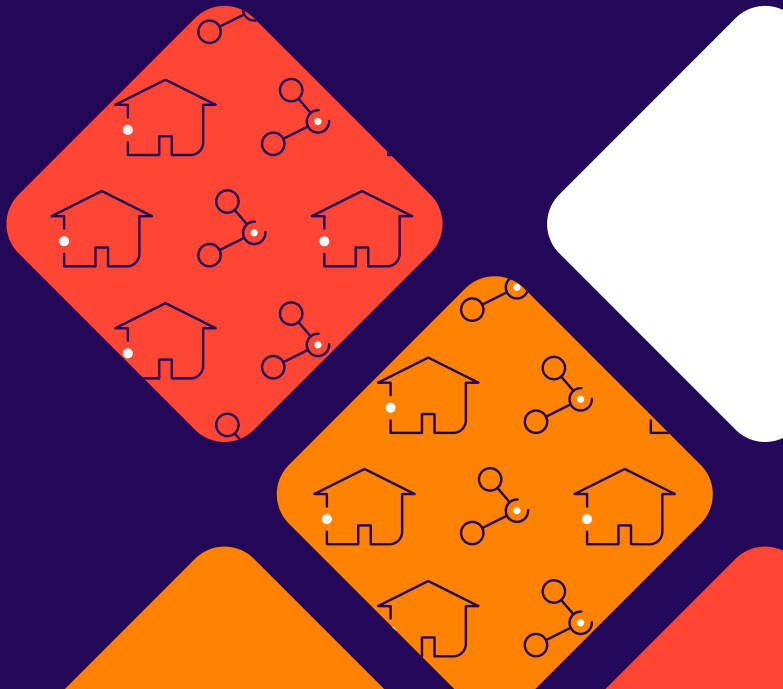


Cultural Relations Collection

Local peacebuilding and cultural relations work

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Muhammed Yassin Hammami and
Abdulstaar Kriwi

Cultural relations
and peacebuilding



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Foreword

The Cultural Relations Collection essay series, produced by the British Council's Research and Insight Team, asks early-career and established researchers to examine the theory and practice of cultural relations. We invite fresh perspectives on what has been the British Council's business for almost 90 years – building connections, understanding and trust.

This edition explores how cultural relations can contribute to peacebuilding in different settings and contexts.

Peacebuilding, and the erosion of peace, are intimately connected to many major challenges facing us nationally and internationally. No community that is divided by conflict, or the expectation or experience of conflict, can give adequate attention to less immediate but equally destructive threats, such as environmental degradation or economic instability.

Yet those same factors, left unaddressed, can only increase the likelihood of conflict. The result is a vicious circle which is increasingly difficult to escape.

These essays help us to understand what is meant by a cultural relations approach to peacebuilding and to demonstrate that this approach is both valid and valuable.

Each of the essays comes from a different disciplinary and regional perspective, but some common themes are evident.

One is Galtung's concept of positive (as opposed to negative) peace: peace as an active participatory experience, rather than simply the absence of violence. This supports proponents of cultural relations – and is a riposte to those who argue that soft power interventions in hard power situations are mere wishful thinking.

Also implicit in many of the essays is the importance of enabling safe spaces in which cultural relations can take place. Inclusivity and an atmosphere of trust are a *sine qua non* if citizens and communities are to experience a sense of their own agency.

Related to this is deep listening (listening experienced as a positive and empathetic activity, rather than simply an absence of interruption), a topic explored in depth by one of our essayists. Listening to others' truth

and speaking our own, not only to power but to ourselves, is at the core of cultural relations – and especially in our peacebuilding efforts. No true or lasting peace is built on half-truths and evasions.

Indeed, the importance of facing up to our own organisational and national history is addressed directly in one of these essays; and behind several authors stands the shadow of colonialism.

As in previous editions of this series, there is much here for readers, and the British Council itself, to reflect on and absorb. Peacebuilding is a complex and constantly developing subject, to which these essays make a valuable contribution.

The British Council supports peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and countries worldwide. To meet that goal, we will continue to explore with researchers, artists and peace practitioners how our cultural relations work can contribute to peacebuilding globally; this series is just the start.

Scott McDonald

Chief Executive, British Council

Preface to the Cultural Relations Collection

Welcome to the latest edition of the Cultural Relations Collection. As always, it has been stimulating to read fresh perspectives on cultural relations by new voices in the field. Previous editions in the Collection have examined cultural relations and climate change, and the impact of COVID-19 on cultural exchange. In 2022, we invited submissions on cultural relations and peacebuilding, given our renewed emphasis on the role of building trust and connections as central to the conditions required for sustainable peace, and in the spirit of what John-Paul Lederach calls ‘an approach that addresses the culture of violence by transforming it into the culture of dialogue’.

This is not a new area for the British Council, which emerged from the global crisis leading up to the Second World War in the realisation that building trust and understanding between the UK and the rest of the world was crucial. In 2018, which marked the centenary of the end of the First World War, the centenary of Nobel Peace Laureate Nelson Mandela, and the 20th anniversary of

the Good Friday / Belfast Agreement, the British Council worked with partners in Northern Ireland on the conference *Peace and Beyond*¹, an examination of global approaches to building lasting peace including reflections from contributors from countries including Lebanon, South Africa, and Colombia.

In 2023, the need to examine the conditions for peacebuilding are as relevant as they were in 2018. Colleagues around the world continue to work in communities affected by conflict, such as Ukraine, Ethiopia, and Yemen, to name but three. At the time of writing, we are working on research on the role of cultural events in addressing conflict and sharing the values of freedom and international co-operation, given the UK’s role in hosting Eurovision on behalf of Ukraine.

And so, to the individual contributions herein. At the 2018 *Peace and Beyond* conference, Judith Thompson, Chief Commissioner for the Commission for Victims and Survivors², said: ‘Building social trust [...]in a society transitioning from

1 www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/reflections-inclusive-peace

2 www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/reflections-inclusive-peace

conflict is an essential ingredient to [...] building a better future for everyone and the generations that follow.' This collection builds on that imperative by breaking down varied approaches to the building of trust.

Alice Naisbitt examines the role of science as a peacebuilding tool in two ways: that the connections built reinforce the trust vital to harmonious relations; and that the outcomes of scientific co-operation address drivers of conflict, such as resource scarcity. As with Hannah Dalgliesh's contribution on the soft power of astronomy in a previous collection³, Naisbitt underpins the role of science as providing neutral, common ground for collaboration.

Naisbitt does not shy away from the historic challenges that have been presented to the British Council over the years, and the accusation that cultural relations – in science, arts, language, or education – run the risk of being instrumentalised for the soft power outcomes, rather than their development objectives. This theme is picked up in Daniel Feather's fascinating history of educational co-operation between the UK and South Africa, including through the apartheid era when South Africa was globally isolated. He draws the distinction between cultural

diplomacy and cultural relations, although highlights where those lines can become blurred. While not uncritical of the role of the UK and the British Council over this period, his essay makes a powerful argument for the place of education in supporting a country's transition from structural violence to a more equitable and peaceful state.

Three essays focus on arts and culture as tools for building peace. George Wilkes et al. consider the role of the cultural relations organisation in bridging the local and the global; the need not to overlook the smallest detail of any given conflict, while still recognising the power of building links across borders and amplifying the voice of those affected by conflict. Their emphasis on the need to deal with memory, whether of previous friendships, or of deep trauma, also harks back to contributions in *Peace and Beyond*⁴ by Candice Mama and Cindy Mizher.

The role of the arts to make visible what may previously have been hidden, as well as to imagine new futures, is central to the essay of Daniela Fazio-Vargas and Carlos Pineda-Ramos. They make a powerful case for artistic expression as a means by which different voices can be elevated and building a space in

3 www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-series/cultural-relations

4 www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/reflections-inclusive-peace

which difference is recognised and valued, and that only in this way, can true peace be achieved. Nar Bahadur Saud takes this up in his essay that reminds us that before the arts can support peace and justice, they too must recognise difference. His contribution centres on the need to empower and enable disabled people to express themselves through the arts, and that in doing so not only addresses the inequalities they face as individuals but will contribute to more equitable and peaceful societies.

2022 brought sport to the fore in the discourse on positive peacebuilding – that is, not just addressing violent conflict, but addressing the drivers of conflict, such as inherent violence against marginalised communities, or the continuation of structural inequities. Many people looked to the World Cup in Qatar with mixed feelings, as to whether this was ‘sportswashing’ or an opportunity to open up a human rights dialogue on the world stage. In his essay, Grant Jarvie explores the link between sports and diplomacy, and suggests a more prominent role for sport in development, particularly in peacebuilding, given its emphasis on team spirit, co-operation, and solidarity.

Lastly, Emily Kasriel examines a concept at the heart of peacebuilding – listening. Her essay on deep listening illustrates an approach that prepares individuals for encounters across any divides they find within their communities, however they are experiencing conflict. Drawing on both theory and practice, she draws out the transformational nature of this method, and the impact it has had on individuals and communities around the world, enabling them to truly see, hear and understand the person opposite them.

One of the participants in a deep listening exercise said it allowed her ‘to create an atmosphere of inclusivity, trust and positive discourse’. It feels as if we are in a time in which that approach is urgently needed. I hope too that this Cultural Relations Collection makes a similarly positive contribution, and I urge all readers to embrace that spirit.

Christine Wilson

Director of Research and Insight,
British Council

Introduction

What challenges and opportunities arise where international peacebuilding initiatives use culture to support local peacebuilding?

In many projects supported by the British Council, one of the intrinsic values of action to advance cultural relations lies in the capacity to build peace-enhancing relationships, and one of the often-unspoken objectives is to cross barriers that separate a local community from international colleagues and audiences. In this essay, we draw on a range of British Council projects, in Africa and in the Middle East in particular, which engage with local culture in one or another sense – we will see some projects engage at a very local level, with cultural heritage and educational work in marginalised communities, while for others the bridge supplied by the UK’s cultural relations work allows a sector to enhance and promote a state’s ‘local’ cultural entrepreneurs with international interlocutors who bring specialist interests that match them. We will see both of these competing senses of the ‘local’ in peacebuilding work conducted by other humanitarian and development agencies, just as the nature of the ‘local’ has become a subject of interest to academic scholars

specialising in peacebuilding. To engage successfully at the local level is increasingly treated as a priority in work supported by the British Council’s Cultural Protection Fund, entailing understanding the challenges of overcoming barriers to local communities, and finding ways of measuring the success of projects in doing so. We aim in this essay to uncover more fully what lies at stake where cultural relations work employs a deliberate approach to what is local in peacebuilding work.

In this essay, we bring together a set of writers who are working together on a ‘Memory Bank’ which is intended to foster local cultural peacebuilding. We bring to the discussion a variety of experiences of local peacebuilding, and this will be seen particularly where we focus on the challenges faced when this work is attempted amongst displaced Syrians. As with much work that invokes the importance of ‘the local’ as a space for peacebuilding and development, there is work to be done in understanding what the local is, and what the value of ‘localisation’ is. In what follows, we first dig into the challenges of understanding localisation, before turning to the role of culture in local peacebuilding, both as a problem and as a resource.

We are interested in reflecting on the experience and added value brought by the cultural relations approach adopted in a wide variety of British Council projects, and we aim to add insights from the community level, from the pilot version of the Memory Bank, in seeking to illustrate some of the community resources that suggest themselves where cultural relations is combined with peacebuilding and sustainable development in impoverished, fragile, conflict-affected communities.

A cluster of factors have brought international peacebuilding and development organisations to focus on what is effective at the local level. The international humanitarian and development communities, reviewing decades of repeated failures to create effective and sustained change in disadvantaged countries across the globe, have identified the need for ‘localisation’, building effective local partnerships. They have sought to ensure that their power and money do not destroy the agency of local actors. This entails a shift away from the distant priorities and bureaucratic practices of international aid bodies which have contributed to their efforts lacking legitimacy ‘at the local level’. What this local level is begs discussion, which we will come to, and which is

not commonly spelt out in the work of the many international organisations which have publicised their localisation agenda, and which have signed up to the Charter for Change agreed at the World Humanitarian Summit of 2016.⁵

The turn to the local in the specialist peacebuilding community bears comparison to the trends evident among humanitarian and development agencies, while there are also distinctive points to note. There are initiatives which have focused on local peacebuilding for at least 20 years: notably Peace Direct, founded in recognition that as the peace processes of the 1990s drew increasing attention, local people were nevertheless being excluded from international peacebuilding funding.⁶ More systematic donor recognition of the value of local peacebuilding has been a response of the last five-to-ten years, spurred by the growing number of intractable political and social conflicts around the world, particularly – complicating humanitarian and development work as well – in the poorest countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Where the political dynamics at state level appear blocked, controlled by conflict actors who appear to be immune to inducements to foster change from the international community,

5 charter4change.org/

6 www.peacedirect.org/

a grassroots complement to elite peace processing offers the scope for circumventing this political stasis. Peacebuilding at the local level has therefore drawn the attention of an increasing range of specialists and donors looking to work beyond models of conflict resolution which centre on the rational interests of the political elite – what one of the originators of the notion of the ‘peace process’, Hal Saunders, termed sustained grassroots dialogue (*A Public Peace Process*, 1999). Amongst academic peacebuilding specialists critical of the imperious premises and ill-educated misunderstandings of efforts to build states through Western models, the relative effectiveness and legitimacy of local agency has been of critical interest (an interested lay reader may start with Séverine Autesserre, *The Frontlines of Peace*, 2021, on peacebuilding in hot conflicts, and Stephanie Kappler, *Local Agency and Peacebuilding*, 2014, on post-conflict peacebuilding). We may add to this localising critique an interest in the local in terms of the human and the cultural values offered by a recognised ‘place’. However, introductions to local peacebuilding may also underline that this intangible quality may be defined in many different ways, and is no substitute

for more distant elite peace-making.⁷ This turn to the local has moved a wide range of questions about social interaction to the centre of peacebuilding activity, some of which are of central interest to the sustainable development community, and some of which raise questions about culture as a facet of conflict. In this contribution, we will turn our attention to the opportunities and challenges posed for using cultural relations as a part of a toolkit to unpack conflict dynamics at a local level, and as a conceptual framework that can assist in identifying resources for local peacebuilding.

For the British Council’s cultural relations work, local peacebuilding is already a practical, even sometimes a measurable, objective, reflected in work conducted across Africa and the Middle East in particular. The local community often has a pressing relevance for cultural protection, during conflict and in its aftermath. The project Tourathi (2017–2019), for instance, brought Lebanese youth across the country to initiate local impulses to protect the country’s tangible and intangible heritage, from its monuments to its stories. Other projects use culture as a resource for local community building, with a view to promoting a wide range

7 www.usip.org/publications/2022/08/peacebuilding-needs-local-partners-how-do-you-define-local

of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).⁸ This may most directly aim at strengthening peaceful institutions (SDG16), the Sustainable Development Goal usually equated with peacebuilding, as for instance is true of the British Council's Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme.⁹ In most cases, peacebuilding projects supported by the British Council (the scope of which are reviewed in the 2020 report *The Missing Pillar: Culture's Contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals*¹⁰) are also aimed at more than one further SDG, among which SDG 11 (Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable) most naturally embraces projects such as Artivism¹¹ which combine cultural heritage protection and local peacebuilding. The definitions of culture and of cultural relations in this local peacebuilding work may best be conceived of in broad, encompassing terms, implying – as one study commissioned by the British Council and the Goethe-Institut put it – a response to educational and social need, as well as an identifiable inter-cultural dialogue that benefits locals and partners from across the international community alike

(Cultural Value. Cultural Relations in Societies in Transition: A Literature Review, 2018; for further reflection on the role of the work of the British Council and other cultural relations partners as enablers of peace-bearing engagement, see The International Cultural Relations Research Alliance, ICRRRA¹²). The first two sections of this essay investigate further, showing how cultural relations work offers scope for addressing conflict and development needs with creativity, creating scope for new approaches and new relationships, and offering tools for side-stepping frozen cultures of political division, or for reframing the politics of division and difference. We will also note challenges for the deployment of cultural relations approaches by outsider-led initiatives, introducing the ways in which trust and recognition are blocked in conflict-affected communities.

The Memory Bank¹³ which our team of authors have been piloting is a tool designed to communicate about the needs and sensitivities of cities, towns and villages that have nurtured long-standing diverse cultures, and have then been divided by conflict. The Memory Bank is inspired by

8 sdgs.un.org/goals

9 www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/promoting_peace_and_stability_in_nigeria.pdf

10 www.britishcouncil.org/arts/culture-development/our-stories/the-missing-pillar-sdgs

11 www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/bc_horn_of_africa_-_digital.pdf

12 www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/policy-reports/cultural-value-lit-review ; www.ifa.de/en/research/icrra/#section6

13 diversecommunitieslivingtogether.org/

the recognition that memories of inter-cultural and interreligious solidarity are a widely recognised resource for building peace and for wider community-led initiatives, but these memories can be at the same time painfully difficult to share, to trust, and to defend in the face of hostility. In this pilot phase, we have highlighted examples from across the Middle East and North Africa, from the Balkans and Central Europe, from Southern, Central and West Asia, from across Africa, and from Latin America. A map with a key on the Memory Bank homepage highlights the variety of factors and issues that make local intercultural relationships of value. We envisage that there may eventually be versions of the Memory Bank in local languages, serving intercultural communication between different parts of divided local societies, and also connections drawn between those societies and a wide variety of interested international circles through the shared platform– strengthening the impact of constructive and conflict-sensitive local voices, and increasing international understanding of the complicated and varying ways in which culture and conflict interact at this local level.

The focus in the Memory Bank on these very plural local cultures will be drawn on in the third section of the essay, reviewing the significance for peacebuilding initiatives of understanding pluralism and complexity in local conflicts and peacebuilding, and underlining that the turn to local peacebuilding is not to be confused for a simplified cultural nostalgia, based on a thin common identity or set of platitudes. Surfacing the reality of pre-conflict solidarities which once seemed normal, and which come to be seen as irretrievable, requires a sensitive, collaborative learning process. While this requires a careful attention to the process of forming private and public memories in different parts of these local communities, there are nevertheless many ways that international engagement can helpfully assist the collaborative learning process and support the aspiration to use these memories as inspiration for rebuilding peaceful, developing society. A fourth and final section of this essay reflects on the added value brought by well-designed international initiatives, with examples of British Council-supported projects which indicate the reasons for integrating a local peacebuilding lens into the cultural relations programmes still further across the work of the British Council.

Localisation challenges

As we write (February 2023), earthquakes have struck Turkey and Northern Syria, flattening buildings, crushing communities, unseating aspirations for the recovery of communities of millions of displaced Syrians across the region. Donors set in motion their disaster plans, and their critics counter with the local actors they trust to avoid the corruption and compromise with political actors or regimes whose violence and autocracy feeds off aid. Though this is far from a propitious time to sound out partners on the scope for local peacebuilding initiatives, in this traumatic dislocation we may still see parallels with the challenges faced by community builders in conflict-affected areas at any time.

The marginalised communities which are the targets for much local peacebuilding work have seen such traumatic dislocation before, often many times. To integrate a sense of place into the reconstitution of more normal social reality may matter a lot to many of the divided communities mapped on the Memory Bank. Memories of friendships that once crossed social difference are like a treasure, and peacebuilders need to understand how much such memories mean to locals before they seek to encourage sharing

them to a wide public. Moreover, even for enthusiastic peacebuilding activists, this sense that a place evokes trusting relationships can be extremely difficult to put together again (and to re-member in all of its senses). The widespread appeal of memories of interreligious and interethnic friendships in Syria, Iraq, in Turkey and Greece, in India, Pakistan and across Central Asia, in Ethiopia and in the Central African Republic, across the Caucasus and the states of the former Yugoslavia, to many appear mere nostalgia in light of the dislocations which have subsequently overtaken the population. Dislocations that are both geographical and temporal. Dislocations that are then pressed incessantly by divisive actors, themselves quite possibly acting on the basis of personal as well as collective trauma.

In the most abstract of senses, these memories may be seen as central to a culture of positive peace: a culture which is governed with a view to the requirements of healthy social relationships instead of reproducing the norms of social or political structures which claim a monopoly over legitimate violence (identified in peace studies with 'negative peace'). Nevertheless, as much as these communities were once models of mutual generosity and cross-cultural

recognition, trust in the efficacy of relationships across social divisions often has to be retrieved with great care. Appeals to friendship between the residents of a Damascus suburb make little headway after the regime's security services have turned residents against each other; in Mostar, a post-war generation has come of age without knowing the pre-war Christian-Muslim relationships that elders look back upon wistfully; in Baghdad, attempts to build cross-sectarian peace initiatives in once mixed neighbourhoods face hostility and incomprehension from some of the most marginalised parts of the population, as well as gratitude from those whose family values are bound to the traditions of hospitality and mutual aid that were once characteristic there.

The best time for local, cross-community peacebuilding will always be unpropitious when these dislocations appear to have completely reshaped social norms and realities. Older men who have performed their military service, whether from Saida, in Lebanon, or Podgorica, Montenegro, or Bashiqa, in Iraq, may look back on an earlier era when strong friendships were made during national service which crossed and accommodated ethnic and religious identities. Thanks to the state and those past leaders whom they continue to identify with a bygone political stability

and fulfilling terms of employment. This is true, too, of many of the most marginalised localities and populations, where a mix of nostalgia and grievance can prove difficult for outsiders to process. The value of these memories also does not automatically translate into the terms understood by younger generations, after war, genocide, flight to safety, post-war political turmoil, often accompanied by new forms of large-scale corruption. As positive as the memories are, they may also easily provoke mistrust, scepticism, grievance, partisan response. Finding trust in the local can still be a subject of passion and commitment in these conditions. Memories of friendships become a treasured object on which to dwell, to draw out in countering sectarian hate, and yet for decades after physical violence stops, many remain less ready to share personal details of friendships as public markers of local civic identity and of what may at the same time be privately held ought again to be normal civility and mutual aid.

At planning stage, project initiators do well to take into account that the reception of local memory projects can vary from location to location (for interesting reflections on British Council supported inclusive peace work in Lebanon and South Africa, for instance, see the British Council essay collection *Peace and Beyond: Reflections on building*

inclusive and sustainable peace¹⁴), and of course also within even the smaller local populations. Whether in Northern Syria, in Northern Iraq, or in Northern Bosnia and Herzegovina, local civic initiatives commonly face diffidence when yet another project is aired. In some cities, attachment to efforts at civic improvement remains difficult to encourage, while in others new initiatives indicate a cohort of young activists associate with the culture, history and needs of their community with evident pride. Thus, in Halabja, NWE, a local NGO¹⁵ of young people from diverse backgrounds – characteristic of the city’s history, but also embracing more recent immigrant sectors in today’s population – combines cultural and ecological campaigning, where in other cities there is little evident energy for this. Perhaps, observers reflect, because Halabja retains an old city and locals avoided the dislocation which under Saddam Hussein encourages the younger generation in other Kurdish cities still to identify with the smaller towns where their families originate and where they continue to choose to spend what time they can. In the small, mixed town of Stolac, in Herzegovina, young musicians have set out to create one of the town’s few multi-national institutions, a

youth orchestra, to applause from a local civic circle, and in the face of entrenched division stoked by the political elites which have starved the town of many of the resources that could have been earned were Croats and Bosniaks not still construed by them as natural antagonists.

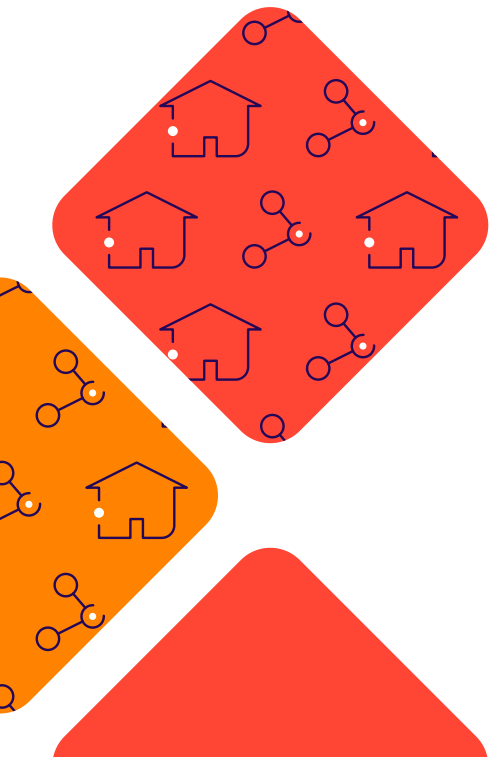
In the face of the many politically-sensitive divisions impressed upon these localities, cultural relations methods may be just what is needed to ignite local initiatives. Skirting around political hostilities, unearthing civic potential, harnessing the energies of talented young people. We explore why cultural relations approaches bring added value further in subsequent sections of the essay, but we will not leave this gloomy account of challenges for peacebuilding initiatives which pursue a localisation strategy without noting why, offered with sensitivity to context, this may be just right for a community, and we are thinking very much of the locations where Syrians have been displaced today, within Syria and in the neighbouring states, in communities in which our team lives and works. Though families may be separated and though they are almost always in dire need of immediate assistance, dislocated Syrians communicate avidly about the hospitality their

14 www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/j063_peace_and_beyond_essays_final_web_new_0.pdf

15 www.nwe-halabja.org/

families have shared. Their avenues for education may be blocked, but one of the most promising ways to initiate a community-building enterprise – familiar from a wide range of British Council projects – starts by drawing together a diverse group of gregarious youngsters, giving them the intellectual tools and practical skills to conduct an exercise addressing the community's most immediate and deepest needs, and walking alongside them as they engage in the work, and then communicate the results so other Syrians and wider international circles can benefit from their experience.

As we turn next to the British Council's experiences of local peacebuilding with a cultural relations approach, we end this section with an affirmation of how powerful these opportunities are for young Syrians, and how eagerly they are taken up, particularly, alas, by contrast with efforts to lead teenagers and young adults into sustained formal and vocational training.



Culture as problem and opportunity

Cultural relations present a sophisticated lens for galvanising those with an existing level of understanding of the pressures exerted by extremist forces for reconstructing societies in fragile, impoverished conflict settings. In the work of the British Council, culture offers still more. The British Council's cultural relations work spans the gamut of educational objectives, itself a central contribution to building peace. In reviewing its contributions to sustainable development, the British Council has noted how many in the development community have come to see culture as 'the missing pillar'¹⁶ in the architecture laid out for sustainable development. Culture – a resource which strengthens the social fabric and enables locals to see their agency in solving problems, according to a British Council commissioned study by Paula Orr¹⁷ – is a cross-cutting dimension to many of the SDGs, and deliberately identifying how it can be of value in development programmes sharpens its value. A reader who reviews British Council programming

in the past decade is returned repeatedly to a further outcome associated with cultural relations work in societies under stress: projects strengthen community, its institutions, and its capacity to foster local living conditions. Cultural relations work has developed a deliberate eye for the community, and hence also for the local.

Where once culture was narrowly conceived as high culture, or elite culture, in conflict-affected localities a broader understanding of culture is needed which is large enough to encompass the realities experienced in community life, and to give space for the aspiration of citizens to use cultural heritage to build new futures in their communities. A schematic link between the impact of cultural relations work and the vulnerabilities of fragile, conflict-affected polities and societies has been developed in the 2021 report Cultural Relations – Key Approaches in Fragile Contexts, drawing inspiration (from among a number of sources) on a review of the experience of the British Council's Art of Peace programmes.¹⁸ While a

16 www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/the_missing_pillar.pdf

17 www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/sdg-16-report

18 www.eunicglobal.eu/news/cultural-relations-key-approaches-in-fragile-contexts-report-available ; www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/the_art_of_peace_0419.pdf ; www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/insight-articles/art-of-peace

regular strand of the British Council's local community-building work focuses on the protection of heritage the community can unite around (projects delivered in a variety of locations across the Middle East and across Africa¹⁹), on distinctive and historical objects, much of the British Council's local peacebuilding work has been focused instead on creative work that nurtures (as indicated in the title of a funding programme of 2009–15 which was a formative influence on British Council peacebuilding work) Active Citizens.²⁰ Heritage protection work supported by the Cultural Protection Fund²¹ and education for civic leadership may also combine in many of the locally-focused programmes, making it important to tease out the relationship between cultural heritage, new cultural production, and the forms and hierarchies understood by locals, by cultural insiders, to represent their culture.

As a spur to reflection, we turn back to the work of Tourathi²² (2017–19), which combined educational work among local youth with aspirations to build peace in fragile, conflict-affected localities across Lebanon – for us recalling much of our own

work with young Syrians and host communities across the Middle East. At the programme's conclusion, evaluators concurred²³ that the project succeeded in giving young people enthusiasm about the work involved in creating a shared sense of the importance of local culture, and through the involvement of young people their families and a wider range of community members were engaged in their work. At the same time, in a number of locations, the community leadership largely fell away as the project developed. In those locations where key stakeholders continued to be engaged, project uptake was enhanced and sustained. In one respect, this is an organisational problem; in another, this is also reflected in similar design challenges faced in many projects intended to encourage local culture and social cohesion. In practical terms, culture requires engagement and support across a collectivity. For those thinking more carefully about project design, sustaining local culture also implies an engagement with the social structures which help to shape collective responses to the role of cultural dynamics in local life. Who owns culture? Who engages

19 www.britishcouncil.org/announcing-17-new-projects-funded-cultural-protection-fund

20 active-citizens.britishcouncil.org/

21 www.britishcouncil.org/arts/culture-development/cultural-protection-fund

22 www.britishcouncil.org/arts/culture-development/cultural-protection-fund/projects/youth-led

23 www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Tourathi_Evaluation_Summary.pdf

and on what terms? To answer these questions before a project begins begs careful engagement across the community, and some activist or community groups will sustain the process of collaborative outreach more carefully or successfully than others.

Initiatives focused on the use of local cultural heritage to foster active citizenship in divided societies inevitably come up against challenging memories. It is in part with this in mind that the Memory Bank was developed. Unearthing local memories in such a way that a community can embrace them fully – without sloganeering that privileges one perspective over others – is a collaborative journey, and fully worth the attention of British Council partnerships. Those who have experienced a society which is shattered by conflict will also experience a breath-taking change in cultural assumptions, in accepted norms, in behaviour. We may hold on to the most clearly articulated ideologies that speak to who we are, and who we want to be, while also experiencing a constant environmental change that suppresses some features of our local culture, and elevates others. In the 1990s in the former Yugoslav republics, for instance, the divisive cultural ideologies of nationalist

campaigns came to dominate public discussions of identity, impressing themselves in new ways on the cultural norms that determined religious affiliation as well. Citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina, or in Serbia, for instance, whether personally more secularist or more religious, lived through a roller-coaster ride in the war years and in the postwar years, their intensely personal experience and sense of identity again and again confronted by new political and social pressure to accommodate shifting discourses about who legitimately shares what and how. This can be as intense at a local level as it is amongst opinion shapers at state level – or more so. On the other hand, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, some advocates²⁴ of local peacebuilding have seen the local as a depoliticised arena in which steps to embrace the other are not confronted by systems of power and control to the same degree, and symbolic religious or cultural power can be exercised in more human-centred ways.

Amongst Syrians, the pace of change, the audacity of the powerful to appropriate culture, is just as breath-taking. As seen from a distance by outsiders, divisions over local cultural norms are evidently a common feature of accounts of what went wrong, repeated as explanation of the enforced divisions that reach

24 http://ndcsarajevo.org/Dokumenti/BETWEEN_COOPERATION_AND_ANTAGONISM_FINAL.pdf

from the political elite to the local level. Within Syrian communities, the process of division is often, even commonly, seen to have little to do with cultural norms, the shaping factors which condition trust and other kinds of behaviour between people of different communities. Memories of hospitality between Shia and Sunni, Christian and Yazidi, are accepted as definitive of Syrian culture, and definitive of local life in small and large towns across the country. Only now they are also politicised, confronted by conflict narratives, appropriated (or misappropriated) by a variety of voices seeking to position themselves in the public sphere. The mapping of these memories in the Memory Bank we see as a vehicle to promote a more realistic and more pluralistic understanding of, or conversation about, the nature of conflict and cooperation across divided societies. The buzz of changing conflict narratives may outpace us, but at the same time ordinary people embrace such reminders of the positive markers of diversity and the normality

of cross-cultural acceptance in local societies with great eagerness. For cultural relations projects to unearth and share these memories, they need to pay attention to the pressures that communities come under, and to the motivations that lead some to share their treasured family memories, while others keep them. Teams of enquiring young people from within a community may be well-placed to explore these memories with older family members. It may also take an outside initiative to allow those who hold these memories dear to give space to careful explanation of the changing local conditions that shaped and reshaped cross-cultural or interreligious solidarities, and to see just how valuable stories of their friendships and ordinary mutual aid across cultural barriers have become.

Pluralism and complexity in local lens

Moving beyond abstractions about generating the will for peace in a local community – words which can be beguiling in their appeal without regard to the challenges faced by local populations – the peacebuilding project designer will set out to imagine how cultural relations may contribute to changing concrete behaviour among parts of the community with very different experience and capacities. In planning for the projects of Active Voices and Active Citizens, these citizens benefit from a support network if they aim to engage inclusively with a community's memories of its pre-war culture, of its life before displacement. Here, both the British Council's work and the experience of the communities represented in the Memory Bank foreground the very complex and practically-demanding contexts in which cultural relations activity will be applied, identifying the scope for pluralism in conflict-affected localities as well as the limitations against which peacebuilding initiatives may rub.

The demands of work in conditions where different parts of a community must be matched with motivations for action speaks to a practical focus on complex local conditions which characterises much of the British Council's community-centred work. For many who respond to these projects, the motivation will come in a match between personal interests and actions which are primarily intended to create, sustain or protect communities. The British Council supported Middle East People's Culture Conservation Collective offers a strikingly close comparison to the Memory Bank. Using the talent, energy, insight and local experience of young people across a range of conflict-affected locations, the project encourages them to take careful but creative approaches to the promotion of the inclusion of marginalised, even persecuted, parts of their communities (the projects supported in this programme are at varying stages of development; for an example which already has a developed web presence, see the [Safina Project²⁵](#)). Young people gain technical heritage protection and media skills, and then take the lead in

creating and collating digital records of heritage in danger of being lost, the festivals, customs, and social norms of a wide range of minorities.

In many locations, by contrast, the focus of attention lies in more immediate and more physical needs. A compelling reason for local action then lies in addressing the Sustainable Development Goals very deliberately: the need for cooperation to restore water supplies, renewal of other features of the fabric of local urban environments, or biodiversity protection. Time-honoured habits of local intercultural cooperation may be an important clue to the conditions of scarcity in which they have been forged. The front page map on the Memory Bank²⁶ website spotlights localities, from Afghanistan, Bosnia, Georgia, and Kosovo, to Syria, Iraq and Guinea Bissau, in which mutual aid has motivated religiously and culturally diverse communities to forge strong and resilient ties. In consequence, community members embrace in their lives the kind of deliberate acts of mutual inter-cultural recognition – recognition of the values of each other’s religions and cultures – that advocates of positive peace²⁷ hold up as an objective. The value of these habits of mutual aid and

recognition nevertheless remain contested – are they special, or banal, community-affirming, or culturally constraining? As acts of deliberation they appeal to the advocate of local peacebuilding as a positive model. As signs of a deep sense of normality, they may also be the object of critical reflection, emblematic of the dilemmas embodied in everyday forms of compromise that specialists focusing on ‘everyday peace’²⁸ increasingly see as a complex, unsettling reality whose value for peacebuilding lies in its capacity to unsettle the demands of the powerful rather than in its symbolic power as a goal for a peaceful life in itself.

Immediate physical needs do not inevitably lead to mutual aid; they also require an acceptance of diversity, or complexity, as a resource, and for this reason mutual aid has an important role for peacebuilding which takes cultural relations seriously. Social and economic mutual aid is a paradigm for accepting interdependence as a response to complexity in cultural life. This applies, too, across the SDGs, to sharing complementary capacities in conditions of economic scarcity, or to extrapolating from an understanding of the role of niche relationships in fostering biodiversity and in ecological resilience. See,

26 diversecommunitieslivingtogether.org/

27 positivepeace.org/what-is-positive-peace

28 global.oup.com/academic/product/everyday-peace-9780197563397?cc=gb&lang=en&

for examples, the stories featured on the Memory Bank map from Guinea Bissau, and Afghanistan, stories grounded on the way that cooperation proves a natural response to extreme marginalisation and deprivation. Stories like this may motivate the use of cultural resources in initiatives focused on creating the conditions for local environmental resilience – in recent years, the British Council has joined cultural and environmental protection themes in local projects, from Uganda and Sudan to Iraq,²⁹ having in mind the damage being done to cultural heritage and the natural environment at the same time (see more on the British Council’s Cultural Protection Fund website,³⁰ and further in the 2021 research report *Exploring and considering best practice for linking climate change remediation measures with cultural protection*³¹). The problems are framed by comparable conditions and challenges, and the tools for community members and experts to explore both dimensions may also have much in common.

How relevant is this argument for harnessing complexity for peacebuilding in divided societies across the globe? It may be argued this environmental approach to local peacebuilding matters in every conflict-affected society. And yet there is an argument, too, for a more cautious approach in societies marked by histories of political and social harm. The British Council has sought to draw lessons from the experience of cultural relations projects in the most complex conditions in Northern Ireland, and the report that resulted³² came out on both sides of the fence. On the one hand, peacebuilding in these conditions requires a ‘thick approach’, embracing the realities in which ordinary people live as well as the political ambitions of the parties which seek to draw on their support, or acquiescence. On the other hand, efforts to bring a diverse group of actors together may fail to produce more than a ‘thin’, tokenistic or abstract form of semi-acceptance, in which the perspectives and experiences of ordinary people are neither recognised nor engaged. In the experience of our team of authors, young people – displaced

29 www.britishcouncil.org/how-climate-change%C2%A0-impacting-uganda%E2%80%99s-heritage%C2%A0 ; www.britishcouncil.org/arts/culture-development/cultural-protection-fund/projects/traditional-food-culture-sudan ; arkforiraq.org/en/about-us/.

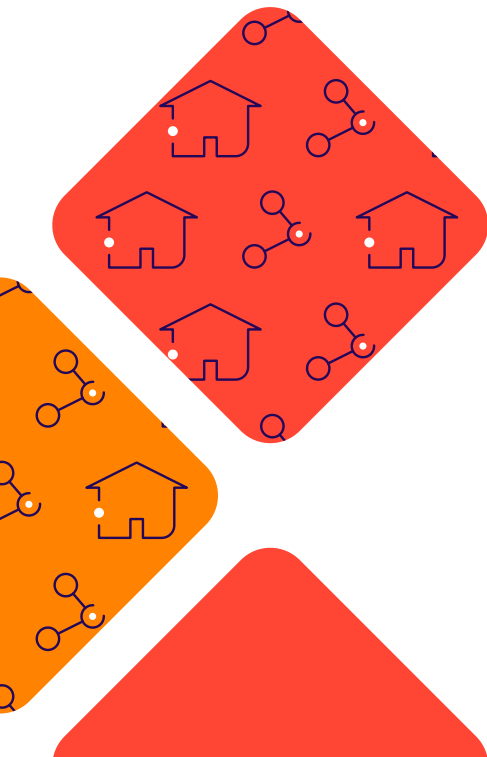
30 www.britishcouncil.org/arts/culture-development/our-stories/cpf_climate_awards

31 www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/climate_change_and_heritage_issues_paper_tripleline.pdf

32 nireland.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/j063_02_peace_and_beyond_essay_opening_dialogue_between_communities_-_arts_in_the_aftermath_of_conflict_final_web.pdf

across the Middle East as they may be – are ready to go beyond the narrow narratives they readily experience in their communities, and look for the more unusual opportunities for engaging with peers from very different backgrounds. In Northern Ireland, the experience may be that peace is best built carefully, within communities first, before embarking on encounters for which much preparation is needed – and a similar argument is made amongst peacebuilders on the basis of some decades of activity in Bosnia-Herzegovina which is seen to have made too little difference to the nationalistic environment in which young people grow up.

In the Syrian context, there is a thirst for moving from community to civic and an embracing collective national reconstruction, and the potential for pushback from online haters is given shorter shrift. As contexts change, the response from peacebuilders will have to as well.



Value added from international engagement

The cautionary words relayed from the Northern Ireland context speak to a natural nervousness about imposing experiments in creating peace from the outside, with little understanding of local conditions and needs, and knowing the dilemmas of using donor power – or academic power – without regard to local agency. At the same time, local peacebuilders cry out for international attention, for support, for engagement. Frustrated by the intransigence of pessimistic locals, they may look to internationals for a fresh (even a naïve) eye, and for the ability to use comparison with experience internationally to reframe the way cultures of hostility are seen and to encourage new responses to them.

The combination of a sensitive and empowering international cultural relations initiative with a deliberately local peacebuilding focus may offer distinctive selling points as well. The local turn in part reflects a lack of trust in elitist state level and international engagement. Many well-

meaning international peacebuilding projects – tarnished with the critical theorists most damning phrase, ‘liberal’,³³ meaning focused on elitist and on formal institutional peacebuilding processes – have brazenly misunderstood the contexts they seek to influence, or carry the political imperatives of donor governments seen by parts of the local population as partisan or even as stirring conflict. As international cultural relations initiatives seek to engage squarely with this trust deficit, including a diversity of local partners from the design stage onwards is a key first step (this was modelled in the method adopted in the multi-country AHRC-GCRF Changing the Story programme,³⁴ in which the British Council was a partner). The conflict-affected localities we have in view are even then still challenging environments, often marked by deep mistrust for all attempts to foster initiative. Some part of the value added by international engagement derives from *not* being involved in economic or political competition

33 Edward Newman et al., eds, *New Perspectives on Liberal Peacebuilding*, United Nations University WIDER, 2009. collections.unu.edu/view/UNU:2527

34 changingthestory.leeds.ac.uk/. For valuable reflections on the outcomes of the Changing the Story programme, see changingthestory.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/110/2021/02/Youth-Voice-and-Development-February-2021-2.pdf and changingthestory.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/178/2022/06/University-of-Leeds-PRAXIS-Empowering-Young-People-Digital-Singles-0622.pdf.

at the local level. A brief review of cases follows, underlining the extent to which joining the international cultural relations partner adds value to local initiatives.

International projects give local communities a valued stage and a profile for their work. In much of the British Council's local peacebuilding work, attention is given to the value of preparing local communities and activists for engaging with governmental officials. The convening power of the British Council brings stakeholders to meet with project partners and beneficiaries. In Ramallah, in Palestine, British Council support persuaded city officials³⁵ to build inclusion and resilience into their local cultural programming. In the Nigerian Stability and Reconciliation Programme,³⁶ the British Council designed and prepared Community Peace Partnerships so that they would be able to engage with the authorities at higher levels. Responding to the direction spelt out in SDG 16 – to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions

at all levels – the British Council's Active Citizens were also presented with a programme that offered skills that enable effective, confident civic and political engagement, encouraging those who join to see themselves as part of a movement for global change³⁷ which is effective on the local level.

The work of the Memory Bank confronts the trust deficit through positioning itself as academic, as a vehicle for careful work bringing local experiences to an interested and diverse international audience, and as a committed partner for local enthusiasts interested in making a difference to their own communities and transcending the limitations of partisan polemic. The project could be much invigorated by the creative and youth-centred buzz associated with British Council initiatives such as Artivists³⁸ – in this early phase of our work, we are a small team, and we may remain so as we encourage local teams around the world to take ownership of local language versions of the Memory Bank. The Memory Bank team aims in its representations of the dynamics of local peace-enhancing habits to embody a reflective learning process,

35 obs.agenda21culture.net/en/good-practices/ramallah-city-resilience-through-culture-and-education-report

36 www.britishcouncil.org/programmes/society/justice-security-conflict-resolution/nsrp#:~:text=The%20Nigeria%20Stability%20and%20Reconciliation,promote%20stability%2C%20peace%20and%20reconciliation.

37 active-citizens.britishcouncil.org/global-impact-stories.

38 www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/bc_horn_of_africa_-_digital.pdf.

eschewing the definitive in favour of open questioning, reframing apparent norms as responses to complex and changing environments, rather than as given and unchanging cultural facts. The international partners in this exchange contribute to this open learning process, naively and ignorantly as it may be, but thereby opening space for discussion of the meaning of accepted terms, and of their relationship to local contextual factors and histories. Whether discussants are international or local, the preference for an open and international collaborative learning process is also useful in confronting assumptions about what is lacking in a given situation: should peacebuilders focus on the lack of trust, or the lack of livelihoods, in communities broken by violence, in Ethiopia, or Kosovo? The need to assess what is lacking is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of the study of why peace or reconciliation is missing in conflict-affected environments. The temptation of many observers is to focus on the distinctive pathology of a wartorn society – marking the politics of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a cultural sickness born of histories of victimhood and trauma, rather than seeing the space given to opportunistic conflict actors in the lead-up to war, and in the decades

which have followed; blaming the use of torture and violence in Syria on a deep, pathological culture, rather than pinning the responsibility for the destruction of the country on particular elites; blaming the corruption, the drugs, the power of gangs, in conflict-affected countries across the globe on very local faults, rather than identifying common patterns arising across the most divergent cultures. Against this, the partnership of international and local peacebuilding initiative may identify forms of inspiration for trust which derive from not being a part of the systems which benefit from conflict – some perhaps hyper-local, some international.

The condition for a healthy international exchange is a concern to be kept alive throughout the delivery of a project, mindful that the best of intentions and designs can go awry in the intense environments that sustain conflict at a local level. Problems of trust are at heart also problems of politics, at the international and the local levels, not only responses to the weaknesses of local political and social norms. For international cultural relations practitioners to show recognition of this is an important facilitator for their work, and a source of added value as their work progresses.³⁹

39 For further reflection, see the recent British Council report *Trust in international relations, public diplomacy and soft power*. www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/trust_in_international_relations_public_diplomacy_and_soft_power.pdf.

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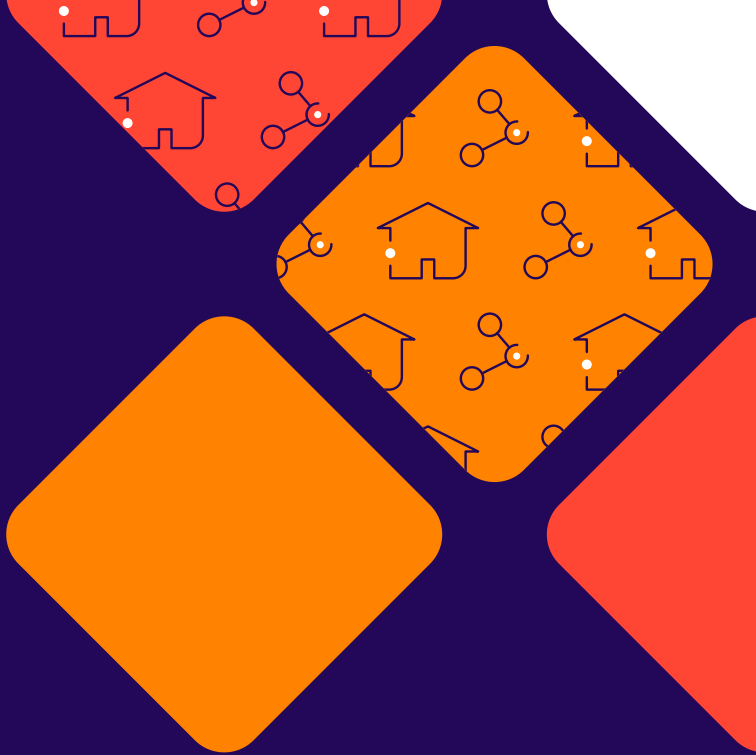
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