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Rethinking governance for mutual accountability: Lessons from six peacebuilding organisations

Learning Brief

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Reflecting on partnerships with:

BUILD UP

UNOY

GPPAC
A Network of People Building Peace

Life & Peace INSTITUTE

CONCILIATION RESOURCES

international alert

Introduction

Across the peacebuilding sector, organisations are increasingly grappling with questions that extend beyond strategy or fundraising. Debates around localisation, decolonisation, network governance and shifting donor landscapes are prompting organisations to reflect on deeper questions of legitimacy, representation and accountability. As organisations seek to become more accountable to the people and partners they work with, this involves looking not only at what they do, but also at how decisions are made, where authority sits, whose perspectives shape those decisions, and who organisations ultimately hold themselves accountable to.

Governance has traditionally been associated with legal compliance, fiduciary oversight and accountability to Boards and donors. Yet for many peacebuilding organisations, this understanding is increasingly incomplete. Alongside legal responsibilities sit other forms of accountability to staff, members, partners and communities. Balancing these different accountabilities is rarely straightforward, particularly as organisations seek to strengthen participation, representation and locally-led approaches while retaining clear responsibility for organisational decisions.

PeaceNexus has for many years supported organisational development processes aimed at helping international peacebuilding organisations align their structures, policies and ways of working with their commitment to locally-led peacebuilding. Alongside this individual support, PeaceNexus has invested in peer-learning[1] spaces where partners can exchange experiences and reflect collectively on organisational change. The governance small grants launched in 2024[2] sought to bring these two approaches together. They provided modest, targeted support for organisations to advance a governance process, while creating opportunities to learn across their different experiences. The grants deliberately invited organisations to examine whether their existing governance arrangements remained fit for purpose and, in particular, to explore how mutual accountability could be strengthened between different parts of the organisation and its stakeholders.

Six international peacebuilding organisations successfully applied for PeaceNexus governance grants of CHF 15,000 each to support their ongoing governance adaptation journeys: Build Up, Conciliation Resources (CR), Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), International Alert, (IA) Life & Peace

[1] Including a board-level peer-learning group for international peacebuilding organisations

[2] The grants officially closed in December 2025.

Institute (LPI), and United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY). They entered the process with different governance questions and at different stages of organisational change. For some, the grant supported an existing reform process; for others, it provided dedicated time and space to better understand their governance challenges and build a shared basis for taking the process forward.

This learning brief draws on their experiences to explore how organisations worked through governance questions concerned with mutual accountability, what this enabled them to change or take forward, and what they encountered along the way. It does not present a blueprint for governance reform. Instead, it identifies recurring patterns across six distinct organisational journeys and considers what these suggest for other organisations seeking to strengthen mutual accountability through governance reflection and potential reform.

Different starting points, but common emerging patterns

The small grants started from a simple premise: strengthening mutual accountability does not mean prescribing the same governance solution to organisations with very different histories, structures and relationships. Each organisation therefore entered the process with its own questions about what needed to change.

These questions broadly clustered around three areas:

- How should governance evolve as organisations themselves change? This included questions about organisational identity and legitimacy in the context of localisation, decolonisation and decentralisation.

- How should authority and accountability be shared? Organisations questioned how formal responsibilities related to governance practices that had become more collaborative, network-led or distributed.

- How could organisational commitments to participation and locally-led approaches be reflected more meaningfully in governance? This raised questions about whose perspectives enter organisational decisions and how participation connects to actual influence.

Despite these different starting points, recurring patterns emerged in how organisations worked through their governance dilemmas. The analysis that

follows explores three of these patterns: re-examining organisational identity and legitimacy; creating and holding space for difficult governance conversations; and translating reflection into governance practice. They overlap and reinforce one another rather than representing a sequence. Together, they show some of the ways organisations sought to move from broad ambitions around mutual accountability towards changes in governance relationships, processes and practice.

1. Recurring pattern: Re-examining organisational identity and legitimacy

For organisations grappling with how governance should evolve alongside wider organisational change, discussions about structures often led back to more fundamental questions. Changes in the peacebuilding sector, expectations around localisation and decolonisation, organisational growth or downsizing, and changing relationships with partners all raised questions about what kind of organisation they wanted to become. In some cases, this also raised questions about how the organisation had already changed while its governance had not kept pace. Governance reform therefore involved not only asking what should change structurally, but also what those structures should enable, whose perspectives they should reflect, and where legitimacy should come from.

This was particularly visible at **LPI**. Its governance process formed part of a wider reflection on localisation, decolonisation and the future role of international peacebuilding organisations. LPI had already made significant changes to how it operated: leadership and programme roles had increasingly shifted closer to the regions where it works, expatriate positions had been reduced, and the International Board had become more geographically diverse. Yet these changes raised further questions about what it meant to remain an "international" organisation and how governance should evolve accordingly.

LPI explored these questions through consultations involving staff, partners and governance actors, followed by leadership discussions and a two-day retreat involving all managers with external facilitation. Rather than immediately settling on a new governance structure, the process opened different possibilities. These included strengthening the role of programme countries in global governance through advisory structures; further diversifying the International Board to better reflect the regions where LPI works; and considering whether some global functions should eventually be located closer to where much of the organisation's work takes place.

The process also showed why these conversations could not be reduced to organisational design. Different understandings of concepts such as localisation and decolonisation surfaced within the organisation, requiring time to develop greater shared understanding before their governance implications could be addressed. Shifting accountability towards peers and partners also generated uncertainty for some staff. This helped LPI recognise that changes to governance and organisational identity would need to be accompanied by changes in everyday behaviour, communication and relationships through a continued dialogue rather than a one-off structural decision.

Conciliation Resources (CR) approached questions of organisational identity and governance from a different starting point. Over time, CR had developed a more decentralised organisational presence, with regional structures and locally registered entities emerging for a range of practical and operational reasons. This evolution had also prompted recurring, but not fully resolved, discussions about what organisational model CR wanted to pursue. Rather than simply adapting governance to existing arrangements, CR saw an opportunity to take stock of where it had arrived and make a more intentional choice about the kind of international organisation it wanted to become.

Initiated by the Board and connected to CR's wider strategic planning process, the governance review examined existing arrangements alongside different organisational models, drawing on external expertise, peer experiences and discussions with Board members, management and staff. An important outcome was the decision to pursue a unitary, diverse and decentralised international organisation, rather than a federation or confederation. This provided a clearer direction for how CR wanted its organisational identity, governance and structures to evolve together.

The review also helped clarify what this choice would mean for governance. Recommendations included strengthening the role of the UK Board as an International Board, clarifying the respective roles and relationships of the different entity Boards, and identifying ways to distribute responsibility, accountability and decision-making across a decentralised organisation while maintaining coherence and connection. A governance committee has since been working through the implications of this direction, including questions of Board roles, oversight and authority.

CR's experience illustrates how governance reflection can help an organisation move from structures and arrangements that have evolved gradually towards a more deliberate vision of what it wants to become. The choice of organisational model was an important step, but translating that choice into governance relationships, processes and everyday practice remains an ongoing journey.

2. Recurring pattern: Creating and holding space for difficult governance conversations

Taken together, their experiences illustrate a recurring pattern: governance reform can create an opportunity for organisations to reflect on how they have evolved, clarify what kind of organisation they want to become, and consider how their governance arrangements can support that direction. Answering these questions also means looking beyond Boards and formal structures to the relationships governance is intended to serve, between international and country-level structures, Boards and management, staff, partner organisations and, ultimately, the communities with and for whom peacebuilding organisations work.

Questions about authority and accountability are difficult precisely because they involve power. They can challenge established roles and relationships: who has authority to make which decisions, whose perspectives carry weight, and how greater participation by one group affects the role and responsibilities of others. These questions can be particularly complex in international organisations and networks, where governance actors, staff, members and partners may also bring different cultural and organisational understandings of participation, leadership and accountability. Across the different journeys, organisations repeatedly found that working through these questions required intentionally creating time and space in which different perspectives could be heard, assumptions surfaced and tensions explored without requiring an immediate solution.

Build Up Its starting dilemma was whether conventional Board governance could coexist with a collective, non-hierarchical organisational model in which decision-making and ownership were intentionally shared. Trust, relationships and informal accountability remained important as Build Up grew across several legal entities. However, the relationships between its different Boards and the collective became increasingly complex, with governance arrangements at times feeling more burdensome than beneficial. Rather than starting with a new Board structure, Build Up dedicated staff time to an internally-led reflection process that asked what

accountability the organisation actually needed and what role its Boards could usefully play. This made previously implicit expectations more visible and created a basis for rethinking Board composition and roles in practice. Alongside their formal oversight responsibilities, Board members began taking on more active roles in specific thematic areas, engaging with relevant teams and creating opportunities for closer collaboration and mutual exchange between the Boards and the collective.

GPPAC entered from a different starting point. As a global network with several governance bodies and layers of representation, its immediate challenge was to develop a shared picture of how governance currently functioned in practice. An external consultant reviewed previous governance work, interviewed different governance actors and mapped accountability relationships, information flows, consultation mechanisms and decision-making across the network. Rather than immediately producing clarity, the mapping revealed how differently actors understood existing roles and where accountability relationships had become blurred. This became an important outcome in itself: it created greater shared recognition of what was unclear and why further reform was needed. The findings informed GPPAC's strategy and provided a basis for a longer organisational development process through which governance roles and relationships can be further clarified. GPPAC's experience shows that progress can initially mean surfacing ambiguity rather than resolving it.

UNOY's constitutional review provides a third variation. Its starting point was concrete: bringing a constitution last updated in 2003 closer to a governance model that had become considerably more decentralised and member-driven in practice over time. Yet doing so exposed a tension between different forms of accountability. The Board retained legal and fiduciary responsibility under Dutch law, while the International Steering Group represented members in strategic discussions and the Secretariat carried much of the organisation's operational responsibility. Joint meetings, repeated consultations and specialised legal advice created space to work through how these roles could coexist within the formal governance framework. The process did not remove the tension.

Differences in risk appetite between governance bodies remained, particularly given the Board's legal and financial responsibilities. Instead, dialogue helped create a clearer distinction between formal legal authority and practical governance influence, allowing UNOY to strengthen member participation and operational delegation while retaining clear legal accountability.

Across these different processes, how the conversation was held mattered. Several organisations used external facilitators to bring together perspectives and help navigate questions that could be difficult to address through existing relationships and reporting lines. **CR** combined external governance analysis and learning from peer organisations with interviews across different levels and parts of the organisation, alongside discussions with management and Board members. **LPI** used external facilitation alongside consultations and leadership reflection. **Build Up** chose a more internally led process, facilitated by its peacebuilding chaplain, whose role included stewarding collective values, and similarly invested dedicated staff and Board member time in the reflection. The common factor was therefore not external facilitation itself, but the deliberate investment of time, ownership and facilitation in the process.

Taken together, the experiences suggest that creating and holding space for governance conversations is part of the change process itself. Before moving towards new structures or roles, organisations often needed greater shared understanding of where responsibilities were unclear, where perspectives differed and what options might be possible. This did not require agreement on everything, but enough shared understanding and ownership of the issues to move from different perspectives on governance towards collectively owned change.

3. Recurring pattern: Translating reflection into governance practice

As organisations developed greater clarity around their governance dilemmas and how their governance functioned in practice, they began translating these reflections into a vision for how their organisation actually should work: who participates in decisions, how different perspectives feed into them, where responsibilities sit, and how formal governance arrangements connect to everyday organisational practice.

International Alert (IA) provides a particularly useful example of this shift from reflection to practice. Its starting point was an ambition to make organisational planning and resource allocation more responsive to the priorities of partners and communities. This had developed gradually. The organisation's 2024 - 2030 Strategy was itself developed through an iterative consultation process with staff and local partners, with findings from each stage brought back for reflection and validation. A Board retreat also explored how governance could "invert the pyramid", with the Board seeing itself less as the starting point of organisational direction and more as receiving and translating the aspirations of partners and communities into strategy and organisational plans.

IA then tested these ambitions through participatory country implementation planning with partners. The small grant provided an opportunity to take the next step: to examine how learning from these processes could inform organisation-wide planning and budgeting. Rather than simply adding another consultation step, the intention was to trace the process from engagement with partners through country offices to Executive Team and Board-level decisions and ask where and how partner priorities could meaningfully shape organisational choices and resource allocation. External support was used to review existing planning and budgeting processes, draw out lessons and facilitate reflection with the Board and Executive Team, with the intention of feeding these into subsequent planning cycles and governance arrangements.

This exposed a practical challenge at the heart of participatory governance: perspectives gathered locally are often numerous and context-specific, while organisation-wide planning ultimately requires choices and trade-offs. IA therefore had to consider not only how to hear partner perspectives, but how these could travel through the organisation and meaningfully inform decisions such as the annual budget. At the same time, the process had to remain manageable for country teams and partners and avoid participation becoming burdensome or performative.

IA has not yet fully tested this approach through a complete planning and budgeting cycle. Its experience therefore does not offer a finished model, but it does highlight an important step in moving from participation towards mutual accountability: understanding and strengthening the pathways through which partner perspectives can actually reach and shape organisational-wide decisions. How this works in practice and how potential competing priorities are ultimately weighed, will continue to be tested through future planning cycles.

Other organisations had already begun translating their reflections into more concrete governance changes. **Build Up**, having questioned how conventional Board governance could fit its collective model, began changing the way Board members engaged with the organisation. Individual Board members are now connected more closely to specific programmes or organisational functions, acting as thinking partners to staff, with less emphasis on plenary Board discussion. **UNOY**, meanwhile, translated changes that had already occurred in practice into its formal governance framework and constitution, explicitly recognising the International Steering Group and Secretariat as governance bodies and clarifying their respective roles, while retaining the Board's legal and fiduciary responsibilities.

While the mechanisms and stages of change differed, each organisation was grappling with how broader ambitions around participation and accountability could be translated into practice and governance frameworks. This meant adapting existing roles, processes and formal governance arrangements rather than designing governance anew, while recognising the organisational relationships and ways of working that had already evolved.

What organisations encountered along the way

A number of recurring tensions emerged as organisations worked through their governance dilemmas.

One of the most persistent involved reconciling ambitions for broader participation with the legal responsibilities that formal governance structures continue to carry. Across several organisations, efforts to strengthen mutual accountability raised questions about how participation and influence could be broadened without creating ambiguity around decision-making authority and fiduciary responsibility. In practice, strengthening mutual accountability meant working creatively within legal constraints rather than seeking to remove them.

As organisations broadened participation, they also encountered increased complexity. More perspectives required more consultation, facilitation and coordination, while decision-making could become slower and more resource-intensive. The challenge was therefore not simply to increase participation, but to find forms of participation that were meaningful and manageable for those involved.

A further challenge concerned time. While governance processes could begin with identifiable milestones and deliverables, working through questions of identity, power and accountability often required a different pace. Building trust, negotiating different perspectives and developing shared understanding cannot easily be compressed into short project cycles. This was particularly relevant given the modest size and timeframe of the PeaceNexus small grants. They could provide dedicated space and resources to initiate or advance these processes but not carry the full organisational change process. In several cases, an important outcome was therefore greater clarity and momentum for work that would need to continue beyond the grant period.

What does mutual accountability look like in practice?

Strengthening mutual accountability is central to making peacebuilding organisations more responsive to those they work with and represent. Governance is an important part of this, but strengthening mutual accountability requires attention not only to formal structures, but also to how power, participation, and accountability are exercised in practice. The six governance journeys do not point towards a single model of mutual accountability. Rather, they highlight some common characteristics of what strengthening it can involve in practice.

First, accountability extends beyond formal governance relationships. Legal and fiduciary responsibilities remain important, and formal governance structures provide an important foundation for accountability. At the same time, organisations also need to consider their accountability to staff, members, partners and communities. The challenge is not to replace one form of accountability with another, but to consider how these different relationships can be reflected in governance structures and practices, while remaining clear about where formal responsibility sits.

Second, participation matters most when it connects to actual organisational decisions. Creating opportunities for people to contribute does not automatically mean that their perspectives will influence decisions, even when this is the intention. Strengthening mutual accountability therefore requires attention to how different perspectives enter decision-making, where they can shape choices and resources, and where the limits to that influence lie. This may involve changes to formal governance arrangements, but also to the processes and practices through which decisions are made.

Third, mutual accountability requires clarity about roles and expectations. This becomes particularly important where organisational practices and relationships have evolved faster than formal governance arrangements. Making responsibilities, decision-making authority and accountability relationships more explicit does not remove tensions but provides a stronger basis for working through them. Beyond the specific governance changes explored, the six journeys also demonstrate the value of having a dedicated adaptation process. This created space and momentum for organisations to advance conversations that might otherwise have been difficult to prioritise. Bringing different perspectives together, openly naming tensions around power, representation and accountability, and developing a shared understanding of these challenges were important steps towards addressing them. These conversations also helped organisations move towards more concrete

changes: clarifying and formalising decision-making responsibilities, rethinking how governing bodies engage with and support the organisation, and developing shared reference points to guide future decisions.

Taken together, these experiences suggest that strengthening mutual accountability is not simply a question of designing a new governance model. Formal governance arrangements can play an important role in strengthening mutual accountability, but their value also depends on how responsibilities, decision-making authority and participation are understood and exercised in practice. This may mean adapting formal structures and decision-making authority, clarifying how different actors can influence decisions, or strengthening the processes through which organisations remain accountable to those they work with and represent.

The value of governance adaptation therefore lies not only in the structures or mechanisms ultimately introduced, but also in what the process makes possible: bringing difficult questions into the open, building shared understanding and enabling organisations to make more deliberate choices about how power, responsibility and accountability are exercised. These journeys show how organisations can move from recognising tensions to identifying ways to address them, even when the changes themselves take time to develop and put into practice.