The "Market Failures" in International Peacebuilding

Lessons from Burma and a Path Beyond Stagnation

Billy Ford
Southeast Asia Peace Institute
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International peacebuilding is in the middle of a wrenching transformation. As violent conflicts displace huge numbers of people, drive famine and atrocities, and destabilize the world, the international peacebuilding system is being gutted by budget cuts and a fraying international system. Amidst the despair of this moment, there is a community of practitioners taking stock of the way peacebuilding is done. This is my attempt to contribute.

I've spent nearly 15 years working on peacebuilding and human rights in Burma. In this paper, I catalogue the most pernicious challenges I have faced. I offer fixes where they exist, but many of the challenges that I highlight here are classic public goods problems with no clean remedy. One reason I name them here is to prevent misdiagnosis. Too often we blame visible problems like petty corruption, rogue bureaucrats, or individual incompetence for systemic problems.

This paper buckets the challenges of international peacebuilding into two overlapping domains: (1) complex, systemic problems that I frame as 'market failures'. These problems require incentive-rewiring institutional reforms. (2) Complicated operational challenges that seem widespread, but which are likely solvable through technical solutions.

Section 1: Peacebuilding Market Failures

If we look at peace as a public good that emerges in unpredictable ways within a complex and interconnected system, then many of the sector's most frustrating features look like textbook market failures. That lens helps explain why innovation is slow, incentives are misaligned, and impact is uncertain. It also points toward new ways of operating.

The Demand Problem

In industries that grow fast, demand signals and evidence of 'what works' drive innovation. In peacebuilding, the evidence is thin and scattered, and demand signals are distorted. This may be the most insidious challenge we face. It should come as no surprise, then, that we repeatedly deploy the same approaches even if we have little evidence that they work, as if past practice, intuition, and good intentions are enough to justify them.

In a private market, the demand signal would provide insights into what works. In the case of peacebuilding, that would mean listening to communities affected by conflict. But signals from conflict-affected communities about what they need are often imperceptible to program designers. The clearest signal in the international peacebuilding market, and the one that pays, comes from governments and philanthropies issuing requests for proposal, not from people affected by violence. If communities can't express demand, the market can't price their preferences.

A handful of government donors and philanthropists dominate the market, essentially acting as monopsonists. They are primarily accountable to taxpayers and boards, not to the people impacted by war. The result is often risk-averse programming optimized for compliance and good news, not honest system change or rigorous evidence of impact. Those who pay are typically far from those who benefit, so the latter can't discipline performance. In the *best* case, the monopsonists, who is often the worst informed about the problem, tries to figure out what outcome the conflict-affect community most wants, and buys the services that they think will help achieve that outcome. As my former professor, Bill Easterly, said, this work "is neither a democracy nor a free market".

Recommendations: Rewire demand signals

- Establish country-level funds in which local civil society coalitions set priorities and commission work. Donors then finance the mechanism and audit for integrity and inclusivity. Implementers must be able to show how community priorities shape their program design.
- Pay for the unglamorous work of convening, translation, and facilitation that makes real community consultation possible. Require a short "what we heard and how we changed" memo before any major disbursement.
- Use community scorecards with budget teeth. Run quarterly citizen scorecards on access to justice, security, and service quality. Tie a slice of funding to improvements verified by independent checks.
- Where safe, match modest community or diaspora contributions (cash or in-kind) with donor funds to signal demand without penalizing poorer areas. Cap co-finance expectations to avoid excluding those who cannot contribute financially.

The Evidence Problem

When demand is distorted, resources often follow the wrong signal. Weak evidence compounds this error. Measuring the impact of peacebuilding work is inherently difficult. It is hard to attribute the *absence* of something like violence to a program or policy. It is even harder without the ability to randomly assign treatment, which is logistically impossible and ethically dubious in most conflict settings. Where it is possible, experimental research is costly and offers questionable generalizability across contexts. Further disincentivizing rigorous analysis, most peacebuilding donors, since they

are political actors not necessarily motivated by long-term peacebuilding objectives, seldom reward good evidence and many wouldn't know it if they saw it. So, the strongest evidence we have is usually quasi-experimental and it mostly measures the impact of a program on antecedents of peace, like trust and intergroup contact, rather than cessation of violence itself.

Unlike fields that compound knowledge, peacebuilding too often feels like we reset to zero with each grant cycle, rehashing the same ideas with little new evidence to go on. In science, every insight is tested and refined until it becomes tomorrow's starting point. Our field rarely does that. Projects end, teams disperse, data vanishes into a byzantine file system, and the next program rebuilds from scratch under a new acronym. Innovation and growth happen in pockets, often where you find a serendipitous convergence of highly motivated people with uncommon resources and the right set of complementary skills; but at an industry level, growth is slow.

The chasm between academia and practitioners adds to this challenge. Despite some promising recent initiatives like GCCI's fantastic evidence review, academics are often incentivized to ask narrow esoteric questions that offer little value to practitioners and policymakers. They are primarily accountable to academic journals and dissertation or tenure committees, not to peacebuilding practitioners much less conflict-affected communities. They tend to prize methodological purity and tight identification, while practitioners live with uncertainty and messy implementation. And even when good research exists, most practitioners don't have the time to sift through the literature or the skillset to parse an empirical paper (see labor specialization issue discussed below), so findings go unused. The two worlds need each other, but usually talk past one another.

Recommendations: Getting better evidence, and using it

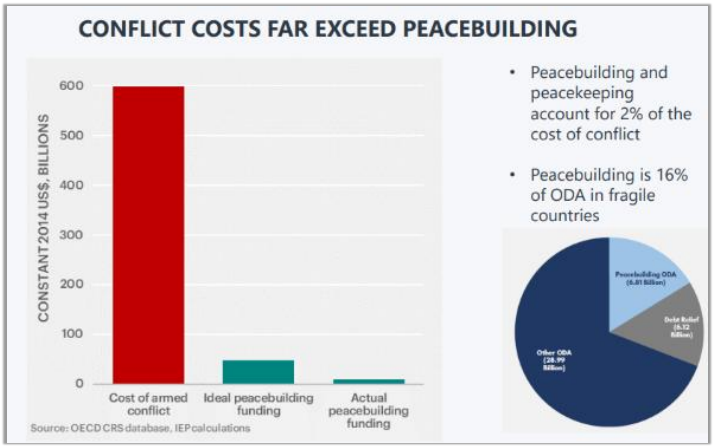
The solution likely lies in a combination of improved incentives, better tools and processes, and new connections.

- Experiment with or build lightweight system mapping tools that are customized for local/conflict actors to lead the design and data input. Tie the map to continuously updated data like incident feeds and administrative dataset to identify high-leverage programmatic intervention points and adaptations. Combine small experimentation with the live system map to explain causal relationships between factors. Let the map guide where the next experiment goes, and use problem-driven programming (PDIA) to scale what works rather than importing templates.
- Explore lower-cost experimentation like A/B testing and staggered roll-outs. Use simple, mobile data collection tools like KoBo so the marginal cost stays low.
- Where rigorous evidence or data is scarce, focus on strengthening theory. Invest in middle-range theories and causal stories we can test and refine across contexts. Publish short, falsifiable hypotheses with indicators so other teams can try to break or confirm them.
- Develop an AI research agent, trained on the catalogue of experimental and theoretical literature, to support program design and adaptation. In partnership with program teams, the agent could scan relevant literature and then flag design gaps, suggest tweaks,

propose feasible evaluative metrics or raise questions for design teams to discuss. Let the machine shorten the distance between evidence and design.

- Build a learning market, not just a grant market. Create pooled, multi-donor learning portfolios that fund families of related interventions across geographies, with shared indicators and open data standards. Require pre-analysis plans where appropriate but encourage adaptive deviations when the system shifts. Commission independent, practice-oriented syntheses each year and pay implementers for contributing usable data and codebooks, not just reports.
- Close the practitioner–researcher gap by incentivizing joint designs, shared datasets, and practitioner-ready research syntheses. Donors could fund a 90-day embedded researcher to set up measurement and quick tests for program teams, then transition ownership to field teams.
- During program design, run structured forecasting activities with teams (Good Judgment–style) on key program assumptions. These exercises consistently improve accuracy and expose shaky priors or biases before you bet resources on them.
- Before commissioning big studies, ask what decisions the result would change and price the value of information. If the expected value is low, default to cheaper tests and preserve scarce funds for high-value research.

The Resources Problem



Peace is the ultimate public good. It is non-excludable and non-rivalrous, which invites free-riding and chronic under-investment. Those most harmed by conflict are often the least able to pay and have the least political leverage to compel others to contribute.

As a result, the level of investment in peacebuilding is not commensurate with the scale of the problem. Recent estimates put the global economic impact of violence at roughly $17.5 trillion in 2024 (15.7% of global GDP). This is likely a significant under-counting given difficulties in calculating opportunity cost. Regardless of the exact figure, it's huge. Violent conflict is a staggering drag on welfare that garners comparatively little investment.

A 2020 analysis estimated that the cost of conflict in the country I'm devoted to, Burma, is about $30 billion per year. In a world with efficient markets for public goods, a verified 1% reduction in expected conflict costs would be worth about $300 million in avoided losses. In practice, peacebuilders cannot capture that value. There is no market that prices "units of peace", verifies attribution, and obliges beneficiaries to pay. Effective peacebuilding can offer massive social returns and near-zero

private returns. Whereas a tech company designed to distract people and sell their attention to advertisers can raise hundreds of millions of dollars through debt and equity markets, peacebuilders are left with small, short-term grants chasing problems with trillion-dollar price tags. It is a catastrophic misallocation of capital that disproportionately harms the most vulnerable. Peacebuilders face missing markets, difficult attribution, and diffuse beneficiaries, so capital goes to services with much lower public value. As a result, current funding levels are likely orders of magnitude too small and too short-term.

Peacebuilders also operate without leverage. We don't have predictable revenue, receivables a bank will lend against, or collateral. As a result, we can't borrow at scale, can't smooth cash flow, and can't front-load investment to match the systems-level problems that we face. Donor funds often arrive late or in short bursts, which forces small, sequential projects instead of big, compounding bets. That means stitching together six-month grants for work that needs multi-year capital and long runways. Without debt or growth equity, even proven models can't scale beyond the next grant cycle. This model forces peacebuilding organizations to operate hand-to-mouth, driving capable people from the already low-paying sector.

Recommendations: New investment models

If we want investments to meet the scale of this enormous problem, and we expect that governments will continue to underinvest, we need a different approach to peacebuilding finance. The point isn't to "financialize peace", it's to pay for outcomes so free-riding is harder and good work can attract the resources to have impact.

This could include market mimicry such as outcome-based contracts (pay for verified reductions in violence), parametric peace insurance (automatic payouts when a violence threshold is met), "peace impact bonds" (payment contingent on reducing violence), and progressive matching that multiplies small local contributions with large external funds. Here are some ideas:

- Pilot outcome-based finance initiatives with third-party verification. Have communities or (democratic) governments set 3-4 outcomes they would like to see, such as faster dispute resolution, less domestic violence, or stronger rights protections, and give implementers room to choose any safe, lawful path to achieve the outcome. Create a compensation structure that pays for outcomes, accounting for confounders and commensurate with the cost-of-violence benchmarks like those from the Institute for Economics & Peacebuilding. Have a third party judge the results. A donor or development finance institution can promise to cover losses if the results don't materialize, so implementers can borrow modest working capital to get started. Consider selecting the 3-4 outcomes using a quadratic voting system that helps people express how strongly they feel about an issue, not just which side they're on, by making each subsequent vote more expensive.
- Tie a greater share of funding to independent, cumulative learning (including mixed-methods quasi-experimental and experimental research where ethical and feasible), and create open registries and replication incentives so results travel. Commission "evidence

syntheses" like GCCI tailored to practitioners, not just academic audiences. Pay peacebuilders and researchers for sharing clean, reusable data and short "how we did it" notes.

- Experiment with "community procurement" or pooled, in-country platforms where local coalitions set priorities and commission work. Donors can then finance the platform rather than pre-selecting activities. Ensure confidentiality so that community members can express preferences without retaliation.
- Increase "core funding" for local organizations and/or set up a "working-capital fund" that vetted local groups can draw on to bridge slow reimbursements, internal banking crises, exchange rate losses or other interruptions to cash flow.
- Experiment with advance commitment funding in which donors post a public promise: "If any qualified provider delivers a verified X% reduction in violent incidents in this area, we will pay $Y." This could enable peacebuilding to raise modest loans against that future payment, because there's a clear buyer for success.
- Use smart contracts and stable coins through platforms like Coala Pay to ensure consistency in payments. Use pre-agreed indicators like "violent incidents per 100,000 people staying below a threshold for three months" and release through smart contracts automatically if targets are verified.

Section 2: Operational & Implementation Challenges

In addition to the market-level challenges, the tools we use for conflict analysis, program design, project management, finance, and evaluation are often built for stable, well-resourced environments, not for contested, low-connectivity places. They optimize for compliance over speed and safety, struggle with multiple languages and off-grid workflows, and stall out under basic realities like bank de-risking and staff turnover. The result is delays, brittle programs, and peacebuilders overwhelmed by compliance and operational complexity. Even when the strategy is right, the machinery makes it hard to succeed.

Conflict Analysis & Adaptative Management Systems

Peacebuilding interventions rarely operate along a clear pathway from inputs to outcomes. They interact with armed actors' incentives, local political disputes, historical grievances, market shocks, shifting political attitudes, and geopolitics, among dozens of other factors. Linear "theories of change" often obscure this reality. Despite years of talk about systems thinking and adaptive management, many programs still design and judge themselves like a straightforward immunization drive or agriculture program.

When tools exist, they're rarely built for the people who hold the most information: local peacebuilders. The best systems mapping tools, for example, are scarcely usable outside of the

academy, much less by the people with data to accurately populate the map. Maps get drawn *about* communities, not *by* them. The result is elegant diagrams that are misleading because they are seeded with bad inputs.

Even accurate maps won't save us from ourselves. Our conflict analysis is often riddled with cognitive biases, like overconfidence, anchoring, confirmation bias, base rate neglect and motivated reason, and often warped further by internal power dynamics. These habits make us overweight vivid anecdotes, underweight base rates, and cling to first impressions. They also silence junior or local partners who might contradict the prevailing view. The result is often false certainty that hardens into program plans.

Once we've mapped the system and surfaced blind spots, we need to be capable of adapting as the system changes. Adaptive management pays off, but it takes time, which is the scarcest resource for program teams. Teams can't continuously collect reliable data, reflect, pivot, obtain approvals, and process the paperwork. The ideal is having embedded developmental evaluators who lead such efforts, but it rarely fits the budget (never, in my 13 years of experience). Worse, incentives often reward polished reporting over effective adaptation.

Recommendations: Analyze and operate at the system level

- Identify or develop new systems mapping tools that are lightweight, offline-capable, functional in local languages, and customized for local peacebuilders to input factors. Kumu offers a useful starting point, but would require customization for it to be useful for all key stakeholders. Co-design system maps with local peacebuilders. Budget for facilitation and translation as core costs so the map becomes a shared, regularly used operating picture (including during Strategy Testing) rather than a one-off diagram. Refresh the map on a set cadence using a small number of simple indicators like incident logs, short phone/WhatsApp polls with RapidPro, and community panels. Prioritize timely, good-enough signals over large surveys that arrive too late to guide decisions.
- Where ethics and access allow, run small tests tied to uncertain causal pathways in the map (ex. A/B variants or staggered start dates). Specify in advance the question each test will answer and how the result will change the next program decision.
- Organize simple forecasting tournaments (see: Good Judgment) using the Delphi Method to surface disagreements early and force clarity. As a team or in partnership with external stakeholders using a polling app, make specific, time-bound predictions on key assumptions, track accuracy, and adjust plans when reality proves you wrong. It's a cheap way to expose shaky bets before they harden into programs.
- With every major analytical claim, require that the analyst explain the base case (i.e. "what usually happens here") and provide disconfirming evidence if there is deviation. This standard procedure reduces anchoring and confirmation bias without adding heavy process.

- Arrange short Strategy Testing meetings every quarter. Use a one-page dashboard or the team's systems map; agree on 1–3 concrete adjustments; and apply pre-cleared pivot rules (ex. small budget or scheduling changes) so adaptation can proceed without lengthy approvals. During the session, consider what changed in the system; what changes resulted from our work; how did we change as a program team; and how do those changes affect the assumptions underlying our theory of change.

Operational systems

Resource constraints and slow innovation leave most peacebuilders running mission-critical work on input systems that are either archaic or grafted from other sectors. In one past job, for example, my team used a finance system from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It worked only in English, was inaccessible to non-citizens, and assumed stable bandwidth and office networks. Our programs, meanwhile, were led largely by non-Americans, in conflict zones, with intermittent connections.

None of the organizations I have ever worked for had an organization-wide project management system designed for program operations. Every team has built a bespoke project management system from scratch just to answer simple questions like, 'how much money do we have?' and 'have we paid our vendors?' The systems are usually made up of an array of disconnected Excel spreadsheets and apps like Airtable, KoBo, Trello, and Quickbase, each with their own log-ins, variables and idiosyncrasies. Monitoring, evaluation, and learning lives in ad-hoc files scattered across shared drives and chat threads. When staff turnover, as they often do in high-stress low-compensation contexts, the knowledge of how the system works, what was promised to our partners, and what we've learned from our work often walks out the door with them.

Perverse incentives deepen the rut. Finance and compliance are judged on clean audits, while program teams are judged on results. In practice, audit needs win out since the cost of financial non-compliance is higher than the cost of programmatic failure. As a result, program team operate with rigid templates, lengthy approval processes, and documentation rules designed for low-risk environments.

The consequences are not abstract. Risk is pushed to local peacebuilders and subcontractors whose payments can take months and who receive opaque contracts that are always in English. Imprecise budget systems mean resources are inefficiently managed, resulting in regular over or under-spending. Peacebuilders end up allocating huge chunks of their time navigating complex trackers built by someone who left the organization years ago instead of doing peacebuilding. The system isn't neutral infrastructure. It undermines trust among practitionners, which is a pre-requisite to operating in a conflict zone, and destroys productivity.

The result is organizations that function as less than the sum of their parts.

Recommendations: Tools that fit the field

Peacebuilders require tools and systems built for low bandwidth and multiple languages that surface the essential information managers rely on to make decisions. We need a simple, safe, auditable and fast finance system that ties deliverables to payments and provides managers with safe and easy access to essential information. It should reward on-time, accurate execution and documented learning, so the machinery helps good strategies succeed instead of grinding them down. The following tools reflect my experience and are illustrative, not exhaustive, of operational solutions that peacebuilders could explore.

- For moving money, tools like Coala Pay combine stablecoin payment systems with smart contracts and simple dashboards. These allow low-fee, fast cross-border transfers where banking is weak. They create a more equitable distribution of risk between large organizations and local subcontractors, offer more predictability in payment, and clearer records.
- Address the information and power asymmetry in contracting by always offering to issue the contract in the first language of both parties, not defaulting to English.
- Invest in exploring, customizing and (especially!) adopting of AI-assisted project management tools. Pursue organization-wide adoption to pursue economies of scale and unlock customizations that can be shared across teams. Consider tools like ClickUp or Notion that can provide donor-appropriate program updates that simplify reporting.
- Use internal deliberation tools that surface team perceptions, assumptions, and disagreements which can guide management and operational adjustments. This is especially important for large, multicultural, multilingual teams working remotely with uneven power dynamics. Tools like Pol.is can help elicit novel ideas or clarify perceptions that may clash with leadership without getting personal or exposing staff to retribution. Use Signal for secure internal communications or Element for a Slack-like system that is relatively secure.
- Use tools that make external data collection fast, simple, and workable offline. KoBo Toolbox supports offline and low-bandwidth environments and is accessible in many languages (including Burmese!). RapidPro can run five-minute micro-surveys and feedback lines in many languages. In sensitive areas, default to voice calls (IVR) rather than text to leave a lighter digital trace. Consider Metabase for simple data visualization.

Peacebuilders could develop a workable tech stack that meets their needs so that they don't have to rely on outdated or poorly tailored tools. This could look something like: use KoBo for field data and RapidPro for short community pulses. Store data in Airtable or Excel, and output a weekly dashboard with Metabase. Manage workflows in Notion or ClickUp with AI summaries and a few well-chosen automations. Keep a living system map in Kumu that a local partner updates each quarter and is used to identify high-leverage points for program adaptation. Move cross-border payments into conflict zones with Coala Pay. Use Signal for sensitive internal correspondences and Pol.is for program adaptation.

Labor specialization

Peacebuilding is unavoidably multidisciplinary. Program staff are expected to be skilled in budgeting, contracting, procurement, MEL, fundraising, research and analysis, legal compliance, IRB processes, media engagement, recruitment, and personnel management, while also, of course, showing mastery in peacebuilding methods, at least one country/region and other thematic domains. The tasks of a peacebuilding team are often done across languages and distance and under conditions of war. The breadth of tasks and working conditions almost guarantees skills mismatch and burnout. In practice, thin budgets and rapid start-ups push generalists to do everything, too often producing generic interventions. Donor incentives don't help. They often reward clean compliance and punchy reports with nice photos and a heartwarming anecdote more than real evidence of impact, adaptation or learning. This has the secondary effect of professional stagnation for many who "gain" 10 years of experience by working the same year ten times.

Given the political nature of peacebuilding donors and low risk tolerance, hiring managers often prioritize candidates who are skilled in navigating political bureaucracy rather than peacebuilding methods. This tends to preference a narrow group of highly credentialed native English speakers who have had the opportunity to travel or intern in political institutions (people like me) and ignores virtually everyone else, especially people from communities affected by conflict. Sector-wide under-investment also yields low salaries, pushing many capable people to high-paying professions that offer little social value, amounting to a significant misallocation of labor.

Power imbalances between international actors and local organizations compound the problem. Calls to "decolonize aid" and to empower local peacebuilders are on the right track, but the bureaucratic incentives that hold power where it is remain strong and growing nationalism in donor capitals makes this an even harder pitch.

Some practitioners, including myself, also too often confuse moral conviction with being right. Having a positive impact is about much more than one's motivation.

Recommendations: More productive and equitable teams

Despite these challenges, I've worked on some incredible teams. Those teams have had a few things in common and tend to show characteristics of Daniel Pink's book, Drive. We were generally paid enough that money wasn't a major point of grievance; we had a reasonable degree of control over our work; we were given opportunities to learn, including from other colleagues, and to pursue mastery; and we shared a motivating purpose. With those principles as the foundation, here are a few other ideas peacebuilders could consider:

- Budget a protected training allotment for each team member and reward learning. Guarantee every staff member 5–10% time and a small annual budget for skill upgrades tied to their role. Create opportunities for staff to present what they learn and tie

promotions or raises to showing new skills, not just years of experience. Also, reward individual contributions to others' learning through mentorship or internal training initiatives.

- Create flexible mechanisms to engage a range of external experts so that you don't have to hire for everything. Pre-contract experts in key domains (ex. sanctions, rebel governance, mediation) on fractional retainers. Build flexible scopes of work (5–30 hours/month) so teams can pull in exactly the expertise needed without a full-time hire.
- Fund an embedded advisory model of peacebuilding in which peacebuilders are available and accountable to pro-peace stakeholders *within* a conflict system. I have seen this low-cost approach work well in highly dynamic environments where external peacebuilders bound to stiff workplans quickly fall behind conflict dynamics. It can be a hard sell to donors who expect benefits to flow to them, but it helps peacebuilders build trust faster with conflict actors and keeps peacebuilding advisors relevant as conditions shift.
- Align donor reporting with real work. Negotiate templates that draw directly from the task management or MEL system, emphasize outcomes and adaptations, and include a brief "what we learned" annex. Reward teams for credible course corrections, not just perfect plans.
- Address recruitment bias by using structured interviews with scoring rubrics, ensuring involvement of local peacebuilders in review committees, and tracking interview pass-through or hiring rates by language, nationality, and gender. As pay secrecy tends to protect existing inequities, consider publishing salary bands for each job posting and introduce salary transparency internally.

Risk management and the cost of inaction

Taking action in a conflict setting carries real risk. So does inaction. The cost of inaction is often hidden but has become clearer to me recently given the missed opportunities during Burma's transition period and in the post-coup revolution, which have partly resulted from low risk tolerance and an unwillingness to fail. The cost of inaction is considerable: foregone lives saved, trajectories not bent, legitimacy not earned. In many conflicts, a certain risk tolerance is required to have any impact at all.

The principle of 'do no harm' was born from humility and ethical restraint. It should not be misread as 'do nothing until risk is zero'. We must also acknowledge that restraint itself comes with trade-offs. Burma's post-coup conflict underscore how quickly the cost curve steepens when action is delayed or routed only through the safest channels.

This challenge is magnified for complex internal conflicts in countries of limited geopolitical significance. For costly internal conflicts like Burma, Sudan, and Yemen, the international community typically reverts to the safest, lowest-commitment playbook of elite dialogues and short-

term ceasefires because complexity reads as intractability and intractability triggers risk aversion. The result is a bias toward short-term, low-risk interventions that ignore underlying drivers. Mistaking complexity for intractability leads policymakers to privilege state actors and procedural engagement while ignoring legitimate stakeholders who could be partners in peace. The irony is that this caution props up the status quo while windows for constructive action narrow and costs mount.

A better approach treats risk, like complexity, as something to assess and manage in partnership with conflict stakeholders, not merely avoid. The goal is disciplined action under uncertainty. Undertake small, reversible moves early and make bigger commitments as confidence grows. That requires tools and rules that account for the cost of inaction alongside those of action.

Recommendations: A healthier relationship with risk

The peacebuilding ethic of do no harm shouldn't change much. We should protect people first, and proceed with humility. What we could change is the cost-benefit assessment and how we make decisions to act. When the cost of inaction is visible and counted, the "safest" path is often one in which we act carefully, early, and with rules for adaptation.

- Make risk-return tradeoffs explicit. Approximate the opportunity cost of delay or inaction and document instances where calculated risk-taking yielded outsized benefits. Protect staff who report learning from near-misses and failures.
- Adopt option-value thinking: prefer actions that create information and can be reversed cheaply if the system responds badly. Report publicly on calculated risks taken and the cost of opportunities missed.
- Set decision thresholds in advance. Define what evidence would justify starting, pausing, or scaling an intervention given the risk profile. Similarly, adopt pre-cleared adaptation rules for staff and partners. Authorize field leads and/or partners to make low-risk adaptations (ex. under $5,000, timing/venue changes, language adjustments) without new approvals. Reserve escalations for changes that alter the risk profile.

Conclusion

Peacebuilders work every day to address complex problems that cost the world trillions of dollars. But the peacebuilding 'market' is heavily distorted and shaped by perverse incentives that nudge peacebuilders away from interventions that might actually reduce conflict. We struggle to determine what works, why it works, and how to build on that knowledge to drive innovation. We are also trying to solve society-scale problems with shoestring budgets and shoddy systems. On the ground, the result is peacebuilders spending their days managing burnt out staff, placating political donors, wrestling with incomprehensible budget systems or chasing approvals for routine activities.

Peacebuilding can work better. If we rewire incentives, upgrade operational machinery, and reorient the way we make decisions, the sector can trade tired methods for results and turn today's hard-won wins into tomorrow's baseline. We should treat peace like the public good it is: pay for outcomes communities value, make the cost of inaction visible, and scale what works through locally owned analysis and adaptation.

New fixes are within reach, especially given the emergence of new technology. We can do more to connect local peacebuilders with intersecting industries and build tools and systems that fit their needs. A core objective of these efforts is to improve systems so that peacebuilders can spend most of their time doing peacebuilding, not financial compliance or budget tracking. Do that, and progress will compound. Projects won't just succeed in pockets, but will stack into shared knowledge and stronger institutions.

We are entering an era of greater conflict risk and higher stakes. Nationalism, xenophobia, and inequality are corroding social contracts at home, while the rules-based order frays internationally amid major-power competition. Multipolarity raises the odds of miscalculation just as the problems that most demand cooperation like AI safety, climate change, biosecurity, and pandemics become more acute. If peacebuilding stays slow, siloed, and compliance-bound, local conflicts will metastasize and the cost of inaction will compound. The task is urgent: build a faster-learning, locally led, outcome-focused system so we can create a peacebuilding system that provides the shared security that this moment demands.