GLOBAL RESPONSES TO ARMED CONFLICT

The menacing multi-dimensionality of peacebuilding under conditions of state fragility

Fletcher D. Cox

Introduction: Global armed conflict patterns and approaches

On July 9, 2011, the Republic of South Sudan seceded from Sudan, becoming the world’s newest state. Hope for progress toward state formation and sustainable peace surrounded independence celebrations. Six years later, however, South Sudan now ranks as the world’s most fragile state (Messner, 2017). Even with a significant global peacebuilding effort, ethnic conflict and political violence, state-sponsored violence in disputed areas such as Abeyei and the Nuba Mountains, and humanitarian crises undermine the ability of South Sudan to build a functional, peaceful state.

State fragility, not only in the case of South Sudan, but across the globe, is a major driver of armed conflict (Carment et al., 2009; Marshall & Cole, 2011; Brinkerhoff, 2014). Most armed conflicts in the world today are not new “conflict onsets,” but rather conflict recurrences related to prior wars. Analysis from the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) of Uppsala Conflict Data Program’s (UCPD) most recent global dataset, for example, presents a very clear finding that war begets war (PRIO, 2017). Statistically, 60 percent of armed conflicts recur, and post-conflict peace, on average, lasts only seven years (Gates et al., 2017). In stark contrast to Charles Tilly’s classic theory that war-making built and strengthened states in Western Europe, modern armed conflicts do the exact opposite (Ayoob, 1996; Leander, 2004; Taylor & Botea, 2008). They destroy state institutions and create conditions conducive to conflict recurrence and deeply protracted armed violence.

State fragility generates powerful spillover effects for the global community. During the post-Cold war era, and into the 21st century, global demand has grown for international peacebuilding. International, regional, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are more deeply engaged than ever before in efforts to prevent, ameliorate, and contain armed violence (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2015). In 2017, the cases garnering the most global attention include Syria and Iraq, Yemen, Ukraine, South Sudan, DR Congo, Mali, and the Central African Republic along with the Greater Sahel, and Lake Chad Basin. These conflicts generate tremendous global costs due to the humanitarian impulse to alleviate human suffering, prevent genocide, and reduce gross violations of human rights when states fail to uphold their responsibility to protect (R2P) vulnerable
civilian populations (Weiss, 2006; Evans, 2009; Bellamy, 2015). In 2017, conflict responses consume 80 percent of all humanitarian resources (World Bank, 2017).

Global peacebuilding in the 21st century faces a major challenge. The global demand for conflict prevention is rising, yet the ability for wealthier donor states to coordinate, cooperate, and collaborate to share the global burden of governing conflict in fragile states is falling. Predominantly Western donor states have experienced declining public support for international burden sharing (Weiss, 2009). This occurs for a broad number of reasons, including negative reactions against refugee crises caused by conflict recurrence, and the relationship between protracted armed conflict and the increasing use of terrorist tactics. Social distance and unequal power relationships also can lead to “collective inter-group empathy failures” (Cikara et al., 2011; Hogeveen et al., 2014).

In 2016–17, for example, the United States became more isolationist, and less cooperative with the United Nations (UN) and other international organizations (IOs) involved in global conflict prevention efforts (Rogin, 2016). Domestic politics affect resources available for peacebuilding, as well as the legitimacy of international peacebuilding organizations (Keohane & Milner, 1996). “Donor fatigue” can create negative feedback loops, undermining the legitimacy and capacity of IOs such as the UN, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the African Union (AU), among others.

In the early 21st century, even with falling domestic political support for international institutions in many donor states, international peacebuilding actors and organizations continue to move forward with the broad aim of the consolidation of peace (Roeder & Rothchild, 2005). This goal is now most clearly articulated in the Global Goals for Sustainable Development (SDGs). SDG number 16 is to “promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies” (UN, 2017). This global agenda aims to overcome the aforementioned dilemmas of state fragility and armed conflict, and to mobilize international political support and financial resources for peace processes in fragile, conflict-affected countries.

To illustrate key concepts and international norms driving global peacebuilding efforts, this chapter describes and analyzes major peacebuilding policy frameworks among major IOs including the OECD, the World Bank, the UN G7+, and the UNDP. In particular, the chapter explains how “statebuilding” and “peacebuilding” have become deeply interrelated norms within the “global peacebuilding architecture” (de Coning & Stamnes, 2016). The concept of statebuilding triggered major debates among scholars and policymakers. Critical theorists in international relations, in particular, offered harsh criticisms of the approach (Pugh, 2005; Mac Ginty, 2008; Richmond, 2010). The statebuilding as peacebuilding debate, therefore, provides a platform for explaining key arguments from critical theory and related schools of thought (Lemay-Hébert, 2013).

Overall, the chapter argues that lessons learned from peacebuilding successes and failures drive innovation in peace and conflict research, and in peacebuilding praxis (Wang et al., 2005). As a result, global peacebuilding is highly multi-dimensional and complex, with a broad array of actors working to tailor peacebuilding approaches to very specific conflict contexts. In Anna Jarstad’s terms, understanding today’s “Varieties of Peace” involves understanding causes of “everyday peace,” as well as state–society relations, and domestic–international interactions (Jarstad et al., 2017). Even though international actors often encounter highly complex problems and dilemmas while working to build peace in conflict-affected countries (Paris & Sisk, 2009; Brinkerhoff, 2014), recent innovations in international peacebuilding now work to address known problems that can lead to failure. For example, the ongoing “turn to the local” (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Autesserre, 2014b), and efforts to study how timing and sequencing affect the durability of peace (Langer & Brown, 2016) create room for optimism for strengthening global peacebuilding norms and praxis.
The global peacebuilding architecture: Actors and norms

The global peacebuilding architecture includes a very broad array of actors, organizations, and international norms (Karns & Mingst, 2009). Unique regional conflicts and diverse local conflicts create variable operating conditions for peacebuilders that demand a broad set of tools. Peacebuilding agendas, therefore, are menacingly complex and multi-dimensional, drawing broadly on multiple arenas of praxis, including: negotiation and mediation, humanitarian aid and early recovery, human security, statebuilding, political economy and development, and democratization.

Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) provide a strong theoretical framework for thinking about norms in international peacebuilding. From their perspective, it is important to track norm “life cycles.” Ideas about what it takes to sustain peace “emerge,” reach a “tipping point,” and then start to “cascade” across multiple states and actors (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Some norms eventually become “institutionalized” at the global level, completing the full life cycle and becoming accepted “rules of the game” (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, pp. 895–9). The following section focuses on explaining how statebuilding and peacebuilding have become dominant norms in global peacebuilding policy and praxis (Haider & Strachan, 2014).

Global peacebuilding norms: Building state authority, capacity, and legitimacy

In international peacebuilding praxis, a dominant norm is that building states is essential for fostering resilience toward armed conflict. Building state resilience is a process that may occur from the “top-down,” and the “bottom up” (Mac Ginty & Firchow, 2016). The following section highlights major agenda-setting reports to show how IOs think about statebuilding as peacebuilding. The reports offer related approaches that, in Finnemore and Sikkink’s (1998) terms, provide evidence of expanding “organizational platforms” for the spread of international norms related to global peacebuilding.

First, the OECD (2008) statebuilding report titled From Fragility to Resilience argues that a state experiences fragility if there is an imbalance between society’s expectations and the state’s capacity to meet those expectations. Weak state–society relations yield very low capacity for the state to extract taxes. This undermines the ability of the state to provide basic welfare services for the population. A lack of state capacity undermines human security, and makes societies vulnerable to shocks that can increase vulnerability to armed conflict escalation (OECD, 2008).

Second, the OECD (2010) report titled Unpacking Complexity focuses on legitimacy and state fragility. In states with low capacity to meet social expectations via the provision of human security or the protection of “human capabilities,” citizens tend not to perceive the state as a legitimate source of authority (Nussbaum, 2011). Legitimacy can be “residual” or “embedded” due to historical circumstances, shaped by state performance (“output legitimacy”), shaped by social participation in political processes (“input legitimacy”), and even shaped by social recognition of alignment with global norms (“international legitimacy”) (OECD, 2010, pp. 9–10). The most recent OECD report on conflict and fragility, Hitting the Target, But Missing the Point, shows the duration of the theme of state legitimacy. Fragility will continue, it claims, without “donor support for inclusive and legitimate politics” (OECD, 2017, p. 1).

Security sector reform (SSR) and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) efforts within peace processes relate to the third dimension of statebuilding: authority. A state’s authority can be measured by its monopoly over the use of force, and its level of control of armed actors and vigilante groups (Krasner & Pascual, 2005). Capacity to collect taxes and the strength of the legal system also affect state authority. These factors affect the extent to which a state projects power and control over a certain territory (Anten et al., 2012).
Low state capacity, a lack of political authority, and low levels of legitimacy combine to cultivate weak political systems that lead to high levels of armed conflict vulnerability (Putzel, 2005, p. 4). The concept of fragility hinges upon these three inter-related forces that shape the overall ability of the state to prevent, contain, and govern conflict without external support and intervention. Sustainable peace, therefore, requires restoring authority, capacity, and legitimacy in conflict-affected states.

Fourth, the New Deal and the newly revised Stockholm Declaration draw attention to a fourth potential driver of global conflict vulnerability – external intervention itself (International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, 2011). Large-scale interventions are a key feature of the modern international system. Even if undertaken with the best intentions, peacebuilders have the potential to create political instability, exacerbate conflict dynamics, and increase economic inequalities (Cox & Sisk, 2017). For example, the UN rushed elections in Angola, increasing rebel group mobilization and triggering all-out civil war (Richmond & Franks, 2009). Similarly, humanitarian actors, without paying attention to local intergroup conflict dynamics, exacerbated war in Sri Lanka (Roque, 2011; Goodhand et al., 2011).

The longstanding “Do No Harm” agenda is a key norm that aims to prevent negative consequences (Anderson, 1999). The New Deal and the Stockholm Declaration represent the most recent thinking of international donors and the G7+ regarding how external interventions should be structured to make external intervention less likely to contribute to conflict recurrence. Building on the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005), the New Deal claims “country-led and country-owned transitions out of fragility,” and “national ownership” of development policy priorities are essential for sustainable peace (Easterly, 2008; OECD DCD-DAC, 2011). The principal logic of the New Deal and the Stockholm Declaration is that external actors are ineffective when they utilize their own structures, personnel, and leadership to accomplish short-term technical aid targets in lieu of committing to long-term processes of state formation and sustainable peace. There must be high levels of “focus” and “trust” within “global–local encounters” during peace processes (Zahar, 2012; Björkdahl & Höglund, 2013).

These global agendas help explain why contemporary peacebuilding policy thinking has shifted away from the static term “fragile state” toward more dynamic, process-oriented terms such as “fragility” and “situations of fragility.” Conflict-affected countries work to build peace under ever-changing, context-specific dynamics related to important “micro-dynamics” of war and peace (Kalyvas, 2006, 2012). The broad array of highly context-specific factors has not hindered international peacebuilders from trying to “unpack” the complex causes of state fragility in order to develop more effective approaches (OECD, 2010).

Global debates: Criticisms of the peacebuilding architecture

Multiple scholars are skeptical of the ability of external actors to adequately “unpack complexity.” Assessments of the primary interests that drive international actors to intervene in conflict-affected countries leave many analysts skeptical of the “liberal peacebuilding” enterprise (Mac Ginty 2008; Richmond, 2009; Höglund & Orjuela, 2012). The following section highlights how major schools of thought critique the statebuilding-as-peacebuilding agenda described above.

First, Barnett and Zürcher (2008) (Rational Choice Approach) employ game theory to model interactions among external peacebuilders, state elites, and rural elites within the initial peacebuilding phase of a statebuilding operation. They claim: “peacebuilders and local elites pursue their collective interest in stability and symbolic peacebuilding, creating the appearance of change while leaving largely intact existing state-society relations” (Barnett & Zürcher, 2008,
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In short, peacekeeping operations rarely create social change necessary for sustainable peace. They reinforce extant state–society relations, resulting in “co-optive peacebuilding.” External meddling, they claim, rarely changes domestic political structures that drive conflict.

Autesserre’s (2009) recent ethnography of international intervention in DR Congo builds a similar argument. She suggests international peacebuilding programs, at the local level, tend to create suspicion between international and local actors, mistrust, and weak and inefficient practices and behaviors that can lead to systematic program failures (Autesserre, 2009, 2014b). This evidence suggests statebuilding and peacebuilding remain strong ideals, yet in practice few IOs are really good at it, and most often fail to do the hard work of fostering inclusivity under pressures from donors to show quick results and shifting domestic politics.

Second, Chandler (2006) (Critical Theory) also is concerned with incentives, but at the international level. In his view, Western donor states have a large amount of power to effectively build peace in fragile states; however, they tend to deny the existence of such power. In the New Deal, for instance, donor power is ceded to “national ownership.” Donor states and IOs, in this arrangement, “appear less as external or coercive forces and more as facilitators, empowerers, and capacity-builders,” making it appear that, “non-Western states have ‘ownership’ of policies that are externally imposed and where it is the poorest and most excluded sections of non-Western societies that are the agents of policy” (Chandler, 2006, p. 178).

In other words, powerful governments contribute to global peacebuilding efforts only to maintain their own state legitimacy in line with international norms, and, at the same time, to dodge accountability for their own failures. The pursuit of domestic–international “partnership” described in the New Deal and the Stockholm Declaration is not an altruistic collective pursuit to build peace more effectively, but rather a cloak for the self-interests of the most powerful states, allowing them to make the excuse “we tried, but they failed” (Chandler, 2006, p. 166).

Third, Fearon and Laitin (2004) (Neo-Institutionalist Approach) view modern statebuilding operations as a form of international governance they term “neotreasuship” (Fearon & Laitin, 2004). Across cases such as Kosovo, East Timor, and Afghanistan, they identify a global statebuilding regime with three dimensions: (1) foreign jurisdiction over both domestic policy autonomy and primary economic functions vis-à-vis multiple and multi-dimensional actors; (2) a large, rapidly expanding set of legal mandates for intervention; and (3) short-termism as an operational principle (Fearon & Laitin, 2004).

Within this regime they identify four primary policy challenges: recruitment, coordination, accountability, and exit. For instance, in terms of accountability, IOs and NGOs are the “agents” of “principal” states. As agents, they are more accountable to their donors than to the societies they engage. This causes peacebuilders to spend more time, energy, and resources responding to external interests rather than to real needs of the state and the society. From their perspective, this results in highly ineffective engagement.

Richmond (2009) (Critical Theory) questions the ideology behind the concept of state fragility. He argues contemporary statebuilding theories and techniques were constructed within Western, mostly North American, “problem solving circles,” and are “ideologically motivated [and] an expression of liberal culture rather than universal norms” (Richmond, 2009, p. 324). For example, in Richmond’s view, the Stockholm Declaration aims to foster “national ownership,” yet merely creates another “corridor of power” in which Western governments’ resources are offered “to an elaborate structuration of sometimes predatory elites – international and local – but not to the general populations” (Richmond, 2009, p. 170). State institutions created with external support claim to help those who suffer most from conflict, yet, in reality, have almost no impact on the everyday lives of citizens living within “peacebuilding experiments” (Autesserre, 2009, 2014a).
Global peacebuilding norms: A case for cautious optimism

On the one hand, international peacebuilding organizations try to make a case that building more resilient states on a global scale is both feasible and desirable. Critics, on the other hand, claim powerful states and IOs do not have just motives and adequate knowledge to implement real solutions to state fragility. Whose claim is more convincing?

Critics draw attention to power, interests, and ethical dilemmas at work in modern peacebuilding operations. However, these approaches risk employing over-generalized assumptions about statebuilders’ interests and may fail to adequately account for the fact that state fragility remains an extremely complex, multi-dimensional concept. “Liberal peace” processes are much less static, cohesive, and hegemonic than critics claim (Mac Ginty & Firchow, 2016). The emerging global peacebuilding architecture now embraces complexity, multi-dimensionality, and context specificity (Paris, 2010).

Barnett and Zürcher’s (2008) argument that situations of fragility are highly resistant to change due to the nature of incentive structures within peacebuilding processes is an important insight. Reforming the structures of aid delivery, fostering greater trust in peacebuilding partnerships, and utilizing local knowledge as the basis for peacebuilding programming may not always reshape domestic political incentive structures. Their logic, however, is too narrow. The idea that state fragility remains change-averse due to the “rational choices” of elites has limited applicability.

Political economy scholarship provides a stronger framework for understanding why some conflict-affected countries, even with large amounts of external aid, remain fragile. Fragile states have very weak tax systems as well as very large informal economic sectors. These sectors are untaxed, which limits the accumulation of state resources required to increase social expenditures needed to increase state legitimacy. The lack of state capacity to extract resources and then redistribute them via welfare mechanisms such as cash transfers, higher levels of education, health care for the poor, creates high levels of income inequality and poverty. Laborers in the informal sector face very large collective action dilemmas, making them prone to “prebendalism,” which leads to fractionalized political systems (Joseph, 1983; Rudra, 2003). While low levels of capacity, legitimacy, and authority create distinctive syndromes that, indeed, are very hard to transform, elite behavior is only one part of a larger set of inter-related problems.

Chandler’s (2006) main claim is that modern domestic–international aid relationships conceal the real power and interests of donor states. Is global peacebuilding marked by real instances of international cooperation and burden sharing, or deep fragmentation with hidden objectives? Chandler (2006) could be correct that some external actors are only interested in gaining the legitimacy that comes with pretending to care about fragile states and protecting their status when statebuilding fails. However, this type of behavior is not universal. The interests, motivations, and normative commitments of donor states vary considerably.

For example, Hyden (2008) attempts to account for variation among states’ ideological approaches with a taxonomy of approaches to statebuilding. In his model, different states display different levels of commitment to economic development and to improving governance. “Substantivists” engage in fragile situations with a high commitment to development and a low commitment to governance, “Idealists” are committed to both development and governance goals, “Realists” have low levels of commitment to both development and governance, and “Formalists” have a high commitment to governance but a low commitment to development (Hyden, 2008).

To illustrate, the donor “great powers” (e.g., Sweden, Norway) and many EU countries are idealistic and generally have few qualms about providing direct government support to foster
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national ownership, as prioritized in the New Deal and the Stockholm Declaration. In contrast, China, as an emerging donor, provides aid with very little interest in the quality of governance (Knack et al., 2011). Intentions and interests in statebuilding and peacebuilding vary considerably among powerful donor states.

Fearon and Laitin’s (2004) key insight is that there are clear governance principles that impact how external actors operate in fragile contexts. They highlight sovereignty by multiple international actors, emerging legal mandates for intervention, and short-termism. However, there are other emerging norms that are just as important to consider. The New Deal and the Stockholm Declaration demonstrate that peacebuilding norms have advanced in the past decade. The “Do No Harm” agenda has become a key norm that statebuilders are expected to uphold. “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) is also on its way to becoming a global norm. The OECD’s “Ten fragile states principles” also are becoming more relevant (Kurtenbach, 2007). There is substantial evidence for an emerging set of international principles, norms, and expectations, that are being revised and strengthened as international actors learn from failures and successes, gleaning “lessons-learned” along the way. These norms may help overcome some of the dilemmas Fearon and Laitin (2004) describe, especially short-termism.

Richmond’s (2009, 2010) strongest claim is that the global statebuilding-as-peacebuilding project has become an illiberal project, with IOs imposing a Western form of order upon fragile states. This, however, may oversimplify the motivations, interests, and functions of actors involved in peacebuilding, and risk undervaluing the interesting ways contemporary scholars attempt to deal with local, informal institutions and so-called “hybrid governance” structures. There is a considerable literature emerging to work through the issues Richmond raises (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Bratton, 2007). Boege et al., for example, describe the nature of hybridity in fragile states as “diverse and competing authority structures, sets of rules, logics of order, and claims to power co-exist, overlap, interact, and intertwine, combining elements of introduced Western models of governance and elements stemming from local Indigenous traditions of governance and politics” (Boege et al., 2009, p. 10).

External actors do not always have interests that undermine local interests. Instead, they often become embedded in the fragile context in ways that reshape any supposed external–internal division. Determining what amounts to “effective” peacebuilding is not merely a technical question. It depends to a large degree upon good governance on the part of both internal and external actors. There are certainly challenges, problems, and dilemmas in statebuilding efforts, yet they are not always as detrimental and as ethically bankrupt as Richmond claims (Paris, 2010).

Conclusion

Ultimately, it is not a given that external actors, even with extensive resources or advanced theoretical knowledge, can actually “build peace,” especially in short timeframes, and under highly complex operating conditions. With such a high degree of complexity and multi-dimensionality, it is very difficult, and perhaps even impossible, to predict with any accuracy the actual long-term impact of any given peacebuilding process. Even though international peacebuilding efforts will not always lead to resilience, they also are not always to blame for “reinforcing weak statehood” or “neo-colonial imperialism,” as critical theorists suggest. Complexity does not merely operate to hide deceptive motives and leave room for powerful states to escape responsibility for failed interventions.

The broad array of norms and practices associated with international peacebuilding remain key public goods. They are worthy goals for helping limit violence following civil conflict and for creating conditions for human security and development. Emerging norms for more
effective intervention create room for optimism, especially the recent emphasis on the “local,” applications of Do No Harm principles, and the R2P. International efforts to improve state capacity, legitimacy, and authority, though increasingly under pressure due to declining support for international cooperation, still have important roles to play in creating conditions more conducive for better governance in fragile, conflict-affected countries.

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