COMMENTARY

Understanding Peacebuilding as Essentially Local

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On a recent visit to Mogadishu I was again confronted with the tension between local ownership and international self-interest. On the one hand was the Somali President, who wanted to assert his sovereign authority and lead the peace process according to his vision for Somalia. On the other hand, there was a powerful but diverse international community that has the resources necessary to enhance peace, though such resources were accompanied by a set of ideas concerning what the Somali President should be doing. Officially everyone claimed to support the Federal Government of Somalia, but in reality each outside nation and organisation is engaged in Somalia for its own strategic political, security and economic needs and interests.

Should we then be surprised that any government, let alone a fragile one emerging from twenty years of conflict and instability as in Somalia, would find it extremely challenging to coordinate all these international partners? The reality is sadly that the limited governing capacity that the President and his government have is being overwhelmed by the transaction costs of needing to engage with each of these international actors. Instead of governing Somalia, the President and his cabinet are forced to meet with and

react to each of the proposals offered by his country's international partners. Instead of leading the Somali peace process according to his government's vision, they have to transact away key elements to the satisfaction of each of their partners, and give enough prominence to each of their pet projects, to keep sorely needed resources flowing to Somalia.

The dilemma I am describing here is normal, i.e. it is to be expected given the various interests at stake and the relative power of the various actors involved. What is abnormal is the degree to which we fail to take these factors into account. There is a persistent lack of recognition that the amount of time and energy that the new government in Somalia, and all such governments, spend on servicing the needs of their international partners contributes to instability and fragility. No doubt the government of Somalia, like every other of these so-called fragile governments, believe it can come out on top of this game, but the reality is that *he who pays the piper calls the tune.*

It is thus not surprising that for many in the stability business, the notion of 'local ownership' has become a buzz-word. It is one of those words that has to be in any document about end states and exit strategies, yet no one really expects it to be meaningfully pursued. The need for more local ownership has been recognised and discussed in the statebuilding and peacebuilding literature for at least a decade, and if you include

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the development literature perhaps even as much as a quarter century. Some would argue that the reason why it has not become more of a reality in all this time has nothing to do with how much it is obviously desirable, and everything to do with how inherently impossible it is to achieve.

Many in this school typically offer two explanations. They argue that in societies emerging from conflict, local capacity is so weak that it is impossible for the locals to govern themselves, let alone coordinate the international effort. The notion of local ownership is thus unrealistic. They don't know what they need and what they want, and they need to be helped for their own good. The other argument is that it is impossibly difficult for external peacebuilders to know which leaders truly represent local needs and interests, and it is thus best to consult widely but not to give the lead to any particular grouping until there has been an election or some other demonstration of the population's will. Until then, the external peacebuilders see themselves as acting in a kind of unacknowledged guardian role, in which they act according to what they think are in the best interest of the society.

Very few recognise or acknowledge the role the international community plays in undermining local ownership. Some may acknowledge this challenge, though most argue that it is unintended. In Mogadishu this seemed to me to be a clearly foreseeable and logical outcome of the transaction costs imposed on the new government. In theory it should be possible to prevent overburdening a new government, but we are faced with a classical case of the *tragedy of the commons.* Each international partner, acting independently and rationally according to its own self-interest, contributes to undermining the resilience of the local government. Although some may grasp that collectively, as a result of the transactional burden and the imposition of foreign norms and models, they are contributing to the very weakness of the government that they are meant to support;

they are unable to change their ways, and act in their common long-term best interests.

The avoid such a situation, each of the international partners will need to somehow exercise voluntary self-restraint. How does one break through the tragedy of commons and get the individual agents to act in their best common interests? To address this dilemma, I suggest three steps. These steps are premised on the notion that improving the information and understanding each agent has about its role in the larger peacebuilding system – and the effect it is having on the government – may increase the chances that they may take steps to mitigate against such negative effects. By increasing the information in the system one also hopes to encourage more open communication about these effects among agents, especially among internal and external agents. The three steps are outlined below.

First, external peacebuilders need to reaffirm the principle of local ownership and re-commit to make it the starting point of their approach to state- and peacebuilding. No one seems to challenge the essential logic that for any peace process to be sustainable it has to make sense for, and serve the interests of the people directly involved.

Secondly, international partners need help to recognise and acknowledge their role in undermining the resilience of the very fragile governments they are committed to help. External peacebuilders need to recognise that they intervene in conflict and post-conflict situations to serve their own interests. As a result they tend to be more supply driven then they like to admit, even to themselves. Perhaps there is a naïve belief among some that – because the external and internal peacebuilders share the same overall objective, namely to pursue sustainable peace – they are motivated by the same interests. But we know this is not the case. They are more likely to have different understandings of what sustainable peace means and different theories for how to achieve sustainable peace.

Third, external and internal peacebuilders need help to openly discuss their respective interests. The tension between the local ownership principle and interest-driven external initiatives will continue to be a predictable characteristic of international peacebuilding processes. It is the product of inherently contradictory interests that cannot be resolved, only transacted on a case-by-case basis. It is not undesirable – in fact it serves a very useful evolutionary purpose – but it needs to be acknowledged, understood and discounted, not ignored.

Below I consider the challenge of local ownership – and what can be done to improve it – in greater detail. I also discuss the benefits local ownership can have for the resilience of fragile post-conflict governments and societies.

Local ownership

For most people in the international security and development sectors, what local ownership really means is that the representatives of a given society should be encouraged to voluntarily choose to adopt the neoliberal norms and institutions that the international community has designed for them. There may be some room for hybridisation in the process, but at its core many international aid workers, peacekeepers and diplomats believe that some degree of top-down imposition of neoliberal norms and institutions is warranted, because doing so represents international standards and the accumulated 'scientific' knowledge and best practices of the (Western-dominated) international community. In other words, these agents of the international community believe that because adopting neoliberal norms and institutions is ultimately in the best interest of the country in transition, some degree of coercion is justified.

This is how most people working in the statebuilding and peacebuilding field view local ownership today. From this perspective, the essential act of peacebuilding lies in its design, i.e. an international actor diagnosing the local problem and designing a solution for it – from the outside and from the top-down. I argue for a fundamentally different approach. I argue for understanding sustainable peace as emergent from the local – from the inside and from the bottom-up.

My own journey to this position has been rather counterintuitive. I was, and remain, interested in peacebuilding from the perspective of the role of international organisations, like the United Nations and the African Union. I wanted to improve their ability to design and manage coherent multi-stakeholder peace missions – to enhance their capacity to achieve more coherent and comprehensive interventions – in the belief that more coherence will result in more effective missions and thus more sustainable outcomes. My interest in researching coherence within a multi-stakeholder environment eventually resulted in an interest in Complexity theory.

When systems become so dynamic that we are no longer able to keep track of the effects of specific initiatives we commonly refer to them as 'complex'. I was interested in understanding what it means when we say a particular conflict, or the international response to it, is complex? What was it that we could learn from applying the knowledge generated by the study of Complexity to the peacebuilding context? Complexity theory address multi-agent systems that have the ability to adapt, i.e. they are able to learn from their history and act to change their structure and behaviour to adapt to changes in their environment. What makes them especially interesting is that they do this without some kind of central control mechanism. They don't seem to need a 'brain' or a leader in order to take decisions. Instead, they have a kind of distributed intelligence, and they demonstrate emergent behaviour, including self-organising behaviour. Complex social systems, like a post-conflict society, develop the ability to organise and maintain themselves not because of a centrally controlled hierarchy, such as a strategic framework or a strategic plan, but as a result of emergence –

the ability of non-linear interactions to spontaneously result in self-regulating behaviour through complex feedback systems.

For instance, complex social systems develop their own institutions over time through iterative adaptive processes, and this is an emergent process of self-organisation. Institutions are not designed and imposed, they emerge from the history and culture of a specific society. A police service is not just a neutral institution that can be replicated in any society. Every society has norms that relate to the appropriate role it expects its institutions to play when it comes to enforcing its values, and these norms are critical to understanding the role a police service could and should play in any given society. The linkage between history, culture and institutional legitimacy is, from a Complexity perspective, emergent from the local, not derived from the universal.

The most fundamental insight I gained from applying Complexity theory to peacebuilding was the realisation that the ability of external agents to gain knowledge of the complex social systems we are dealing with in the peacebuilding context is inherently limited. Complex systems, which include all social systems, are non-linear, and this means that we are not able to know enough about these systems to predict their behavior using a linear cause-and-effect science model.

Nor can we transfer one model that seemed to work well in one context to another and expect that it would work equally well there. This is because each model has a history that is specific to the context within which it emerged. Once it is divorced from that history, it loses the context within which it had meaning. Concepts like statebuilding and peacebuilding convey the assumption that we are able to 'build' the state and 'build' peace, in the same way we can design and build a bridge or a tunnel. In fact, social systems are part of the organic world, not the material world. Our social systems are bio-ecosystems; we are not like the parts of a machine which have specific and pre-

designed roles in a causal chain. Complex systems evolve, including (or in particular) in non-linear ways.

What are some of the implications that flow from these insights? Firstly, we have to adjust our theories of change. We have to acknowledge that there are no off-the-shelf solutions and no one theory of change or model of state transformation, such as the neoliberal peace model, that can claim universal applicability. We have to come to terms with what it really means when we say that something is context-specific. It means that it can only emerge from that context. It does not mean that we can import a universal model and simply make a few adjustments for the local culture and context.

Secondly, we need to change the way we plan. We need to come to terms with what it means when we say we cannot, in complex systems, diagnose the problem and design a solution for it. In a non-linear social system the 'one-problem-one-solution' construct does no longer make sense because the linear cause-and-effect logic no longer applies. The system is continuously evolving, and 'the solution' needs to adapt and evolve with it. We need a new approach to planning that goes beyond the old problem-solving 'assessment-design-apply' approach. We need a new planning model that can recognise the need for continuous iterative processes and that enable interventions to evolve along with the surrounding system.

Thirdly, we need to change the way our organisations learn and transfer knowledge. We can't 'learn lessons' or identify 'best practices' from one situation and expect to universalise it in a way that will make it transferable to another context. At the moment most organisational knowledge flows from the centre to the periphery, from the strategic to the tactical. We will have to invest in a new focus on learning from the context, from the tactical to the operational. The operation needs to be informed by what it is they are tasked to achieve strategically, but the knowledge they will need to achieve

that vision will need to be generated from the tactical level.

Fourthly, we would need to change the way we monitor and evaluate our programmes and campaigns. We can't only monitor for, or benchmark against, anticipated results. Whenever we intervene in a complex system it will respond in a variety of ways, some of which we may have intended; but a non-linear system will also respond in many unintended ways. Monitoring only for the intended outcomes will result in us missing out on a great deal of important information about how the system is evolving. Monitoring will assume great importance because it is only through feedback that complex systems can gain the information they need to adapt and evolve.

International roles and limitations

This brings us to the second step we identified in the introduction, namely that international partners need to recognise and acknowledge their role in undermining the capacity of governments they intend to support. Complexity theory has shed light on how complex systems self-organise. Self-organisation in the statebuilding and peacebuilding context refers to the various processes and mechanisms a society uses to manage its own peace consolidation process, i.e. the overall ability to manage its own tensions, pressures, disputes, crisis and shocks without relapsing into violent conflict. For statebuilding and peacebuilding the implication is that interventions have to be essentially about stimulating and facilitating the capacity of societies to self-organise.

Seen in this context, peacebuilding is a very delicate and self-contradictory process fraught with built-in tensions. There is an inherent tension in the act of promoting a process of self-organisation; external interference undermines the ability of the 'self' to develop (to take responsibility, to learn from failure and successes) sufficiently for self-organisation to emerge. Understanding this tension – and the constraints it poses

– helps us to understand why peacebuilding is so complex. It should also free us from illusions of easy solutions and grand models and help us to focus on case-by-case transactions that seek to reflect the interface between local context and international interests.

Many, if not most, international peacebuilding missions to date have made the mistake of interfering so much that they ended-up undermining the ability of the local system to self-organise. External peacebuilders impose neoliberal political and judicial norms and model institutions according to their own ideal types. In the process we deny these societies the room to develop their own institutions which are emergent from their own history, culture and context. External peacebuilders fail to recognise the degree to which their own norms and institutions are the product of their own history, culture and context. Consequently, they underestimate the challenge of transferring these norms and institutions to other cultures and contexts.

Finding an appropriate local-international relationship

The third step we identified in the introduction was that external and internal peacebuilders need to openly discuss and transact their respective interests. The key to successful statebuilding and peacebuilding lies in finding the appropriate balance between external security guarantees and resources, on the one hand, and the degree to which the local system has the freedom to develop its own self-organisation, on the other.

We may be able to identify and agree on some broad principles in, for instance, the form of a statebuilding and peacebuilding code of conduct. Ultimately, however, what is appropriate has to be determined in each specific context, as in the articulation of a compact between the local authorities and representatives of the international community. As these processes are dynamic and non-linear, what is appropriate will be

continuously changing and such compacts would thus also need the ability to evolve.

Conclusion

Applying Complexity theory to peacebuilding leads us to conclude that self-sustaining peace is directly linked to, and influenced by, the extent to which a society has the capacity and space to self-regulate. For peace consolidation to be self-sustainable it has to be the result of a home-grown, bottom-up and context-specific process.

The robustness and resilience of the self-organising capacity of a society determines the extent to which it can withstand pressures and shocks that risk a (re)lapse into violent conflict. Peacebuilding should thus be about safeguarding, stimulating, facilitating and creating the space for societies to develop robust and resilient capacities for self-organisation.

International peacebuilding interventions should provide security guarantees and maintain the outer parameters of acceptable state behavior in the international system, and they should stimulate, facilitate and create the space for the emergence of robust and resilient self-organised systems. International peacebuilding interventions should not interfere in the local social process with the goal of engineering specific outcomes, such as trying to produce a neoliberal state. Trying to control the outcome produces the opposite of what peacebuilding aims to achieve; it generates ongoing instability and dependence, and it undermines self-sustainability.

The art of peacebuilding thus lies in pursuing the appropriate balance between international support and home-grown context-specific solutions.

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