

Local peacebuilding: debates and lessons.

Andries Odendaal

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“Local peacebuilding”, as done by the “international community”, is controversial. Let us be clear on one thing though: through all the centuries and millennia local communities have made their own peace. In doing so they relied on the rituals and customs known to them. “Local peace” is therefore not new, neither is it controversial. What is new and controversial is the notion that outsiders have the responsibility to ensure local peace.

With the formation of the United Nations in 1948 “peace” was globalized. It formally became the responsibility of the “international community”. For the subsequent decades this peace-making was largely the business of state actors, operating in the nexus between the international and the national. With the dramatic decline of inter-state war and the rise of intra-state war from the 1990s onwards, the shift towards international responsibility for “local peace” was, in a sense, inevitable. However, it has in no way been applauded by all.

There are three interlinked debates that are noteworthy for our purposes. Stated very simplistically, these debates are:

- (1) Local peace relies on the implementation of national peace agreements, ideally mediated by the international community. Once international and national actors decide on peace, in other words, it will trickle down to the local levels through effective governance. The opposing argument is that the trickle-down assumption just does not work. Furthermore, if the real sources of conflict as experienced at the local level are not truly transformed, the peace is superficial, only serving the interests of national and international elites.
- (2) The peacebuilding paradigm that guides international peacebuilding is founded on the liberal understanding of the democratic state. A liberal democratic state, in other words, is the best guarantee of peace. Peacebuilding, consequently, is almost synonymous with building a democratic state with functional state institutions. The contrary view is that this largely Western paradigm is being enforced on societies across the globe in a way that smacks of neo-colonialism. When local peacebuilding is pursued in the context of such a “statist” paradigm, it is guilty of the same ideological error. The “local” should not primarily be understood as a geographic site, but rather as the site of resistance against neo-colonialism and marginalisation in all its forms. Local peacebuilding (or peace formation), in this view, means international support for social movements, whatever their size or geographical spread, that seek to form peace in ways that are authentic to local societies.
- (3) The third debate is based on the notion of state sovereignty. Any intervention by outsiders, whether of the liberal or post-liberal persuasion, is an irritating and patronising violation of that sacrosanct principle. Proponents of this view also regularly criticize the manifestly inconsistent and hypocritical way in which powerful states sanction interventions by the “international community” in other states merely to pursue their own interests. The counter-argument is that all states have signed international protocols and are members of the various peace architectures that have been constructed, mandating international action

under certain conditions. Furthermore, internal instability has become a legitimate concern of the international community as it gives rise to large-scale internal displacements, emigration, and even terrorism. All these matters have direct and serious implications for other nations. The objections to the violation of state sovereignty is, in this view, an unconvincing veneer to safeguard the interests of narrow national elites.

How do we proceed?

It would be highly irresponsible to engage in local peacebuilding in ignorance of these debates. Put differently, local peacebuilders and their funders must be able to justify and account for what they do and why they do it.

What follow below are a few pointers towards a responsible approach towards the transformation of local conflict systems.

1. *Local is not the same as locality.*

It is not helpful to impose artificial boundaries (such as municipal boundaries) on the site of local peacebuilding. The boundaries should rather be determined by the dynamics of local conflict systems. By a conflict system is meant the complete array of relationships, interests, issues and histories that bind a specific group of actors into dynamic and sustained patterns of conflictual behaviour. It is important, though, to distinguish local conflict systems from larger national or international systems. Local conflicts have dynamics of their own. Their transformation is not solely dependent on what happens at national or international level.

2. *The interlinked nature of conflict systems.*

While local conflicts differ in some respects from the larger conflicts, they are all inter-linked and interactive. The specific drivers of the conflict are rooted in local dynamics, but some of the roots extend into larger systems. This understanding of the distinct yet embedded nature of local conflict systems is important. On the one hand it means that local conflicts must be understood and approached in terms of its local dynamics. Local conflicts are often resistant to efforts to impose national "solutions". On the other hand, due to the interaction and interdependence of smaller and larger systems, they cannot be approached in splendid isolation from dynamics at the national or international levels.

For example, in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa violent intra-community conflict has been raging for many decades. During the low-level civil war in the 1980s and early 1990s in that province, these conflicts seemingly converged with the larger conflict as all the violence of that time was explained as politically motivated. However, despite peace agreements not only at national level, but also at provincial level between the main protagonists, the violence within some of these communities continued to this day. Some of these conflicts are, for example, driven by longstanding chieftainship issues. Chieftainship determines access to and control of the land. What happened during the time of the low-level civil war, therefore, was that the local protagonists had plugged their contest into the political struggle, essentially continuing the pursuit of their own interests but now with access to greater powers. It meant that the arrival of national and provincial peace did not resolve their disputes.

Such chieftainship contests have their roots in the colonial and apartheid dispossession of land; as well as in the ongoing desperate struggle for survival in a highly unequal society. They are furthermore reinforced by the inability of current state policy and institutions to provide redress. It would therefore be a mistake to understand such a conflict purely in terms of its local

dynamics (as if local actors did not also identify with the political motivations in the 1980s; and as if state action/inaction did not have a significant impact). But it would be equally wrong to see local violence purely as a symptom of the larger malaise. If the latter was the case, all communities would have been at war with themselves. The intra-community violence must be understood in terms of its unique local dynamics – but as these interact with the larger socio-political systems. Because of the uniqueness of each conflict system, peacebuilding requires attention to the specific local dynamics. Because of the interlinked nature of the conflict, it must be addressed in a way that is relevant to the transformation of the larger systems.

3. *Whose analysis?*

The meaning of local peacebuilding differs from national context to national context. It means something very different in contexts where oppressive regimes are in place compared to cases where there is a substantial agreement on the conditions for peace. There is also a vast difference in contexts where violence is prominent and wide-spread, and those where the violence is contained. In some cases, “local peace” indeed refers to a site of resistance where “peace” does not mean “pacifying”. In other cases, “local peace” means attention to local conflict dynamics to enhance the national consensus on peace. Local peacebuilding cannot adopt the very same strategies in Syria as in current South Africa, nor can local peace in Nepal be compared with local peace in Libya.

Furthermore, within the same national context, the meaning of local peacebuilding differs from one conflict system to the next. In general, analysis must determine strategy. In the case of local peacebuilding, the role of analysis is even more critical. A key question is whose analysis it should be?

Stathis Kalyvas has warned against the role of “urban bias” in conflict analysis. Urban bias refers to the one-sided and incomplete understanding that develops if an analysis is dominantly influenced by written sources in a global language, produced by the urban intelligentsia. These analyses may be good at identifying general trends, but they lack attention to local specificity and to the views of the spectrum of “owners” of local conflict.

The analysis that will enable local conflict transformation, however, is one that is developed and shared by the “owners” of that conflict. Analysis of a local conflict system, therefore, cannot be assumed based on generalised theories. It must evolve through the dialogue between local stakeholders. As such analysis is an essential part of the dialogue. A shared analysis will more readily lead to a sustainable solution than an imposed analysis. This is the true nature of “local ownership”. It prohibits any pre-cooked strategies.

This poses a serious dilemma for international agencies: how to plan and budget effectively when the strategies to be supported are not ready-made? On the other hand: why invest heavily in strategies that, by their pre-cooked nature, are bound to be unsuccessful?

4. *Impact on scale.*

The issue of impact on scale is important. As far back as 2004 Mary Anderson has warned that local efforts do not necessarily “add up” to “peace writ large”. To my mind, however, the answer does not lie in how far and wide programmes should be rolled out; or in superficial statistics. The answer lies in an accurate understanding of the interlinked nature of conflict systems; and the qualitative impact that transformation at a local level has for the larger systems.

For example, in 2003 John Paul Lederach received a request from a leading activist in Nepal to assist them to find more constructive responses to the Maoist insurgency that was active at the time. Working with a select group of Nepali civil society leaders, they spent the next seven years analysing the deeper nature of the conflict and preparing a responsive strategy. One of the outcomes of this process was the understanding that there were, across the country, numerous local conflicts on access to natural resources - land, water and the forest. Access to these resources had been determined by the “feudal system”, as the Maoists termed the caste-based social hierarchy. These conflicts would persist despite the outcome of national negotiations. Consequently, the Natural Resource Conflict Transformation Centre in Nepal (NRCTC) was established in 2013. They are implementing a process that is truly relevant to the context, based on the principle that conflict is primarily transformed by those whose conflict it is. The results are impressive indeed. They claim a 92% success rate (94 successes out of 102 cases over a period of less than 4 years). However, they are only active in 27 of the 75 districts. Does it mean that this intervention fails the requirements of impact on scale?

These interventions took place at the sensitive nerve-ends of Nepal’s social and economic reality – where poor people competed for access to vital resources on a playing field that was grossly distorted by the power of identity. They addressed the core dilemma of Nepali society: how to transform relationships and economic reality in an inclusive and constructive way; how to build peace that is more than pacification that truly heals and brings new hope. In achieving this, they also transcended the ever-present threat of political capture in a context of debilitating political party competition. As such, the project has national significance beyond its geographic limitations. To my mind, it is already successful in meeting the requirements of scale.

5. *The relative contribution of outsiders.*

“Capacity building” is the catchword used to describe much of the justification for the role of outsiders. It is a controversial concept, though, because it assumes that outsiders have the capacity and know-how to transform a local conflict. When capacity building is our core input to local peacebuilding, we shall judge our impact by the number of workshops conducted – regardless of their impact. However, *we as outsiders cannot really know how to build local peace*. Capacity for local peacebuilding is not transferred by the superficial or prescriptive transfer of knowledge and skills. At most we can stimulate dialogue between ourselves and insiders, sharing experiences and insights. This may well happen at externally organised workshops, and it may involve a sharing of experiences and insights developed in other contexts. Outsiders may further accompany insiders in their internal dialogue and their search for an adequate response to the conflict. However, the essence of all this is *dialogue* and not “we know, and you do not”. Local peacebuilding cannot be performed without professional humility – the professional attitude that is informed by an understanding of the limits to what we can achieve. In addition, local peacebuilding cannot be enforced through the artificial timelines of a “project”. It will unfold following its own inherent tempo.

Overall, the attention that local peacebuilding is currently receiving, both in theory and practice, is welcome. We need ongoing robust debates to improve our own understanding and practice. I trust that our discussions today will contribute significantly towards this end.