

*The following are a number of broad critiques on contemporary peacebuilding. They are made at a generalized level and therefore do not constitute a critique of every individual peacebuilding effort.*

## **I. The Concept of ‘Peacebuilding’.**

A broad ‘definition’ of peacebuilding as virtually anything that is being done in a situation of large-scale violence or post-violence, makes the concept analytically and operationally useless.

## **II. The Politics of Peacebuilding.**

Peacebuilders should beware of believing or pretending that it implies the ‘end of politics’.

‘Conflict’ including at times violent conflict, is not only about destruction. Conflict can be the result of a struggle for a better society, against forces perceived to restrict fuller and more equitable human development. That struggle can have transformational ambitions. Opposing any type of ‘conflict’ in the name of ‘peace’ simply depoliticizes and delegitimizes what can be justified and necessary struggles. Peace-building then de facto becomes a form of ‘pacification’, which typically benefits the ruling elites.

“Peace” is neither a neutral word nor one that is universally seen as a positive value. Often people in a difficult context will understand ‘peace’ with regard to that context, hence as something with very concrete political implications. They are very alert and sensitive to the questions: “What sort of peace are we talking about? Whose peace is this?”

Simultaneously, a strong international intervention may push aside the national politics and replace it with an externally determined one. In the long run that undermines the domestic legitimacy of the ‘outcomes’, and contributes to the weakening of a national political process.

## **III. The Practices of Peacebuilding.**

### **a. Overbearing external actors**

International ‘assistance’ actors can be so overbearing they crowd out the local/national actors. Not only do they spend significant amounts of the funds available on themselves, but they become an obstacle to ‘local ownership’.

*“Local ownership has often been reduced to local post-facto buy-in, as a process of legitimization for external actors or, in extreme cases, as an exit strategy for the international community. Furthermore, the principle of local ownership can also be both an empowering and a*

*disempowering one, since it is by and large the international community that decides which forms of local ownership are desirable and which are less so, as well as what constitutes the 'local' aspect.” (de Coning et alii 2010:15)*

*“The international community needs to accept that local ownership implies that it will not be able to control the outcome of the peacebuilding process. The legitimacy of the local actors involved and of the peace process as a whole is at risk if local ownership is perceived as securing agency for local actors that are closely associated with the interveners.” (idem p. 2)*

An overbearing presence of international actors is furthermore an obstacle to the strengthening of local capacities for conflict management, and may actually undermine those capacities for example when internationals hire away all the best 'local' personnel.

b. Whole of society rather than national government 'ownership'.

Bilateral and especially multilateral institutions have a tendency to put much emphasis on their relationship with a national government. This is understandable behaviour between states and between organisations and their member states. Unfortunately, it also induces a practice that reduces 'national ownership' to 'national (and central) government' ownership. From a peacebuilding point of view, this may well be a strategic mistake, especially in societies that have experienced large scale internal violence. And this for two reasons:

- Even a very capable and committed national government cannot handle the challenges by itself. It will need complementary help from other sectors in society.
- Internal violence and conflict always raises questions about the relationship between 'leaders' and 'followers' and, in many cases, between the state and its supposed 'citizens'. Giving primacy to the national government without explicit strategies to broaden the ownership more widely with the potential of gaining broad social and political support for certain reforms and transformations, risks ignoring this and reinforcing the primacy of 'leaders' and of the 'state' over ordinary people and citizens. (see also de Coning 2010:20)

c. Mismatch between fitness and purpose.

Peacebuilders that come with a certain expertise construct an activity and a purpose in function of what they can supply. One example are 'dialogue organisations' who are 'fit' i.e. capable and competent in organising and facilitating 'dialogues' but may be inclined to address every problem with a 'dialogue'. Organisations specialized in 'training' may respond to every challenge by organizing 'training'. The reverse are organisations that believe they can handle any type of challenge, and go well beyond, not only their area of experience and expertise, but also fail to consider whether they actually have the perceived legitimacy –in that particular environment- to shoulder a certain type of intervention or action.

d. Programming disconnected from conflict analysis.

Even if a conflict analysis has been done, the resulting programming has no connection to it. Its design is shaped by other elements such as the 'supply' interests of the agency, or generic ways of approaching a given problem.

e. Failure to engage the 'hard liners'.

Too many peacebuilding efforts engage and concentrate on the 'moderators', those that are already 'convinced'. But it is precisely those that are not 'convinced' and hold more 'hard line' positions, that need to be engaged and brought in a process.

f. Technocratic approaches.

Technocratic approaches manifest themselves in a variety of ways:

▶ *Generalised recipes.*

Recipe 'answers' are being brought to very different types of contexts and conflict dynamics, be it about security sector reform, political party functioning, trauma healing etc. In a broader sense a form of 'liberal' model of politics and economics is being proposed/imported/imposed even if there is no 'organic' fit.

*"...peacebuilding programs tend to be underpinned by an implicit universalism. They generally privilege formal institutions over informal or traditional structures, prefer technical solutions over culturally specific approaches, assume that international standards will always be applicable, and rather inexplicably underestimate the fiscal pressures on post-war states that make it hard to sustain expenditure on critical institutions at the same level as international donors." (Call & Couzens 2007:14)*

▶ *Institution-building focus.*

Technical state- and institution building discourses have increasingly come to dominate peacebuilding work. The social and political dynamics then become almost an 'afterthought', occasionally captured in 'lessons identified'. Yet peacebuilding is quintessentially about 'social cohesion' and 'political contracts'.

Another expression of this is the frequent neglect of the emotional dimensions of conflict and the importance of mindsets.

Dermot Ahern, Foreign Minister of Ireland at the UN in September 2006

*"Peacebuilding and conflict prevention are ultimately about psychology: addressing fears, perceptions, beliefs about the past and about the future. A conflict does not begin when the trigger is pulled. It begins in the heart and mind of the person who pulls the trigger."*

Quoted in Europeaworld 29 Sept. 2006

► *Project thinking.*

'Projects' may be a suitable format to manage funding through, but 'projects' do not sufficiently add up to leverage some social and political change or to build sustained peace. Projects can be an expression of, and support a drive for change, but do not by themselves mobilize enough key people and ordinary people to effect more significant changes in a sustained manner. Wider, deeper and longer-term processes are required. The actual focus is on efficiency rather than on effectiveness.

*"The emphasis on efficiency and the tight timelines imposed on peacebuilding programmes result in a bias towards engaging with urban-based local organisations with previous experience of working with the international community."* (de Coning et alii 2010:16)

► *'Tools'.*

Working with 'tools' such as 'peace and conflict impact assessments' (PCIA) are unlikely to have much impact on better practice. More than a 'tool' an broader 'approach' is required, supported by an overall organisational 'ethos'.

*"Transforming the behaviour of organisations working in conflict areas requires something more fundamental and encompassing than even the best adapted tool can deliver. Research indicates that the positive impact of conflict sensitivity is limited if it is confined to technical activity, rather than understood as strategic and relevant to an entire organisation and its partners (Lange 2004).(...) What is needed is "integrating the appropriate attitudes, approaches, tools and expertise into the organisation's culture, systems, processes and work, such that (for example) conflict sensitivity is applied not just to isolated projects but becomes an entire organisational ethos."* (Barbolet et alii 2005:5-6)

g. Linkages and synergies.

► *Strategic deficit.*

Project approaches, following a more generic design and with less local/national ownership have a higher risk of showing a 'strategic deficit'. A comparative review of a large number of projects that got funding from four European governments highlighted this point:

*"The study identifies a major strategic deficit in the peacebuilding efforts of the U4. (...) The problem is visible in the fact that more than 55 per cent of the projects do not show any link to a broader strategy for the country in which they are implemented. Some projects are not linked to a broader strategy because there is no strategy for them to be linked to. In other cases, the broader strategy exists but projects show no connection to it. Various security and socio-economic projects seem "strategy resistant" as if they need no strategic justification because their worth is self-evident. Planning is based on relatively little analysis, and there are important conceptual confusions and uncertainties."* Smith 2004:10-11)

- ▶ *No active linking to create synergies and ‘add up’.*

Individual projects by themselves are unlikely to get enough leverage on an entrenched conflict system. Yet achieving a ‘cumulative impact’ does not happen automatically. Active efforts are required to create linkages

*“Many peace activities are discrete efforts directed toward affecting one (often small) piece of the puzzle. Most peace practitioners talk of the importance of linkages among the work at all levels and across sectors of society. Often, people will say, “I have to assume that, over time, all of our different activities will add up.” But, the evidence is that, without explicit efforts to add it up, this does not automatically or inevitably occur. The “adding up” of activities seems to be one crucial area for improving effectiveness. (...) they do need to connect to other activities for maximum effectiveness.” (Anderson and Olson 2003:54)*

- ▶ *Lack of attention to the vertical connections.*

Lederach, whose ‘pyramid’ of actors and peacebuilding foci has been very influential, and which finds practical expression in the ‘Track’ thinking about peacebuilding, has himself subsequently pointed at the importance of the vertical connections – and their relative neglect in much peacebuilding work.

*“Interdependence is built on relationships and relationships are the heart and bloodlines of peace-building. In peace-building there are many forms of interdependence. Most recognized is the idea that we build new or rebuild broken relationships across the lines of divisions created through and by the conflict. Using a pyramid to describe a setting affected by violent conflict I refer to this as horizontal capacity: the effort to work with counterparts, enemies, across the lines of division. Most peace-building work, particularly in the sub-field of conflict resolution, has been aimed at improving aspects of relationships through negotiation, dialogue, and mediation by getting counterparts to meet with each other. However, if we ask the question ‘who meets each other to develop relationships?’ we find this answer: people who are at a relative equal status within the context of the conflict. Community people meet community people, mid-range leaders encounter each other, and of course, top level political leaders in the limelight sit across negotiation tables. In other words, the emphasis of dialogue has fostered horizontal relationships.*

*The most significant gap of interdependence we face is rooted in the lack of responsive and coordinated relationships up and down the levels of leadership in a society affected by protracted violent conflict. This is what I have referred to as the vertical capacity: the ability to develop relationships of respect and understanding between higher levels of leadership with community and grassroots levels of leadership, and vice versa. To put it simply, high, middle-range and grassroots levels of leadership rarely see themselves as interdependent with the other levels in reference to peace-building until they discover they need them, usually when the*

*process is under enormous stress and time constraints. If pursued the resulting relationship suffers manipulation or instrumentalist superficiality.*

*Correspondingly, we are hampered in our ability to create and sustain vertical and horizontal integration strategically necessary for implementing the kind of long-term peace-building we hope to put in place.(...)*

*Strategic change in a system requires that horizontal and vertical relationships move in tandem on an equal basis. In far too many places and times vertical capacity has been weak. What one level of peace-building undertook was rarely understood by, much less conceived and conducted in a way that significantly involved other levels of the affected society. Yet all levels, at one time or another, are affected by and must coordinate their activities with each other.” (Lederach no date).*

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