



Transforming Partnerships in International Cooperation

Executive Summary



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Partnerships between individuals and organisations in the Global North and Global South have become common practice in the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sectors. They aim to address critiques of international aid and development approaches by increasing local participation and ownership, and improving development outcomes.

Despite ongoing reform processes emphasising improved and equitable partnerships, many approaches still reflect neo-colonial hierarchies, undermining the value and dignity of local partners. More recent efforts to reform the sectors, including the Grand Bargain agreement,¹ the ‘localisation’ agenda and the ‘ShiftThePower’ movement,² have focused on the power imbalances between Global North donors, INGOs and intermediaries, and indigenous civil society actors in the Global South. In some parts of the sector, this has led to calls to decolonise international aid and development, and build more equitable partnerships.

In the second half of 2022, Peace Direct convened a global online consultation to discuss the issue of inequitable partnerships and how to decolonise them. Over 200 participants from 70 countries and across the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sectors took part in the consultation and follow-up interviews. We are indebted to all those who shared their insights, stories and expert analysis.

Our findings presented in this paper build on our previous reports, *Time to Decolonise Aid* and *Race, Power and Peacebuilding*, which were published in 2021 and 2022, respectively. These reports highlighted the prevalence of systemic racism across the wider humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors. Our aim for this report is to provide a series of accessible approaches to building and sustaining better partnerships between civil society actors in the Global South and Global North donors, INGOs and intermediaries.

¹ Inter-Agency Standing Committee, ‘About the Grand Bargain’. Accessible via: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/node/40190>.

² Global Fund for Community Foundations, ‘Community Philanthropy and #ShiftThePower’. Accessible via: <https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/what-we-stand-for/shiftthepower/>.

Findings:

- Definitions:** The absence of clear a definition and understanding of partnerships – particularly ‘equitable partnerships’ and their guiding principles – means local organisations in the Global South do not have clarity on the motivations of Global North actors. This ambiguity has led many participants to perceive that Global North actors are primarily seeking subcontractors in the Global South who can simply implement projects or programmes designed externally, rather than fostering genuine collaboration and partnership within the local context.
- Transactional:** A considerable portion of the funding in the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sectors is highly transactional in nature. Donors, and by extension many INGOs, tend to prioritise short-term activities aimed at achieving specific project objectives, rather than the long-term transformation of communities and societies. This leads to partnerships themselves becoming an instrument for the delivery of outputs, rather than being mutually beneficial and transformative, both for the partners and for the communities they serve.
- Neo-colonial:** Many Global North actors continue to hold neo-colonial attitudes that have not been acknowledged or even recognised. This is seen by Global South actors as one reason for the failure of Global North actors to develop equitable partnerships. This is compounded by the reluctance of Global South actors to raise these issues for fear of losing funding. These attitudes and behaviours undermine any prospect for more equitable partnerships.
- Power:** Local actors believe that Global North donors and INGOs actively avoid addressing the power imbalances in their relationships with Global South organisations. This reluctance is attributed to Global North actors’ desire to preserve their own power, a deliberate ignorance of existing power imbalances, an inability to envision a world without their influence, or a lack of skills and experience in engaging in discussions about power.
- Reimagine:** Local actors continue to see partnerships with Global North actors as desirable, but participants emphasised that partnerships cannot continue as they are currently conceived. Instead, they need to be reimaged and transformed.
- Values:** Trust, humility, respect, and mutuality/reciprocity emerged as the foundational values for ‘decolonised partnerships’, with participants highlighting their importance in building relationships and achieving meaningful outcomes. Key behaviours they outlined included mutual accountability and responsibility, clear communication, co-creation, shared vision and purpose, and respecting each other’s contributions.
- Mindsets:** A crucial building block towards more decolonised and equitable partnerships involves challenging and changing current mindsets and worldviews, both among Global North and Global South actors. This includes addressing racism, elitism, and other harmful attitudes when viewing Global South actors and communities, as well as recognising and reflecting on power and privilege in the partnership itself.



Recommendations

We've developed an extensive set of practical recommendations which emerged from the consultation. For the purposes of this Summary, we have selected a few key recommendations for each aspect of partnerships. Please refer to the full report for the full set of recommendations. If you're unable to access the recommendations in the full report due to language barriers, please get in touch with us at info@peacedirect.org.

Changing mindsets and worldviews

- GS** Allocate time with your staff to share alternative narratives that challenge dominant discourses and perspectives in international development.
- GN** Encourage an internal culture of openness to critique by encouraging Senior Leadership to hold difficult conversations about racism and power imbalances both internally and externally.
- Both** Educate yourself. Learn how the current international system of cooperation has been influenced by Global North thinking. Learn about how Global North actors have directly and indirectly imposed their ways of thinking across the international humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors.
- Joint** Explore together, through a facilitated conversation, differences and similarities in ideologies and motivations underpinning concepts such as 'development'. By promoting mutual learning and recognising the value of diverse knowledge systems, you can challenge the notion that expertise solely resides in the Global North.

Vision, purpose and goal setting

- GS** Identify what partnership principles and behaviours matter to you most. Codify and share these with prospective partners.
- Both** Define what you mean by partnership, and critically assess *why* you want to establish a partnership.
- Joint** Co-create a vision document that outlines the aims/purpose of the partnership, distinct from project funding.

Key

This key indicates whether the recommendation is aimed at Global South actors, Global North actors, or both. The recommendations highlighted as 'both Global North and Global South actors' are applicable to both groups, while the 'joint' recommendations should be undertaken *together*.

GS Global South actors

GN Global North actors

Both For both Global North and Global South actors

Joint Joint recommendations, to be undertaken together

Communication and language

- GN** Practice active listening in conversations with your partner, paying close attention to what they may not be telling you.
- Both** Practice communication techniques to clearly express your perspectives, needs, and concerns in partnerships. This includes educating yourself around cultural norms in communication and taking these into account when communicating with partners from other countries.
- Joint** Agree on how to cultivate a safe space in which difficult issues can be raised without fear of retribution or defensiveness.

Practice

Roles and responsibilities

- GS** Use approaches such as Appreciative Inquiry to identify your organisational strengths and assets, rather than gaps, in order to help inform the roles and responsibilities that you should take.
- GN** Unlearn assumptions about who holds technical expertise and what technical expertise is. Reflect on how much of your work is focused on technical vs transformative outcomes.
- Joint** Commit to reassessing how roles and responsibilities will shift over time, in particular how any role assigned to the Global North partner should diminish.

Programme design

- GS** Build inception phases into projects to enable the project design to be 'stress tested' in communities and then adapted following feedback.
- GN** Ensure that project/programme design is led by the Global South partner and agree how they can challenge and/or refuse any imposition of ideas and activities.
- Both** Unlearn any prejudice you might hold about the value of indigenous knowledge.
- Joint** Review programme documentation together, before sign-off, to minimise the risk of any misunderstandings.

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Budgeting

- Both** Build in emergency or contingency funds into budgets to enable you to adapt quickly to any rapid change in the context.
- Both** Recognise how budget discussions are often the most obvious manifestation of Global North control over their partners. Global South partners should call out such behaviours if they observe this, and Global North partners should train staff to be alert to the ways that this might show up in their work.
- Both** Build in costs that support strengthening the partnership, for example a yearly in-person meeting to review the health of the partnership.

Funding

- GS** Identify funding and in-kind contributions from your own communities and constituents.
- GN** Analyse how your funding may have created dependency among your partners and develop a strategy to counter this.
- GN** Provide direct, unrestricted and/or multi-year funding to foster trust, adaptability and sustainability in partnerships. If unrestricted funding is not possible, provide flexible funding to allow partners to navigate changing contexts and plan for the long term.
- Joint** Regularly share updates on your fundraising efforts, to build a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities that both parties face.

Non-funding support

- GS** Identify the stakeholders and spaces that you would like to access and which partners could support you.
- GN** Build in additional staff time to implement non-financial methods of support, such as advocating for your partner in Global North spaces and events or supporting your partner to advocate directly in those spaces.
- Joint** Explore together the opportunities for different non-financial aspects of support, for example opportunities for joint advocacy, engaging with networks, promoting each other's work and so on.

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Partnership duration and transition

- Both** Share openly your partnership aspirations and how such plans contribute to your strategy and mission.
- Joint** Discuss how and under what conditions the partnership will transition, including an eventual exit.
- Joint** Build in review periods that allow both sides to critically reflect on whether the transition plans need to be adjusted in any way.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning

- GS** Identify what you and your communities consider success in your work/activities and use this as the basis for programme design and learning.
- GN** Be prepared to rethink and scrap your existing MEL approaches, such as logical frameworks.
- Joint** Build in regular learning exchanges, ideally once a quarter or every six months.

Organisational development

- GS** Identify and assert your own technical, contextual and social capacities/expertise before analysing gaps.
- GN** Stress-test your assumptions about the added value of your expertise by inviting your partners to assess the value they place on these skills.
- Joint** Share and discuss your organisational strategies together, using this as the basis for organisational development discussions.

Accountability

- GS** Develop mechanisms to ensure that your organisation is accountable to the communities and constituents you serve. Not only is this vital to ensure the best outcomes for communities; it also addresses a common criticism by Global North organisations of local CSOs that they lack ‘downward accountability’.
- GN** Unlearn harmful established approaches to accountability, which place reporting to you and your donors as the most important measure of accountability.
- Joint** Agree jointly how you intend to be accountable to each other, including behaviours and values.

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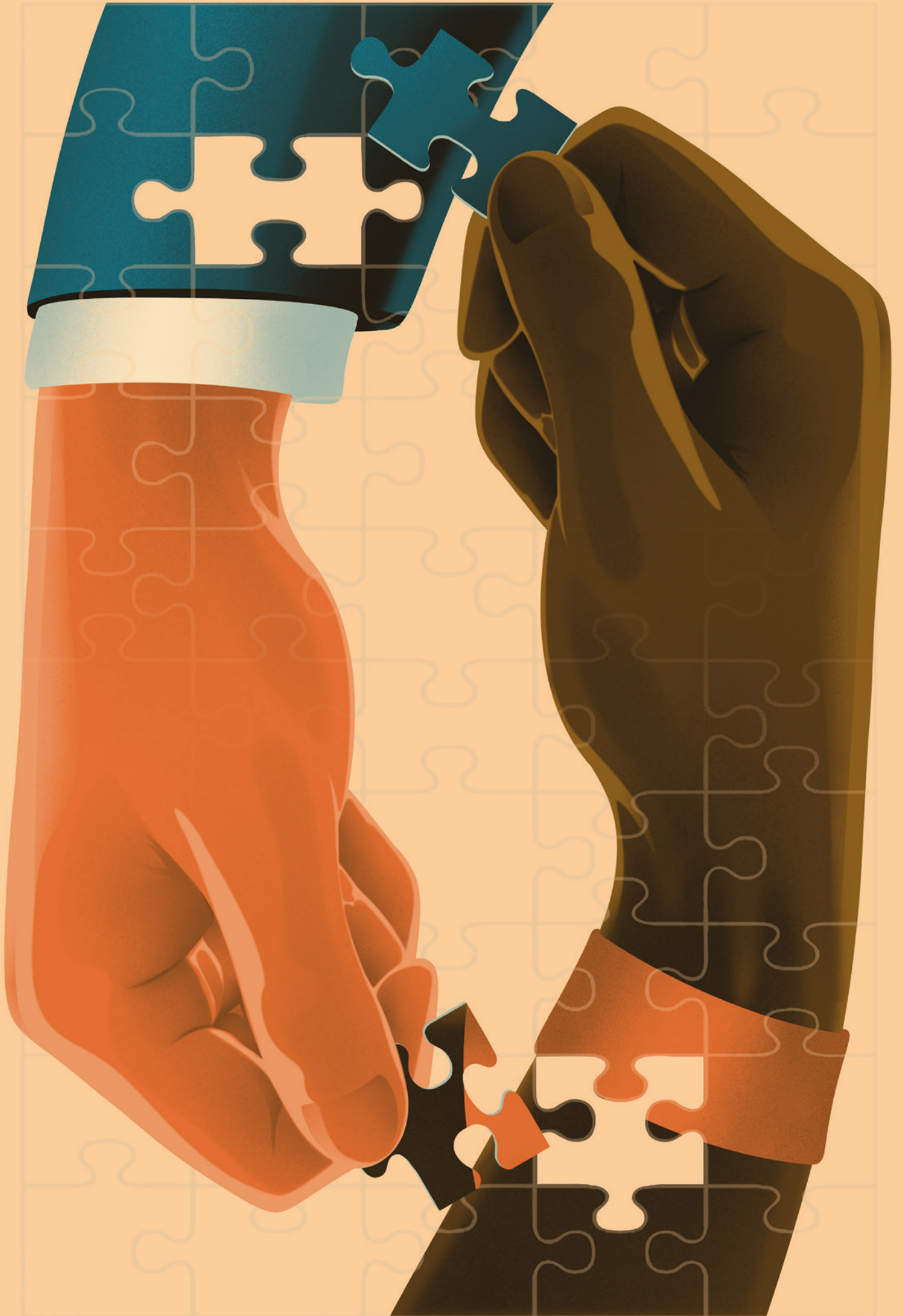
Joint Joint recommendations, to be undertaken together

Financial sustainability

- GS** Explore ways to generate non-grant income, such as setting up a small commercial enterprise, advisory services or fundraising from your own community. Share these with your partner.
- GN** Consider carefully the extent to which your business model relies on the existing framing of your organisation as the ‘technical expert’ and consider ways that your financial sustainability does not continue to depend on such a model.
- Joint** Agree milestones for the financial health of your respective organisations.

Check-ins

- GN** Build in staff time and budgets to allow staff to cultivate meaningful check-ins, including in-person meetings.
- Both** Ensure that check-ins do not focus just on programme/project delivery, but also focus on the health of the partnership.
- Joint** Practice how to give and receive difficult/challenging feedback, including agreeing in advance how tensions and disagreements will be handled by both parties.



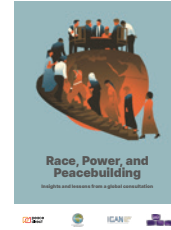
Decolonising the Sector

This is the third report in our series on decolonising the sector.



The first report, *Time to Decolonise Aid*, was published in May 2021 and can be downloaded here:

peacedirect.org/publications/timetodecoloniseaid/



The second report, *Race, Power and Peacebuilding*, was published in April 2022 and can be downloaded here:

peacedirect.org/publications/race-power-and-peacebuilding/

Acknowledgements

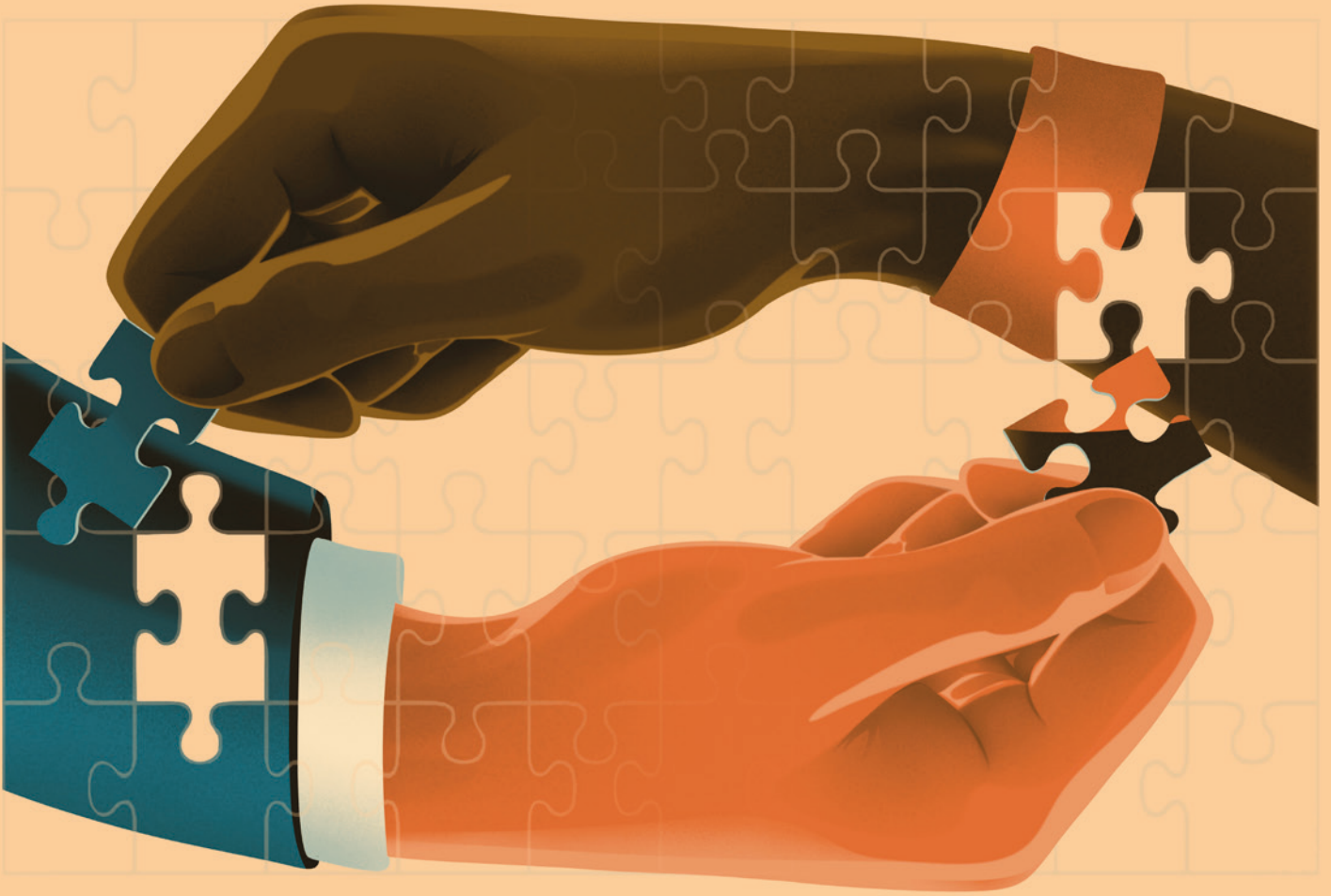
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Abbreviations

CSO	Civil Society Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
ICAN	International Civil Society Action Network
P4D	Platform4Dialogue
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
SAS+	Stopping As Success
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
WPSO	Women and Peace Studies Organization



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