

RESEARCH TO ACTION

BUILDING PEACE FROM THE MIDDLE: THE CRITICAL WORK OF NATIONAL BRAIN TRUSTS

OVERVIEW

The Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT) is a global think tank that provides interdisciplinary analysis and advice on complex questions of negotiation and transition in fragile and conflict-affected societies. Over 200 experts work at IFIT, most of them as members of its global practice groups or its country brain trusts (described in more detail below). Mark Freeman is the executive director of IFIT, and Phil Clark is an expert member of IFIT's Law and Peace Practice Group.

RESEARCH

Strategies for building sustainable peace after violent conflict tend to focus on two levels of leaders: national elites who negotiate peace agreements and community actors who oversee local mediation and reconciliation efforts. Often overlooked in peacebuilding is the critical role of an intermediary level of peace actor—"middle-tier" or "go-between" leaders who help bridge national and community-level peace processes.

As Joseph Nye elaborates through his concept of "leading from the middle," go-between leaders are defined by their membership and mobility: they are typically full participants in national and local endeavors, who move regularly between these levels, sharing ideas and information. Extending Nye's theories to peacebuilding, we argue that, because go-between leaders occupy multiple spaces and belong to multiple constituencies, they play a vital role as bridging agents, educators, and ethical exemplars.



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Go-Between Leaders as Bridging Agents

Go-between leaders often interpret their role in terms of connecting disparate communities of actors and the multiple spaces they occupy. They actively help to reduce the danger of national peace processes overlooking the expressed needs of local communities and thus delivering a detached peace that fails to resonate with more local concerns or root causes. They ensure that national elites are aware of how the conflict is felt and understood at the local level (including the extent to which elites themselves are blamed for fomenting violence) and what diverse constituencies believe peace should entail. This kind of bridging role requires leaders to possess a combination of technical, political, relational, and emotional intelligence, without which they cannot expand spaces for participation and help key constituencies feel connected to processes they often deem aloof. This includes indigenous, women, youth, and diaspora groups, as well as others that may have been directly targeted during conflict but remain marginalized.

Go-Between Leaders as Educators

Middle-tier leaders routinely interpret their role as educating national elites and community-level parties during peace processes. Finding effective remedies to decades-long conflicts is a question not only of strategies and negotiations but also of fresh ideas regarding the nature and causes of conflict and possible responses, including perspectives and lessons from other conflict-affected countries. Middle-tier leaders can contribute substantially in this regard, not only by directly educating national decision-makers, but also by educating a wider set of key stakeholders about how to influence and gain the trust of such decision-makers. Drawing on their own knowledge of elite dynamics, middle-tier leaders can empower community-level actors and marginalized groups to express their views more strategically in critical national (and international)

spaces and discussions in which the actors may come from very different professional, geographical, socio-economic, and linguistic backgrounds.

Go-Between Leaders as Ethical Exemplars

It is important for middle-tier leaders to maintain credibility at both the national and community levels by expressing clearly their core values and motivations. Local communities and key groups in society often view with suspicion the national level—and by extension the go-between leaders who participate in that arena. As such, middle-tier leaders must embody values of transparency, respect, and inclusivity in order to gain the trust of a country's diverse communities, avoiding the competitive forms of leadership that often persist among national elites and fuel conflicts, and modeling alternatives that alter the terrain on which peace is constructed.

PRACTICE

Because middle-tier peace leaders often act alone, they are necessarily limited in their reach, vulnerable to being pigeon-holed politically, and prone to feeling isolated. Informed by the insights on middle-tier leadership and interested in overcoming these challenges, IFIT has pioneered an approach that creatively leverages the unique strengths of this special category of peacebuilder.

The innovation is known as national “brain trusts.” Typically, an IFIT brain trust consists of a multidisciplinary group of 15-18 middle-tier leaders from a particular country, chosen for their policy expertise, personal integrity, and influential local networks. The members of an IFIT brain trust must be diverse in background, professional affiliation, political perspective, and thematic expertise, but all must share a deep commitment to respectful dialogue and the overarching, country-specific purpose of the brain trust (e.g., facilitating a negotiated solution, ensuring the successful implementation of an accord, etc.).

Once a brain trust is in place, IFIT's staff and global experts provide it with real-time policy support based on a continuously evolving and locally elaborated set of peacebuilding priorities. A brain trust will usually meet in plenary at least once per month. In between, its members will be in constant contact with each other, and with IFIT, through a dedicated chat group through which ideas are exchanged, policymaker meetings organized, key articles and draft documents circulated, and so on. Meetings of the brain trust are

always private, and each one establishes its own internal regulation covering issues such as confidentiality, external communications, and similar matters.

IFIT currently operates purpose-built brain trusts in seven countries: Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico, Libya, Syria, Zimbabwe, and Nigeria. Its experience highlights several key lessons of relevance for peacebuilding practitioners globally.

For the country in question, a brain trust:

1. Offers unusually deep and integrated thinking about peacebuilding challenges and possible ways forward that are not filtered through any particular group's interests.
2. Brings actors together who may not normally meet regularly, allowing them to overcome previously hard-to-solve collective action problems and individual limitations.
3. Promotes key ideas or policies that normally would not be sufficiently articulated, in particular ones that help generate consensus, reframe the set of perceived options, and build bridges.

For the members of the brain trust itself, all of whom are go-between leaders, the main benefits include:

1. Continuous access to hard-to-obtain information that is circulated within the group.
2. Expansion of their professional community and political networks and, with it, a multiplication of their individual voice and social impact.
3. Additional legitimacy and visibility—upwards to national decision-makers, downwards to community leaders, and sideways to fellow go-between peacebuilders.
4. Opportunities for integrated policymaking and intellectual enrichment—through discussions, meetings, courses, and workshops supported by IFIT at the national and international level.

Members of IFIT's brain trusts often find the space hard to understand at first. But within a few months they tend to consider it indispensable to their understanding of critical issues of negotiation and transition within their country. This is the best validation of all for this unique IFIT experiment in combining and harnessing the intellectual expertise, moral credibility, and quiet bridge-building talent of peacebuilding's most overlooked actor: the go-between leader.

Authors

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