



INTERMEDIARY ORGANIZATIONS UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT: WHY?

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In 2016, at the World Humanitarian Summit, all the big players in the international humanitarian aid system, committed to *'better support and reinforce national and local actors'*. Since then, the roles and behaviors of notably international aid agencies, acting as 'intermediaries' for the funding to national and local actors, have come under closer review.¹

This briefing paper looks at what we mean by 'intermediary' and why 'back-donors' use them. It unpacks how intermediaries can add value but can also abuse their power over national and local actors they sub-grant to. Abusive behavior can come from specific individuals, but unjust practices can be more structurally embedded in how an organization sees its intermediation role, and its wider organizational culture and self-image. Organizations playing intermediary roles now can and must reflect self-critically about how they choose to play that role. The next briefing paper will offer practical guidance for the conversations back-donors can and must have with those they fund in intermediary roles.

1. WHAT ARE 'INTERMEDIARIES'?

'Intermediary' aid organizations are those that pass on part or all of the funding they receive from a 'back-donor' (typically a bilateral or multilateral, but this can also be a foundation or a corporate sponsor) to a local or national actor (mostly governmental, non-governmental or community-based). The 'intermediation' role therefore is fundamentally related to the flow of funding.

In the current global aid system, most intermediaries are international entities such as UN agencies, INGOs, international financial institutions, donor Red Cross societies, Western research, training and consultancy outfits, and Western for-profit contractors. This also includes pooled funds, managed by the UN or by others.² But there are also national agencies acting as intermediaries who subgrant to more local ones and/or directly to target groups. Examples are the Manusher Jonno Foundation in Bangladesh; larger Myanmar NGOs that in 2022 came together in a Local Intermediary Actor Network and in the future perhaps, the National Network for Local Philanthropy Development in Ukraine (initially co-hosting a fund together with the Start Network).

2. WHY DO DONORS USE AID AGENCIES IN 'INTERMEDIARY' ROLES?

Why first provide already scarce and shrinking aid money to organizations that are going to pass part or all of it on to other organizations, taking a share for their running costs? At face value, using intermediaries does not seem the best use of tax payers or voluntary donor money. But from the perspective of many donors, intermediary aid agencies offer several benefits such as:

¹ See e.g. Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream 2020: *Guidance Note on Arrangements between Donors and Intermediaries*; Humanitarian Advisory Group, Glow Consultants & CoLab 2021: *Bridging the Intention to Action Gap. The future role of intermediaries in supporting locally-led action*; Myanmar Civil Society 2022: *Positioning Paper on Localisation and Intermediary Role*; A4EP 2022: *Proposition Intermediaries Caucus*; Intermediaries Caucus 2022: *Towards Co-ownership: The role of intermediaries in supporting locally-led humanitarian action*. Peace Direct 2022: *The Nine Roles that Intermediaries Can Play in International Cooperation* (working paper for the Netherlands MoFA); Peace Direct 2023: *The Nine Roles that Intermediaries Can Play in International Cooperation*. This paper is also based on GMI's leading critical reflections on this with bilateral donors.

² There are also donor pooled funds which are not managed by the UN, such as the Start Network, the Regional Protection and Development Programme in Jordan and Lebanon, the Aid Fund for Northwest Syria operating out of southern Turkey, or the Global Fund for Community Foundations.

- Keeping their own staffing numbers limited: Assessing large numbers of proposals and the organizations behind them, and managing large numbers of grants, requires larger staff numbers. So various institutional donors prefer to give out fewer but large grants (or contribute to a pooled fund), which then will be multiplied into smaller grants to many more organizations by an intermediary agency, de facto acting as grant multiplier and grant manager.
- Conveniently, this outsourcing also reduces the risks for the back-donor: this is now carried by the intermediary, which can be held accountable for any shortcomings.

There are also less self-interested reasons:

- A donor far away from the contexts where the grant is to be spent, may conclude it better leaves grant-making decisions to another agency that is closer to and has a finer understanding of the context(s).
- Even if donors can call upon technical and thematic experts, these may find themselves with a global remit. Quality, according to international standards, may be better guaranteed by an intermediary with in-house expertise that can be dedicated to a few contexts.
- In certain contexts, bilateral aid money can be rendered more politically ‘neutral’ by channeling it through an intermediary, such as a European Commission aid administration or the UN.

As many donor administrations are under pressure to keep their own operating costs down, not in the least staff costs, it is certain that for the foreseeable future, they will continue to use intermediaries.

3. WHAT VALUE CAN ‘INTERMEDIARIES’ BRING?

The diagram here, from the Humanitarian Advisory Group, shows some of how intermediaries can and do add value.³

In politically troubled and conflictual environments, international intermediaries can also help to promote and protect fundamental rights for residents in the territory, including refugees, also in countries that have not signed the Refugee Convention.

They can equally help to protect the space for civil society, where governments seek to control and drastically limit this.

Intermediaries also can absorb certain risks on behalf of their subgrantees: for example, reimbursing ‘disallowed expenditures’, when the local or national subgrantee does not have reserves and no flexible money to do this itself.



Underpinning the model: Strong, equitable and long term partnerships and relationships that support locally led humanitarian action

³ Diagram from the Humanitarian Advisory Group 2021 *Proposition Paper prepared for SDC: Bridging the Intention to Action Gap. The future role of intermediaries in supporting locally-led humanitarian actions* p.3

Another, complementary, perspective on valuable roles of intermediaries, comes from the peace-support sector, where support to ‘local capacities for peace’ has been an early (mid-1990s) recommendation, that has gained stronger traction since 2015.⁴ Peace Direct has identified nine roles that international intermediaries can usefully play.⁵

1. The intermediary as interpreter. Helping national and local actors understand the policies and statements of donors, policy makers and multilateral organisations whose language and is meanings can be hard to understand.

2. The intermediary as knowledge broker and producer. While the knowledge and expertise to tackle complex humanitarian, development and peacebuilding issues can often be found locally, there is a wealth of knowledge and expertise residing elsewhere, in the practice, research and written documentation generated by activists, communities and other organisations around the world. Local actors often do not have the time or resources to locate this knowledge, and intermediaries can play a useful role in bridging this gap – also between local actors across different countries and continents. Intermediaries can also support local actors in articulating and disseminating their knowledge and learning, though this needs to be handled with care, to respect and protect the ownership and leadership of the local actors.

3. The intermediary as trainer, coach and co-learner. the argument used by INGOs, other intermediaries and donors that local groups and communities ‘lack capacity’ can reflect a structural racism that for years has gone unchecked in the sector. Underpinning the ‘low capacity’ argument is a deficit thinking approach, where people in the Global South are by default regarded as lacking agency and the skills to chart their own path, and therefore needing outsiders. While local actors in the global consultations (...) rejected this problematic framing of ‘capacity building’, they acknowledged that there are skills that they are keen to develop and strengthen and they are keen to learn from others. Intermediaries can plug this gap by providing training and coaching as necessary, for example in donor reporting, advocacy training and strategic planning.

4. The intermediary as convenor. Due to funding constraints, the shrinking space for civil society actions in-country and other factors such as competition and suspicion among local actors, opportunities for collective reflection and learning among local actors are few and far between. In addition, the current system of funding for CSOs often encourages competition rather than collaboration. As a result of this and other factors, local groups rarely have the opportunity to strategise together and learn from each other, thereby weakening local civil society. Intermediaries can play a useful role in providing spaces for local groups to reflect, plan and learn together, either in-country or outside, providing funds, logistics and ‘cover’ for these meetings to take place.

5. The intermediary as connector and eco-system builder. Civil society in most Global South countries suffers from horizontal and vertical fragmentation. Horizontal fragmentation is where local groups aren’t able to connect with other local organisations to learn from each other. This is due to funding constraints, competition/suspicion and logistical constraints such as poor roads, communications infrastructure, equipment and lack of transportation. Vertical fragmentation is where local groups aren’t able to connect to national and international level organisations, initiatives and processes, in part due to the same reasons, but also because of ‘center-periphery’ dynamics whereby elites and decision makers in the metropolitan centers deliberately or de facto exclude actors and stakeholders from the outlying areas. A parallel problem of vertical fragmentation takes place between local actors in the Global South and Global North actors, leading to a disconnect between ‘local’ and ‘Global’ discussions. Intermediaries can help bridge these divides by connecting local actors both horizontally and vertically, sometimes, through convening but also through facilitating and funding exchanges and visits. In this way the intermediary acts as the connective tissue that links different actors and initiatives within the system together.

⁴ GMI 2023: *Evaluating Peace Mediation and Peacebuilding in Ongoing Conflict. What have we learned about good practices?* pp. 5-9

⁵ Peace Direct 2023: *The Nine Roles that Intermediaries Can Play In International Cooperation.* The text box here summarises the original text.

6. The intermediary as advocate and amplifier. An impactful role an intermediary can play is to use their power to advocate on behalf of local actors to protect them and others, push for changes to government/donor policy and practice and ensure that their issues are high on the policy agenda. The protection, power and influence, proximity to geopolitical power and visibility enjoyed by many intermediaries can be utilised to amplify the voices and messages of those who aren't afforded these opportunities or who can't speak out due to security concerns. In addition, intermediaries can use their networks and resources to promote and amplify the expertise and learning of their local partners, ensuring that local organisations receive profile, credit and a platform for their work and achievements. This includes the crucial role that intermediaries can play in educating the general public in their own countries of the importance of international assistance and solidarity with local actors.

7. The intermediary as watchdog. Civil society space to operate safely in many countries around the world is in decline, and repressive governments are in many cases actively targeting civil society organisations and leaders. Intermediaries can play an important role as watchdogs, monitoring trends in the policies and practices of repressive states, raising this in the international arena and working with others to counter these practices. Doing so is not just a way of utilising the power of the intermediary to uphold the rights of others; it is a powerful demonstration of solidarity which is highly valued by local partners.

8. The intermediary as critical friend. Many intermediaries consider local actors as 'implementing partners' and therefore treat them as sub-contractors with commercial-style agreements for the delivery of specific outputs. Almost all local actors do not want to be treated this way but feel that they have no choice but to enter into such agreements. What local actors want are long term partnerships based on mutual respect, trust and flexibility. Through the global consultations that Peace Direct has held, we understand that the role of the intermediary as a critical friend is highly valued. A critical friend is one who does not use their power to dictate terms of the relationship but instead provides advice and guidance when requested and offers themselves as a sounding board for ideas, challenges and opportunities faced by the local partner. The 'friend' part of the equation is to be in solidarity with the aims and mission of their partner, to support them even when they face difficulties and make mistakes and to see their partners as people we care about at a deeply human level.

9. The intermediary as sidekick. Perhaps the most important and least discussed role for intermediaries (particularly INGOs) is that of the sidekick. By 'sidekick' we are referring to a subordinate role, one that supports the local organization in whatever it might need, but does not overstep its support role. The intermediary sees itself as 'support team' for its local partners, in recognition that they should be leading efforts to build peace in their communities and its job is to support this in whatever way they require. While the role of the sidekick may mean performing many of the roles outlined in points 1-8 above, it is also a state of mind or philosophy, which aims to reverse the status quo, so that Global South actors are acknowledged as being in the driving seat, while Global North actors are passengers.

There are several international NGOs who exclusively work with partners; some of them consciously choose not to have their own office in the country or region, so as not to over-impose. But UN agencies and most INGOs continue to see themselves as central in the collaboration, notwithstanding their stated commitments to 'building on local capacities', 'localization' and 'national ownership'. Signals of these show up in their discourse: Overwhelmingly, they speak about the national and local actors they collaborate with as '*our partners*' – a possessive pronoun- rather than '*the local actors we partner with and are partners to*'. A statement by an international agency like "*Our partners elevate the impact we want to achieve*" signals that national and local actors are still mainly valued as useful instruments to expand the reach of what the international agency has decided to do. In other words, local and national agencies are a complement to the agendas and programs of international agencies,⁶ which immediately puts them in a subordinate position to international 'leadership'. Very few international agencies start from the question: *What is it that you, local actors, try to achieve in your environments, and how can we best help you?*

⁶ See e.g. Barbelet et al. 2019: *Local Humanitarian Action in the Democratic Republic of Congo: capacity and complementarity*. ODI

4. WHY QUESTION INTERMEDIARIES?

Should we not trust the international aid agencies that are the core of the aid system we have built over some decades? For various reasons, blind trust has shown itself not to be appropriate, and more critical conversations are called for.

- *Intermediaries should implement donor policies and strategies.* Intermediaries do more than manage back-donor grants. If a back-donor works through them, they are the primary means to turn its policies and strategies into action, as is the case e.g. for gender equality, participatory governance, accountability to affected populations, care about the environmental footprint etc. Are their actions and behaviors in line with back-donor values and -commitments? They can also be a central source for the back-donor's understanding of often complex contexts.

- *Intermediaries have a cost:* They need to fund their own organizational infrastructure (offices, transport, communications, staff etc.) and their grant management. That is taken from the original sum of money that was raised or allocated to support people in a particular context. These costs are not always small. Recently, we visited an international aid agency's office in a capital city in the Middle East. It mostly works 'with partners', hence in an intermediary role. Its offices were in a tower block of nine floors – and occupied seven of those. The two others were used by an insurance company.



Sometimes there are multiple intermediaries, each using a percentage of that original sum. Do all these costs generate 'added value'? Public reports from back-donors, and evaluations, do not usually say clearly what percentage of the total envelope they had available, went on intermediaries – and whether this was all value for money?

- *Intermediation as a business model:* Because intermediation is paid for, and can give a lot of power, it can also become a business model for an international aid agency. There is an incentive then to retain the intermediation role. "The intermediaries have become placeholders." Donors then need to be discouraged from directly funding national and local organizations, cutting out the intermediary. In communications with donors, the intermediary, therefore, will present the 'partner' as good enough to implement, but not having all required capacities and not being reliable enough to operate without close intermediary oversight – an image that can remain unchanged even after years of 'partnership'. We have observed this multiple times in the more than 300 project proposals we have reviewed over the past seven years. Simultaneously, the support to the development of the capabilities of the national/local 'partners' cannot be so effective that they can successfully fundraise directly. As one local actor put it: "We are condemned to stay students forever in the capacity-building school. There is never a graduation ceremony."
- *Drawing the best talent away:* The intermediaries, with their share of the aid money, typically offer better terms and conditions to their staff than national and local organizations can. Thereby they draw away the best talent and most experienced people from the latter, weakening their capabilities which then subsequently have to be 'built up' again – for which the intermediary is paid.
- *Intermediaries are not themselves immune to misbehavior,* examples of which have become more public. There are now regular reports of nepotism, fraud and corruption, sexual harassment and sexual abuse and exploitation etc. also in international aid organisations; some international aid agencies actively intimidate internal whistleblowers.
- *Intermediaries control the narratives:* Notably in the relief/humanitarian sector, more than in e.g. human rights or peace support work, international intermediaries have been the source of a generalising negative narrative about local actors, as a higher fiduciary risk, having low capacities, unable or unwilling to be impartial or politically neutral and/or serving the personal interests of the founder/current director. That narrative persists even after decades of so-called 'capacity building'. Overall, intermediaries can control the narrative both ways: they shape the

image the back-donor gets about the national and local actors, and the image the national and local actors get about the back-donor. Not surprisingly, many national/local actors around the world, for years have been demanding more direct contact with back-donors. so both can form a direct picture of each other. Sometimes they also want such direct contact to bring up the abuses of power they experience from an intermediary. There are intermediaries who will never bring their national ‘partners’ along to meetings with the donor. Stronger still, there have been instances where intermediaries in their contract with national/local subgrantees inserted a clause forbidding the latter from having any direct contact with the back-donor. What does this signal!?

- *Intermediary roles give power, power that can be used responsibly or abused.* That power derives from the control of the money but also from their proximity to back-donors and their deep knowledge of the international aid system. It is intermediaries who, for example, often unilaterally decide which national/local actor receives part of the back-donor’s funding and on what terms; they can add requirements and restrictions beyond what the back-donor demands; they typically dominate the design of the intervention, its monitoring and evaluation; they control who in the reports to the back-donor gets the credit or the blame.

What are some examples of abuse of power by intermediaries?

- Unilateral decisions by the intermediary about what counts as ‘capacities’ and whether the national actor has them, based on assessments that national actors cannot contest and sometimes do not even get to see.
- Asking a bribe from local actors if they want to get a contract for a subgrant or a service provision.⁷
- Instrumentalising national//local actors as subcontractors even while calling them ‘partners’ and even using national/local actors as ‘cheap labour’.⁸ Some INGOs still have an internal policy against any internal cost recovery for their subgrantees, even the ones they call ‘partners’.
- Unilateral cuts to the budget for the national ‘partner’ for e.g. the staffing, office and transport equipment they can have to implement a project, even if the ‘partner’ can credibly argue they need more resources.
- Unilateral decisions by the intermediary about the salaries of the local actor’s staff involved in a project, that are not in line with the salary scale of the local organization.
- Adding conditions and requirements to the subgrant beyond what the back-donor attached to its grant to the intermediary, thereby imposing more restrictions, limiting the quality of the grant and/or increasing the administrative burden for the subgrantee.
- Disproportionate reactions when concerns arise: Such as suspending all funding when a concern arises of malpractice in a subgrantee. While such concerns need to be investigated, immediately suspending all further funding may negatively impact the people that organization is serving and perhaps staff that can no longer be paid even if they behaved with integrity. UN managed humanitarian pooled funds go even further: Supposedly “*to protect the integrity of the investigation*”, the organization concerned is not told clearly what it is suspected of, who conducts the investigation, how long it is expected to take, and it is not allowed a voice. This seems a direct violation of the presumption of innocence until proven guilty, and of the fundamental right of defendants to know what they are accused of and to be heard, that the UN should be promoting globally. Moreover, other international agencies will be informed an organization is ‘under investigation’, often leading them to join in the suspension.⁹ Other pooled funds and intermediaries handle concerns in a firm but much more balanced manner, where the presumption of innocence is upheld until guilt is proven.
- Biased and disrespectful behavior of certain auditors, hired by international aid agencies. “*They come in with the attitude as if we are criminals and thieves, and they are waiting to catch us*”. Auditors have been known to criticize local and national subgrantees for not having a

⁷ One of the corrupt practices found among international aid agencies in the DRC, see [The New Humanitarian | New Congo aid corruption report](#)

⁸ The title of a 2022 report on this is telling: *Breaking the Starvation Cycle*. Humentum

⁹ Currently, there is rightful widespread criticism of the suspension by important international donors of all funding to UNRWA in the Occupied Territories, following an allegation against 12 of its employees in Gaza (out of some 13’000) as a form of collective punishment with dramatic consequences for already merely surviving Gazans. The UN rightfully protests against such disproportionate action – but then should stop its own similar practice.

‘compliance unit’ or a focal point for each major organizational policy, completely ignoring that these agencies do not get the resources for such.

- In reports to donors, do not give due credit to the contributions and achievements of local ‘partners’ but present them as theirs – and blame the local ‘partner’ for any shortcomings.
- Stealing the innovations of a local partner, by presenting, scaling, and promoting them as their own.
- Letting the local ‘partner’ take the criticism of target/beneficiary groups if an intervention is unilaterally ended, reduced or changed by the intermediary (or the back-donor), to the dissatisfaction of the target group.¹⁰
- Badmouthing leaders of national or local organizations who are too vocally assertive and critical of the power inequalities maintained by international aid agencies over local ones. This may go so far as de-funding them, even if their work is good, and seeking to convince donors and other international intermediaries to also ‘blacklist’ the organization. This can well happen with an intermediary agency that at the same time claims that its programs and projects seek to ‘empower’ local people.
- Working for some years with ‘partners’ in a country, then registering there as ‘national organization’ and dropping them from one day to the next, to start competing with them for funding aimed at ‘national organizations’.

These and many other types of abuse of power lead many national and local actors (and aid-recipient households and social groups/communities) to feel *fear*. That fear, resulting from a sense of high dependency on particularly the funding that comes via intermediaries, then leads to self-censorship and submissive behavior. Several national actors (and target group members) will not speak freely to a back-donor in the presence of their intermediary. A collaboration with such a level of fear can never be called a ‘partnership’.

Such abuses of power can come from the behaviors of key persons in the intermediary organization, at the country level, and not be a general organizational culture. A change in key person can mean a total change in the nature and quality of the relationship: one person can treat the national actor as an equitable partner and take them along to donor meetings; her or his successor can do the opposite. This can apply whether they are internationals or nationals. The question is: Is the organization, or the country team, have explicit about how staff are expected to behave with collaborating entities, does it pay attention, and does it act if a behavior is disrespectful or abusive? When it comes to country-level representatives, many agency international headquarters do not seem to pay attention to this, and some international agency HQ people have admitted they give their country representatives so much delegated authority, they have little influence over their behavior. In our experience, this is less the case in peacebuilding than in the humanitarian sector – peace support work has a stronger intrinsic focus on the quality of relationships.

5. INTERMEDIARIES CAN MAKE CONSCIOUS CHOICES

Intermediaries make choices, consciously or unconsciously, about how to interpret their role. Some of the questions they can and should ask themselves are

- What is our fundamental role towards national and local actors: Is our fundamental intention to support them in their efforts to deal with major challenges, or do we see ourselves as the main actors in dealing with these challenges, using national and local actors as complement to our designs, strategies, programs?
- How do we see ourselves: As just a fund/grant manager on behalf of the back-donor, or more explicitly as a relationship manager between the back-donor (and the taxpayers) and the national actor (and the affected people in whose name we raise and allocate this money)?

¹⁰ There is learning to be had on responsible exit e.g. INTRAC & Every Child 2015: *Working at the Sharp End of Programme Closure. EveryChild’s responsible exit principles*; the INTRAC & BOND 2017 learning paper: *What’s It Like to Be on the Receiving End of Exit? A partner and country office review*; the CDA, Peace Direct and Search for Common Ground 2022 report: *Responsible INGO Transitions and Locally Led Development. Findings from a global online consultation*.

- What tensions can we, as intermediary, experience in dealing with at times different understandings, priorities and requirements of both/multiple sides? How do we deal with those?
- What power do we have in our role of intermediary? What are its sources? How can that power be used constructively, how can it be abused? What do we do to ensure that any exercise of our power is just and fair, and prevent and correct abuses of power?
- What are our legitimate self-interests, and when must our self-interest become questionable?
- If we recognise the deep inequalities in the aid system, do we accept them as unchangeable, de facto supporting their continuation; or do we -within our inevitable limits- advocate for systemic change and do things differently where we can? Ultimately the system is the outcome of the cumulative choices made by hundreds of thousands of individuals.

Several intermediaries, as the examples highlight, abuse their power over the purse to subordinate national actors. Others behave like a responsible interface – they seek to support local actors who are in the lead, reconcile at times conflicting expectations and requirements from the back-donor and the local actor and, if needed, may engage the back-donor in conversations about why their requirements are not realistic and possibly counterproductive for the project-objectives or the strategic goal.

6. EFFECTIVE INTERMEDIATION SHOULD LEAD TO ROLE CHANGES

Back-donors like to ask international agencies about their exit-strategy when they submit project proposals. The answers generally vary between unrealistic claims of ‘sustainability’ at the hands of local actors whose ‘awareness has been raised’, who ‘have been trained’, or organised in yet another local ‘committee’ etc., to affirmations that the situation is such that the international agency cannot now exit. But ‘exit’ should not be the sole question. An often more relevant and realistic question would ask about planned role-changes between the international agency and national/local actors.

Presumably the strategic goal of international aid is to contribute to stronger local capacities for development, for peace, for humanitarian protection and action, for the defense of human rights, for global warming adaptation etc. International agencies certainly state that they do not intend to be in a place forever, but at some point will leave. Acknowledging that international agencies certainly can continue to add value, we would still expect that, over time and through a process of capacity-sharing, its local and national partners will take over roles previously played or led by the international one.

Peace Direct, mentioned earlier, in a 2022 working note, is explicit about this: *“It should be noted that many of the above roles are temporary, designed to plug the holes in a system that does not work for local actors. For example, the intermediary as interpreter, knowledge broker and trainer shouldn’t be necessary in the long term, if the system starts to orient itself towards supporting local efforts more thoughtfully. This does not mean that there will be no role for the intermediary. After all, there will always be donors who will prefer to fund Global North organisations as the conduit for funding to the Global South. More importantly, there will always be a need for the intermediary as advocate, critical friend and sidekick. If they play these roles well, humbly and lightly, they can act as force multipliers of local efforts, helping to achieve the SDGs far more effectively than its current trajectory.”*¹¹

In summary: This brief has given an overview of why organizations, acting as intermediary in the funding flow, have come under critical review. They can and do add value but also hold much power they can abuse. Being critically self-aware about this, enables them to make conscious choices.

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¹¹ Peace Direct in a 2022 working note with the same title as its 2023 report: *The Nine Roles that Intermediaries Can Play in International Cooperation* pp. 3-4