

# Why Peacebuilders are “Blind” and “Arrogant” and What to do About it

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## Summary

Peacebuilders are blind when they fail to be sensitive to local context, and arrogant when they do not secure local ownership for peacebuilding efforts. Extant research suggests that this lack of attention to context and ownership go a long way in accounting for the relative lack of success of peacebuilding efforts, and so it is an issue that should be addressed by policy makers. Now, the importance of securing local ownership for peacebuilding efforts have since long been recognized as critical to long-term success of peacebuilding efforts. The problem is that it is not implemented in practice. Why is this so? The report argues that it has to do with two implicit assumptions that are rarely discussed and reflected upon in peacebuilding circles. The first assumption is that universal knowledge is more important than local knowledge. The second assumption is that international legitimacy is more important than domestic legitimacy. Together, these two assumptions make peacebuilding emphasize building and social engineering at the expense of facilitation, mediation and conflict resolution. Because of its expertise, experience and international standing in peace and reconciliation work, in on-going efforts to professionalize peacebuilding at the UN, and in UN reform efforts more generally, the Norwegian MFA is ideally placed to address these shortcomings of current peacebuilding practice. Three areas are singled out as central to make peacebuilding less blind and arrogant: i) public-political debate about the appropriate ends of peacebuilding; ii) institutional reform at the UN; and iii) the development of new hiring guidelines, training modules, and best practices.

## Introduction

The policies of the UN, the World Bank, OECD-DAC and most bilateral donors have converged around a liberal peacebuilding model, where rule of law, market economy and democracy are seen as central to build a lasting peace. There are also procedural principles that are included in this consensus that stipulates *how* to proceed to build liberal democracies. The first principle is that external actors need to respect and secure *local ownership*. The second is that that external actors need, wherever and whenever possible, to build on existing institutions and thus to take *local context* as their point of departure. While the substantive elements of peacebuilding (i.e. democracy, rule of law, market economy) clearly define peacebuilding practice, the two procedural principles – ownership and context – are often neglected or marginalized. Extant research strongly suggests that this lack of attention to ownership and context go a long way in explaining why so many peacebuilding efforts are judged to be ineffective and unsustainable over time. In this policy brief, I seek to answer why securing ownership and sensitivity to context is preached but not practiced, and suggest what can be done to address it (see also Sending 2009).

## Why ownership and sensitivity to context matters

While some studies show that important progress has been made in peacebuilding efforts over the course of the last decade or so (Human Security Report 2007), studies focused on the effectiveness of efforts to prevent and stop violent conflicts paint a less positive picture. These studies find that the failure to build a sustainable peace range from 30 % of countries relapsing into conflict within two years (Doyle and Sambanis 2006) to 44% within five years (Mack 2007). A central factor accounting for the lack of sustainability over time is the inability of peacebuilders to secure and respect

local ownership and to build domestic, bottom-up legitimacy for their reforms that liberal peacebuilding entails (Chandler 2006; Suhrke 2007; Richmond 2007; Paris and Sisk 2008. See also Collier and Dollar 2004).

The importance of securing local ownership for peacebuilding efforts has since long been recognized as among the central principles by policy makers, as evidenced by key policy documents on peacebuilding. Why, then, do multilateral and bilateral actors not live by and implement the procedural principles of securing ownership and being sensitive to local context? The answer can be found in two implicit assumptions that underwrite peacebuilding policy and practice, but that are rarely discussed and reflected upon. The first assumption concerns the *privileging of universal over local knowledge*. The second assumption concerns the *privileging of international over domestic sources of legitimacy*. I discuss each in turn below.

## Two illustrations: Universal knowledge, international legitimacy

### 1. Universal knowledge trumps local knowledge

The UN Secretary General has summarized what is arguably common wisdom within the UN with regards to peacebuilding in saying that the role of the UN is to “help countries emerging from conflict build democratic institutions and entrench democratic norms. Today, the UN’s efforts to promote democracy are inseparable from our broader work for security, development and human rights.” (UNSG 2007) By making post-conflict peacebuilding synonymous with the advancement of liberal democratic principles, peacebuilding has become defined as a project that entails a comprehensive set of interventions aimed at re-building not only state institutions, but the very organization of state-society relations.

Against this background, the authority of external actors in a post-conflict setting is not only derived from their humanitarian or legal mandate. It also stems in no small part from how peacebuilders claim to *know* what needs to be done to prevent future conflicts, and to help build a liberal democratic state. Because all peacebuilding efforts are modelled on and seek to advance goals associated with liberal principles, that knowledge is tied to expertise and experience in what these liberal principles are, how they should be made operational and how they should be implemented. Very schematically, we may say that the substantive content of peacebuilding is defined “top-down” (deductively) from a set of liberal principles stipulating how (ideal) societies *should* be organized and governed, and not “bottom-up” (inductively), where knowledge about what works is generated from concrete experience.

These liberal principles are given from an “Archimedean” position where the means and ends of peacebuilding are seen as a-historical and pre-political. In defining peacebuilding as being about efforts to implement what are essentially non-negotiable principles about democratic rule, human rights, liberal economic policy, rule of law etc, peacebuilders’ technical

competence in and knowledge about the functionally specific tasks of how to reform the judicial sector, or the security sector, or the economy invariably takes precedence over local and context specific knowledge (Barnett and Finnemore 2004).

This feature of peacebuilding helps account for how it is that peacebuilding professionals with functionally specific expertise in a particular issue-area (security sector reform, rule of law, human rights, gender, etc) assume a position of authority in knowing what needs to be done in countries they often know little about. One becomes an “expert” by virtue of knowing about a functionally specific area, not by knowing about a particular country. This is exacerbated by a number of institutional constraints within the UN. For one, UN member states have put limits both on what the UN can do to gather “intelligence” on countries, and the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) is small and poorly equipped to track developments in different countries (Call and Cousens 2007). This is exacerbated by the fact that UN missions at the country level only to a very limited degree hire and make effective use of national and local staff.


The result is often an inability on the part of peacebuilders to really understand what is going on in a country, resulting in sophisticated and technical plans and strategies having little relevance for the problems to be addressed. In an extensive study of MONUC, Autesserre (2008) describes this dynamic, where local conflict dynamics in the Congo were not understood and appreciated as important because of a privileging of universal knowledge:

“Diplomats and UN officials ... brought to their new position the knowledge they acquired in previous postings – and many approached the Congo exactly as if it was their previous country of deployment. [UN staff] found (or privileged) information indicating that violence in the east was a top-down problem. The UN Secretary General reports on the Congo emphasized mostly the national and regional roots of violence.” (2008:15)

The point here is that the relevance of country-specific knowledge is always subordinate to the pre-defined universal principles that stipulate the goals of peacebuilding: Knowledge about the particular geographical, social, economic, political characteristics of a country are considered important *a means* to the end of fine-tuning and adjusting, on the margins, *how* to implement a pre-defined liberal peacebuilding model, the establishment of which is seen to require heavy involvement by external experts.

### 2. International legitimacy trumps local legitimacy

Peacebuilders increasingly recognize the importance of focusing on questions of legitimacy, both in terms of how external actors are perceived by the local population, and in terms of how the general population in a country understand and perceives of the state that is to be built to prevent future conflicts (OECD-DAC 2008). In seeking to operationalize this new emphasis on legitimacy, however, peacebuilders tend to assume



that the internationally established legitimacy of the liberal principles that they advance will automatically *translate into domestic legitimacy* of the state as viewed by the local population. While the normative pull of liberal principles is unmistakable, it is an open question whether different domestic groups see such principles as legitimate – especially when these are effectively being imposed from the outside rather than being developed through domestic debate and negotiations.

In the new Capstone Doctrine for UN “multidimensional” peacekeeping operations – including peacebuilding efforts – the discussion of the normative framework that legitimizes peacekeeping is noteworthy in this regard. The document does *not* list the local population’s beliefs, grievances, goals (e.g. perceptions) as part of the core legitimacy for peace operations. Instead, the legitimacy of peace operations, and peacebuilding efforts, is said to flow from a set of international sources, key among which are conformity with human rights norms, the authority of the UN Security Council, and the authority of the UN Secretary General (UN 2008: 36–39). Instead, local perceptions are described more in the context of how it is necessary to manage the potential for *misperceptions*. The doctrine refers three times in a few paragraphs to how the “perceived legitimacy” of peacekeeping operations is affected by the quality of the conduct of peacekeepers. Here, “effective approaches to national and local ownership” is seen as important to “reinforce the perceived legitimacy of the operation and support mandate implementation.” (ibid. 39).

To talk about the *perceived* legitimacy of a UN peacekeeping operation, however, is to assume that their *actual* legitimacy does not depend on the views of the local population. Indeed, it is to assume that the international (liberal) standards that peace operations and peacebuilding efforts adhere to are what *really* provide them with legitimacy. Legitimacy is seen as synonymous with a particular normative standard in the form of ideas contained in the liberal peacebuilding model and it is thus possible that some actors “perceive” of this legitimacy in the wrong way – that they have misperceptions about what is and what is not legitimate in a normative sense.

This emphasis on international over domestic legitimacy is perhaps best expressed in how local ownership is conceptualized in the Capstone Doctrine: Whereas human rights are seen as *defining* for the normative order of peace operations – together with the UN charter, UN Security Council mandate, and international humanitarian law – ownership is included as “other success factors” that are derived from experience. In short, local ownership is *not* seen as part of the source from which peace operations and peacebuilding efforts derive their legitimacy. In this way, the Capstone doctrine reflect a view that is generic to peacebuilding inasmuch as the substantive goals are defined by reference to a universal standard that takes precedence over domestic sources of legitimacy that may be at odds with these.

The two assumptions about the superiority of universal knowledge and of international legitimacy underpin the rationale and organization of peacebuilding efforts, and they help explain why respect for local ownership and sensitivity to local conditions is so difficult to implement in practice. In this framework, universal templates are privileged, external actors assume the position of experts, and legitimacy is believed to follow from the assumed normative force and universal acceptance of the international standards that underpin peacebuilding. This leads to a relative marginalization of local knowledge and of local sources of legitimacy.

### A way forward

There are evidently no easy fixes to this problem. The belief in social engineering and in the automatic, universal, legitimacy of peacebuilding is deeply institutionalized in the thinking and practice of peacebuilding. Indeed, adjusting the ends and means of peacebuilding to make it fit in with the local context and the “political will” of key local groups can be a highly complex and politically very difficult task. Should one, for example, seek to foster ownership by building on local institutions even when doing so means supporting illiberal forms of rule? Is it appropriate to support national and local leaders in an interest of ownership and context-sensitivity when such leaders exhibit clear signs of ruling in undemocratic ways? These are all difficult ethical and political questions that are far beyond the scope of this report. Below, I identify three issues that can potentially contribute to improving the chances that peacebuilding efforts will be more sustainable over time: i) debate about the tenets of the liberal peacebuilding model inside and outside the UN; ii) organizational reform at the UN, and iii) training, hiring and best practices.

i) Debate about whether the liberal peacebuilding model should always and a priori define the content and goals of peacebuilding efforts appears of central importance. Inasmuch as mandates, funding and guidance of peacebuilding efforts are driven and informed by a particular image of peacebuilding as the advancement of liberal-democratic ideals, it is all the more difficult to reflect on and discuss whether *other* goals should take priority and whether a more pluralistic reading of these liberal principles could be established as the baseline for peacebuilding efforts. There is, for example, a strong argument to be made that only when external actors allow for *liberal principles to emerge much more from and through* domestic debate and contestation – rather than being already defined by external actors – will peacebuilding efforts be sustainable and “owned” by the population in question. This would have to be discussed at a political and diplomatic level to effectuate changes in the modus operandi of peacebuilding.

ii) Based on the analysis above, the problem with peacebuilding is that there is too much emphasis on *building* – on the idea that the peace is there to be built by outsiders and their expertise rather than assisted, cultivated, facilitated and mediated. Highlighting facilitation, mediation and conflict resolution as core features



of peacebuilding would arguably take the edge off the arrogance of peacebuilding, and would help peacebuilders see the problem in a more nuanced and context specific way. In the current institutional set up of peacebuilding efforts at the UN, however, mediation, facilitation and local conflict resolution is emphasized largely in the phase *before* post-conflict peacebuilding kicks in, in the form of high-level peace talks and good offices functions of the UN. Moreover, both country specific knowledge and good offices functions, such as diplomatic negotiations and facilitation, is the purview of the Department of Political Affairs (DPA). Often, the working relationship between DPA and DPKO is suboptimal, owing to classic turf-battles for resources, competence and decision-making authority. Identifying mechanisms to both expand in-house country specific knowledge and bring the expertise on facilitation, mediation and conflict resolution to bear on how peace operations and peacebuilding are defined and organized may be one avenue to explore in more detail.

4

iii) One area that is ripe for efforts to redress this problem is the recruitment policies and not least training of individuals that are charged with planning, managing and implementing peacebuilding efforts. Developing new training modules, new best practices and operational guidelines would – over time – introduce a higher level of sensitivity about and reflection on the tensions and dilemmas involved in peacebuilding, not least with regards to ownership. By emphasizing the ideals of facilitation, mediation and conflict resolution in both training courses, in hiring decisions, and in operational guidelines, the organizational culture and established “ways of doing things” within key UN organizations may gradually evolve to be less “blind” and “arrogant”.

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