Risk Appetite Hackathon at Global Affairs Canada (GAC)

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Thank you Jen [Jennifer Freeman] and thank you GAC for this amazing opportunity.

Apart from anything else, it's just very fun to be able to think outside the box. To the organizers - when you say small organizations, medium and so forth, these mean different things to all of us. Because ICAN is very small, and our network is very big, so I had a slight identity crisis trying to figure out where do I fit in? And that's really the nature of the work that we do. And I wanted to share with you our thoughts on our approach in this realm.

We work with women-led peacebuilding organizations in 40 countries. From 2000 onwards, there was always a question of how do we get resources to women's organizations in conflict zones? It's a very difficult area and they're usually very small organizations. Once I set up ICAN we realised that this is a huge gap. We looked around, nobody was supporting women-led peacebuilding organizations independently. So we set up something called the Innovative Peace Fund (IPF) and in the last seven years that we've had the IPF running, we've distributed $7 million in 25 countries in grants ranging from $3000 to $100,000.

The IPF is still the only multi donor independent fund specifically for women-led peacebuilding organizations in war zones and I wanted to share with you some of the lessons that we've had, both from working with our partners but also in terms of the donor environment that we work with – GAC and others.

But before I do that, I just want to give you a snippet of what my life is like or how we think about these things. And I want to show the story of a colleague of ours called Najlaa Sheikh. Najlaa is a Syrian refugee now based in Turkey. I met her in 2012, as she had just fled Syria. She came to one of our annual ICAN forums, where we bring our partners together. And in the three days that she was there, she was in such a state of trauma that my goal was to see whether I could get her to smile. Just a smile. We got that and we have a photograph of that.

She went away, came back the following year and the subsequent years, and by the second year that she came back, she had set up a centre for Syrian refugee women in Turkey to learn Turkish, to learn livelihood skills, to basically integrate into their new space. And it was
really a peacebuilding activity because it was not just helping the Syrian women, but it was also helping to mitigate some of the tensions with the host community.

Fast forward to 2017, she came to one of our meetings and she said that she suddenly realized that this issue of peacebuilding was much broader, and it was very present to her because her son had grown up and wanted to join ISIS. And she had said over my dead body are you going to ISIS! And he and he said no, no, I want to fight! And she said, well, I'll come and become a jihadi bride. If you're going to go there, I'm not going to let you go. So, she basically embarrassed the son into going to university. But in the meantime, she discovered that there were lots of other mothers who had the same problem. So, she actually ended up getting involved and helping them. This went on.

We also then supported her because they were dealing with victims of torture and rape and so forth, and we connected her with one of our partners in Nigeria that had counselling services and we developed a sort of a tailored counselling and mental health programme for local NGOs and it was sort of spread through Najlaa and others.

Fast forward a couple of years she was at the civil society peace table for the Syrian talks - again from behind the scenes we were helping her and advising her. Then came COVID and she did COVID-relief and she worked with the Turkish authorities. Not only they did work for the Syrians, but it was also for the Turkish communities and with local businesses. And fast forward to the January of this year, Najlaa her entire team were sleeping outside in the cold because of the earthquake. For two nights she didn't drink water because she was afraid of where she would go to the bathroom.

And what was our role in this? So, over the years we have provided grants and we have supported her. But when the earthquake hit, we asked one of our donors: “can we allocate some of the funding from her peacebuilding work to do earthquake relief?” And we were told that we couldn’t do that because it was only for peacebuilding. So, we had to raise extra money from our friends and family to send her and others $2000 in the right time, at the right moment, so that they could situate themselves. The minute Najlaa and her team did that, they started getting other resources from their other donors which had come on board over the years, to do the earthquake relief.

Why do I share this story with you and what are the lessons just from this one story? (And I have a hundred of these stories that I can share with you.) Three things that I want to specifically point out.

1. Localization to me, means understanding that there are local people on the ground who are unbelievably courageous. These people run to the problem and try and solve it, and they are risking their own lives to do this. So, we need to identify them, we need to support them, we need to enable them. Those individuals matter.

What's interesting is that if you think about the state of polycrisis and multicrisis that we're dealing with - it's in the same location - the earthquake, the flood, the conflict, the violent extremism. It's happening in the same geography, to the same people. And the partners
that we have are the ones that are on the ground responding to this, but they're having to respond to different crises.

2. The relationships matter. It matters that they have solidarity outside, it matters that they trust and know there's somebody there, somebody that they can call to get assistance from. And not only just us sitting in Washington as a small team, but being able to connect with the Rosa Emilia's of this world, or their colleagues in Nigeria, and that peer-to-peer exchange and space that we have fostered and provided.

So that global connectivity - the local matters - but the global connectivity also matters. We sit with privilege, we have knowledge, we have access, we can see the horizon, we can sleep calmly at night, not worrying about bombs dropping on our heads. That privilege means it brings a certain responsibility in terms of how we work with our local partners.

3. The third lesson from this is that, that person – Najlaa, Hamsatu Allamin, all the partners that we work are having to be agile and deal with new crises. So, where we that sit in the middle, we’re talking to donors to say, can they do humanitarian work? Can they do some innovative development work as part of their peacebuilding? And so often the answer is “well, that’s not really peace, OPS. Our silo says you can do this, and the other one says you can do that.” The reality on the ground is that it's much more mixed, and we saw this during COVID. We saw this during COVID, and we had some really good practises from donors during COVID.

Bottom line for me - what this all means is that this is about what we call “investing in trust.” We have to trust that the local person who risks their life, knows what is going on. They have the cultural knowledge, that they know what approaches would work best for peace-making and mediation and so forth, and we have to support them, enable them and give them the resources that we have or the knowledge that we have.

Which brings me to the second point about risk. So, if you if I’m talking about investing in trust, what do we mean by risk?

When we set up the IPF with one of our major donors, we were invited with a few of our partners - it was co-design project with our grantees but also in collaboration with the donor.

We went to that to the country, to take our partners and all of a sudden I kept hearing people say, well, you know, “our appetite for risk is very low”. And I couldn't understand what they meant by. And finally, I looked around and I said, oh, here I am as an Iranian/British person coming in with my Libyan, Nigerian, Iraqi, Syrian partners and we’re being told that we are risky.

And so, to me, I've tried to, I flip it and to say, OK, what do they mean by risk? And three things came to mind in terms of the conversations we had.

1. The definition of risk seems to be - and I would put it to the GAC colleagues - it seems to be that we’re worried about whether the local organization has the competency to
manage funds, to run a project, to do things the way we expect them to do. But essentially managing funds right, do they have the competency to do that? Or do they need some interlocutor to do that for them?

2. Second, we worry about corruption, you know, God forbid we give money and then they run away with it.

3. And third, these days - in last 20 years it’s become terrorism. Is this money going to go into the hands of terrorist organisations on the ground?

And honestly for me, when talking to my partners who are risking their lives, these three elements of risk become meaningless. Because if you talked to my colleague Mossarat Qadeem in Pakistan, she is risking her life to go deal with the Taliban and the security forces and so forth to do the humanitarian aid, to do the PVE work, to do the peacebuilding work.

These people are not in the business of risking their lives to be corrupt, to give money to terrorism and certainly they have the competence to deal with resources. And where there are new organizations, they have backup, they have the support that we can provide, they have other support in terms of managing those resources.

So, we have to unpack risk and we have to take what our assumption is and what risk means for the person on the ground dealing with it. And sometimes when we say risk management were actually adding to the threats that they face. You ask a Syrian to hold on to tonnes and tonnes of receipts in their offices, well if office gets raided, those receipts give them risk. So, we have to think about the risk appetite question.

So where does this mean in terms of what we need to do and where we go forward? I again, I put it in in three ways.

1. So, number one, we need to think about this universe that we’re working on as an ecosystem. It's not about scaling up and saying one organization that does this great, let's you know, beef them up and let them be all over the world and sort of monopolize. It should be about scaling across. Everybody at the local level has a particular knowledge in a particular understanding and expertise and they matter. It matters that the logo is their logo is their name. We don't we don't call our partners implementing partners. They are the essence of what happens on the ground. So, we need to be scaling across and an ecosystem that is vibrant, with everybody knowing what their expertise is, what their limits are, and doing comparative advantage and division of labour in that way.

2. Second, related to that, as an interlocutor, as an INGO if you want, is it my job to be a bridge builder or a gatekeeper? Am I creating the space and facilitating access, and should we be doing that? Or should it be that I basically in some ways take the work of others and claim it as my own, which happens very often. We and ICAN have chosen not to do that. We believe that it's really important to have bridges and multiple bridges as much as possible. As I said, to keep the ecosystem and to be respectful of the work that is being done on the ground. This is the essence also I think of decolonization.
3. And then the third element of this is, do we think about it as a grant or a power relationship where which is inherently sort of imbued with mistrust? Or do we think about this as an investment and think about our appetite for trust? The relationship that GAC has with ICAN, that ICAN has with its partners - the way we connect everybody together. Do we trust each other or are we are we constantly thinking that “oh no, you’re waiting for me to make some mistake, for me to be held accountable in some sort of way?” These are things that is at the core of what we're dealing with.

And I think that if we could think about it in, in this idea of an ecosystem in the idea of scaling across and having a really rich social fabric of civil society organisations doing this work, each of us knowing what our role is, it becomes much more collaborative rather than competitive. It allows all of us to deepen and be more efficient, because my staff and my time will be spent working with my partners, as opposed to writing reports and reports and endless audits from multiple donors all the time. So there is an efficiency argument that needs to be made here as well.

And then finally there's a question around why does all this matter?

You all know this - we are dealing with multiple crisis. The international system is overwhelmed with what we need to be dealing with, the number of IDP's and the number of people in need. S that the crises are there and it's becoming more and more complex. But if we don't have positive actors on the ground enabled, if we don’t harness the power of positivity on the ground, what is happening is that negative actors are filling those spaces.

When COVID happened - extremists were all over the place in the areas that we have partners, gangs, militias, young people being recruited into the RSF and Sudan. There’s a reason why this happens, because they're not being given alternatives.

So we need to really think about the security angle of this as well and a security there, and security and prevention more broadly, for regional and political reasons.

And lastly, we as a generation are sitting at a really pivotal moment, I think. If you go back to the post war generation, they had a blueprint of the world. They gave us the UDHR in the UN system. Frankly, we haven't done very well in upholding UNDHR.

We are where we are now. The 21st century needs a different set of solutions. We have the problems we have, the opportunities, the connectivity, the technology, all these things that that you've heard about and that I that I've just spoken about, it's all there. And we have to think about it as a privilege to be rethinking and reshaping how we work together for this new 21st century.

And genuinely, from where I sit, we have these conversations with donors everywhere, I think if Canada can lead the way for a transformed way that we do this work, others will follow.
And the good news is that during COVID you allowed this to happen, you allowed us to do flexible grant-making, you allowed us to be flexible with our own resources and so forth. And the results were ten times, more effective than when we are restricted and when we are bound by log frames and other things that in many ways in the realm of peacebuilding just don't actually work that well.

So, the change is needed, and I think if Canada leads, others will follow, and I think we can have a transformation going forward.