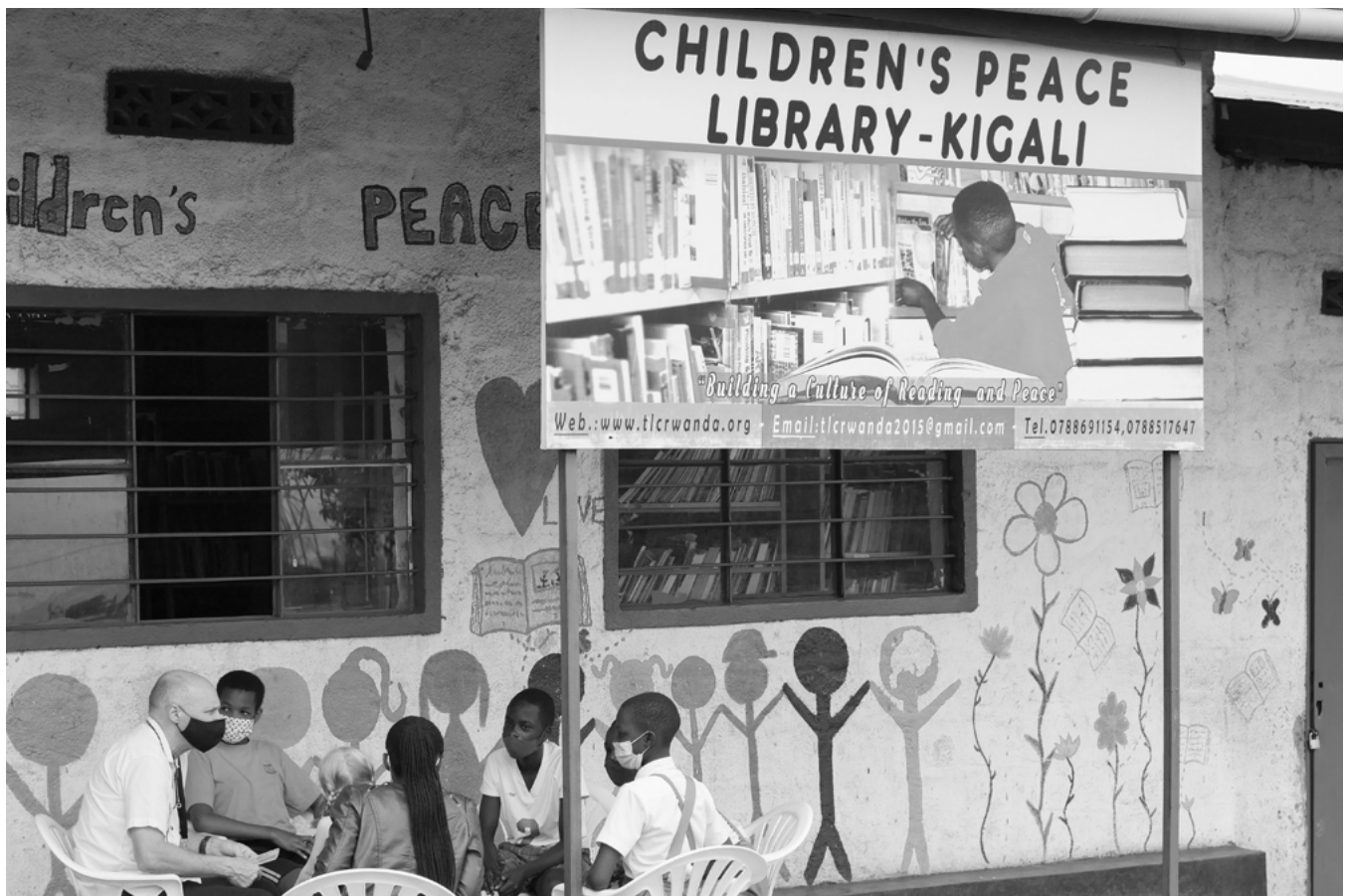
A colorful sign at the entrance to the Children's Peace Library in Kigali, Rwanda. On November 19, 2021, MCC partner Transformational Leadership Center (TLC) hosted MCC visitors at the library with an introduction to the activities and programs available to school students that promote literacy through reading books and peacebuilding.(MCC photo/Amanda Talstra)

Mennonite Central Committee

Relief, development and peace in the name of Christ