



INSTITUTE FOR INTEGRATED TRANSITIONS

## “Horizontal peacebuilding”: A new concept developed by IFIT’s Territorial Trust in Colombia

The ideal of “locally-led peacebuilding” – an outgrowth of the decades-old idea of “local ownership” – is the prevailing standard in the field of peacebuilding. Broadly speaking, it serves as a rebuff against the pretensions of internationals who seek to articulate or steer the peace aspirations and decisions of a country that is not their own.

The ideal of “locally-led peacebuilding” embodies a second critique as well, namely, that peacebuilding processes have been too top-down. Making them more bottom-up is another way of understanding what is meant by locally-led.

Yet, while these understandings of locally-led peacebuilding are well founded, they have two key limitations:

- *First*, they are highly vertical in conception. Insisting that internationals allow locals to lead, or that local elites cede leadership to community-level actors, are both ways of inverting the top and bottom of a vertical relationship. In each case, the invocation is for actors “outside” or “above” to listen more and yield greater agency to actors that are “below” them in power or authority.
- *Second*, by concentrating on elite and community-level actors and processes – vectors that represent the outer axes of the peacebuilding spectrum – current conceptions of “locally-led peacebuilding” effectively leave out a large middle section of key actors.

Enter [“horizontal peacebuilding”](#): a new IFIT concept that offers a different way of thinking about locally-led peacebuilding, with echoes in social capital’s concept of inter-local and trans-local.

The concept emerged primarily through IFIT’s work in Colombia, and more generally through the country “brain trust” model at the centre of IFIT’s operating model.

IFIT brain trusts are purpose-built cross-sectoral groups of 15-18 social, business and political leaders from a particular country, brought together for their policy expertise, personal integrity, influential local networks, and capacity to connect elites and ordinary citizens. A single brain trust might include, for example, the rector of an important national university, the head of the national business council, the country’s chief religious’ leader, the director of a top local think tank, and so on. They are the [go-between leaders](#) who bridge national and community-level processes of dialogue, peacebuilding or transition.

When IFIT created a country brain trust in 2016 in Colombia – the *Fondo de Capital Humano* (FCH) – the work was locally-led but centred in national-level decisions made in Bogotá. In 2020, IFIT mitigated this by creating a second brain trust – the *Fondo Territorial de Capital Humano* (FTCH) – comprised of diverse local leaders and local experts working in Colombia’s most conflict-affected territories.

At first, we anticipated vertical benefits. We knew that the FTCH would add a bottom-up dimension to our work; and that the FCH's technical expertise and elite-focused networks would strengthen the FTCH's more localised impact.

All of that happened. But something else occurred along the way. The greatest value add of the FTCH turned out to be horizontal: the biggest benefits arose from 1) the inter-territorial relationships that formed between and among FTCH members and other local leaders, and 2) the horizontal actions the FTCH carried out or catalysed in and across different territories. By coincidence, a similarly horizontal benefit was occurring in Nigeria via the work of IFIT's Middle Belt Brain Trust.

All of this led our Colombian staff and brain trust members to develop a [full paper](#), in Spanish, on the horizontal peacebuilding concept that is today part and parcel of how we work and think at IFIT.

Of course, peacebuilding will continue to need vertical approaches; and the elite and community ends of the actor spectrum will remain critical. But if locally-led peacebuilding remains stuck in a vertical notion that leaves out the middle layer and overlooks the value of inter-territorial approaches, the reach and durability of peacebuilding efforts will be needlessly underdeveloped. In that sense, horizontal peacebuilding offers the chance for a much fuller and deeper realisation of the ideals of locally-led peacebuilding.

**Mark Freeman** / August 2024

**About IFIT.** Founded in 2012, the [Institute for Integrated Transitions](#) (IFIT) is an independent, international, non-governmental organisation offering interdisciplinary analysis and technical advice to national actors involved in negotiations and transitions in fragile and conflict-affected societies. IFIT has supported negotiations and transitions in countries including Afghanistan, Colombia, El Salvador, Libya, Mexico, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, The Gambia, Tunisia, Ukraine, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.