

United Nations *Peace and Progress*, Volume 1 (1), pp. 47-57.

<http://upp.unu.edu/>



TRACK TWO: COMMENTARY

Cluster 1: Peace, Security, and Human Rights

‘Local Ownership’ in Peacebuilding – a Premature Rhetoric?

WONG, Pearly[†]

ABSTRACT

The concept of “local ownership” was endorsed in peace operations in 2001. However, its recognition and advocacy has not been followed by equal analysis, explanation or scrutiny in policy statements. This paper attempts to look at the limitations and practicality of ‘local ownership’ in peacebuilding efforts. Four major issues of local peacebuilding are discussed: the definitional problem, difficulty in achieving consensus, lack of capacity and resources and conflicts with the liberal peacebuilding model. At the moment, the notion of local ownership in the field is found to be premature. Many gaps still exist in the concept of local ownership. The concept requires substantial reconsideration and clarification regarding its definition, purpose and practicality before any significant contribution to the field of peacebuilding is conceivable.

KEYWORDS: *Peacebuilding, Local Ownership, Bottom Up, Sustainability*

I. INTRODUCTION

The term “local ownership” was widely used by international organizations throughout 1980s and 1990s, and recognized as a key concept for development aid in 1996, when the Development and Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) called for an inclusive approach that respects local ownership of the development process (OECD-DAC, 1996). The concept of “local ownership” was endorsed in peace operations in 2001, when UN Secretary General Kofi Annan noted that sustainable peace and development “can only be achieved by the local population itself; the role of the United Nations is merely to facilitate the process that seeks to dismantle the structures of violence and create the conditions conducive to durable peace and sustainable development” (United Nations, 2001). The Joint Utstein Study, a key document at that time, propagated the

[†] Pearly Wong recently graduated from the United Nations University. She is interested in a broad range of global issues and has done her MSc thesis on the social aspects of agricultural water management in Sri Lanka.

same position: “It is important that partner countries be in the driver’s seat as far as peace building efforts are concerned, especially in post-conflict situations” (GTZ, 2003).

The rationale of propagating local ownership is to obtain greater efficiency and sustainability in peacebuilding activities (Mateos, 2011). With local ownership, peacebuilding activities are expected to encounter minimal resistance by the local actors; solutions that come from within are also considered more appropriate for application to specific local conditions (Van Brabant, 2010). The efforts and effects of peacebuilding activities with local ownership are considered to be more sustainable in the medium to longer term since the commitment to the action and the results is not dependent on the presence and dominant financial support of external actors (Van Brabant, 2010). Another reason for propagating local ownership has to do with ethics and legitimacy (Mateos, 2011). Peacebuilding reform has been criticized for its lack of sovereignty. It is said to be an activity controlled by outsiders and imposed on post-conflict nations (Donais, 2009). Local ownership with its moral notion of respecting self-determination thus comes very much to the rescue from this accusation.

Many have been paying lip service to the concept of local ownership in the field of peacebuilding, including international donors and key policy documents on peacebuilding from the UN, the World Bank and the OECD-DAC (Sending, 2009). However, this recognition and advocacy has not been followed by parallel analysis, explanation or scrutiny. This paper aims to problematize the concept of “local ownership” by examining the ambiguity and contentions within its definition. The paper will also question the practicality of implementing the concept in post-conflict nations and whether it can potentially produce different outcomes from its intent. The paper will then highlight its contradictions with the dominant doctrine of “liberal peacebuilding,” which carries tenets such as liberal democracy, liberal human rights, market values, the integration of societies into globalization and the centralized secular state, which are not necessarily universal (or universally applicable) values (Newman, Paris & Richmond, 2009). The paper concludes that “local ownership” is at best, a premature rhetoric that requires substantial reconsideration.

II. DEFINITIONAL PROBLEM

What exactly is local ownership? The concept is very vague as local ownership can mean different things for different actors. There is no concrete meaning of it when its implication is being discussed in policy papers or even in conceptual frameworks where the importance of local ownership is highlighted (Reich, 2006).

First of all, who are the “locals”? Are they the state actors of the post-conflict country, the civil society organizations, or the indigenous peoples? Different “locals” can result in very different priorities and interests and pose different problems. There is rarely any discussion on which people or groups to which this label actually refers (Diamond 1999; Peck 1999; van Tongeren 1998; van Tongeren 1999). Kuehne (2003). This points out that a major difficulty in the field is to identify local actors who are simultaneously “relevant, reliable, and willing.” What is the constituent of local ownership in failed states where there is, by definition, no political class available to take this ownership in a responsible way? (Kuehne, 2003) The local political elites left standing might initially seem to be the most obvious or convenient locals. However, they can also be rather problematic, particularly if the manner in which the elites rose to prominence was illegitimate, especially in the context of armed conflict. In war-torn societies the government is usually fragile, lacks legitimacy and faces multiple

‘LOCAL OWNERSHIP’ IN PEACEBUILDING – A PREMATURE RHETORIC?

confronting forces (Shinoda, 2008). While local political elites are in the best positions to stake an ownership claim in the peace process, they might possess hidden agendas and cannot always be held accountable in committing themselves towards nation building (Donais, 2009). In Sierra Leone for example, local ownership between 2002 and 2007 had a limited nature in the sense that while local elites were involved in some ways in the design and implementation of reforms, it is evident that other local actors such as civil society organizations and local communities, were excluded from consultation processes (Mateos, 2011). Decision-making within small policy circles of international and national government actors is not always trusted by other local actors. This threatens the legitimacy and thus the implementation of the policy or decision made (Van Brabant, 2010).

Due to this factor, there is an increasing discussion to alter the primary focus from political elites to civil society, which is viewed as being more prone to commit themselves to nation buildings without problems (Donais, 2009). However, there is an overestimation of the after-war condition of civil society, its independence, and “localness”. Rather than being a manifestation of local ownership, the involvement of local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can be viewed as an extra channel to exercise external influence. As Jenny Pearce (2005) noted in the Guatemalan context, outside funders have viewed local civil society as “a tool for processes whose parameters were decided by donors and which turned NGOs and social organizations into projects for an externally driven agenda.” NGOs are financially dependent on donors, rendering total self-determination rather difficult. Moreover, civil society can sometimes be politicized in itself.

For instance, in Sri Lanka during the civil war, the civil society is to a large extent ethnically divided, and popular mobilization has been nationalist and violent rather than pro-peace. The space of political protest is often limited to Tamils, who are viewed suspiciously by the government as potential terrorists in connections with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a rebellion force which demanded sovereignty. Many Tamils primarily desire justice over other causes and this has restricted their movements in peace organizations, which are dominated by the Sinhalese. Tamils instead are more involved in human rights-related activities (Orjuela, 2003).

The second puzzle lies in the level of participation required to be termed ownership. To what extent do the locals have to be involved in the process to qualify as such? For Edomwonyi (2003), local ownership means that the reconstruction effort is locally conceived and led. For Boughton and Mourmouras (2002), it requires the local actors to appreciate the benefits of the policies and to accept responsibility for them, leaving aside those who conceived the policies in the first place. Chesterman (2007) has stated that there is no explicit and coherent meaning of ownership in post-conflict situation. As in natural resource management, participation can be a form of manipulation (passive participation merely to show others that locals are involved), information giving, consultation, or it can be functional, interactive or even self-mobilization (Pretty, 1995). The meaning is less important than indicated by the term ownership. International actors will promote local ownership according to different mandates, perceptions and interests at their headquarters (Sending, 2010).

Van Brabant (2010) has categorized different levels of local participation: public consultation, public participation and public acceptance without participation, and analyzes them towards the goal of creating a sense of ownership. (Note that Van Brabant has assumed “locals” to be the public in general). Public consultations, e.g. a public opinion poll, provide a feel of public

opinions, but these opinions are often based on insufficient information and the act is often viewed cynically for coming after the major decisions have already been made, or would not be taken seriously if the results contradict the elites' opinions. Hence, it is said to be insufficient in providing a sense of ownership. Genuine public participation, on the other hand, requires a very daunting, long and often expensive process, though the results can be rewarding. However, genuine public participation has to have a limited amount of participants. How many participants exactly are good enough remains the question. Besides, due to the enormous amount of decisions to be made in nation-building, genuine public participation is often not feasible.

III. CONSENSUS-BUILDING

In the field of natural resource management, local management usually works better when the community size is smaller and the resource boundary is fixed (Ostrom, 1990). When the size gets bigger, there will be higher heterogeneity, lower cohesion and different interests. It is realistic to expect that there are no homogenous views in any given society, and even less so in divided societies. Among the local actors, there are not only conflicting interests but also different perspectives and proposals (Van Brabant, 2010). There is a balance needed between involving the sufficient amount of right people in promoting a sense of ownership and feasibility of achieving consensus. Successful peace processes must almost necessarily end in negotiated hybridity, ideally achieved through consensus-building along a horizontal axis of relevant local actors and a vertical axis spanning grassroots civil society, the national government and the broader international community (Donais, 2009). Unfortunately, this is often too daunting and time-consuming a task to be completed within a limited time frame of peacebuilding.

Even worse than conflicting interests, however, some local actors might not possess the will in the very first place to attain sustainable peace, as they might have benefited much more from continuous war. Indeed, the very notion of local ownership lies in an implicit and dangerous assumption that local actors will actually make use of such space to build peace. Tangible tensions often arise between a commitment to substantive local ownership and a commitment to achieve sustainable peace (Donais, 2009). A locally-owned peacebuilding process requires identification of local actors who are willing to exercise ownership to build peace, which is not always easy, or these people might be found to be in an extremely weak position (Shinoda, 2008). For instance, in Afghanistan, the international community, committed to a light foot approach, turned to notorious Afghan commanders and warlords who had been marginalized during the Taliban years, designating them to leadership positions. These commanders raced to establish their own authority, allowing a culture of impunity to take root (International Crisis Group, 2006). As Scheye and Peake (2005) pointed out, local actors are not necessarily benevolent stakeholders but might regard reform as a threat to their power, livelihoods, and practices. These are so-called "spoilers" in peace processes, distinguished between limited, greedy and total spoilers, each of which has to be managed in a specific way, either by incorporating into the peacebuilding process, isolating or neutralizing them (Stedman, 1997).

In short, although not impossible, meaningful local ownership demands much more than what the international actors has been attempting so far. It becomes a problem of both will and practicality. It is not just about external actors wanting to exit and finish their mission soon,

but also about the post-conflict nation deserving a strong foundation as soon as possible to enable future development and prosperity. Further consideration and discussion is needed to decide whether complicating the process in order to have local ownership as an end in itself is worthwhile and necessary.

IV. CAPACITY AND RESOURCES

Even if locals possess the will to exercise ownership, they are possibly lacking political, economic and social capacity in terms of human, institutional, material and financial resources to perform essential roles (Shinoda, 2008). Organizing multiparty elections, a thorough reform of the security sector or developing processes of decentralization are demanding tasks for a fragile post-war country (Mateos, 2011). This would justify external interventions for practical purposes, especially in the early stages when the civil society is hardly left with any functioning systems after war, while local elites are highly militarized and factionalized. This inevitably minimizes the local input (Miall, Ramsbotham & Woodhouse 1999).

For instance, in the case of Sierra Leone, most of the donors recognized that at least in the beginning, many of the peacebuilding documents and strategies were designed outside the country due to the lack of local capacity and resources (Mateos, 2011). Unfortunately, this is usually the crucial time when key elements of the post-war settlement are locked in at the time of the signing of a peace accord and the broad outlines of post-conflict political and economic arrangements are determined. In such cases local ownership rhetoric’s projection that locals are the ones in control of everything would be an exaggeration, if not hypocritical.

Realizing the limitation of local actors, capacity building becomes an almost necessary element for local ownership. Capacity building, if being defined as instilling the ability to put in place liberal reforms in the way that is understood by external partners, will take enormous patience and time. An optimist would argue that ownership can be transferred to the locals once the necessary capacities have been developed. High local ownership thus follows “capacity-strengthening.” However, capacity-development itself has to provide a sense of ownership too (Van Brabant, 2010) in avoid being taken as a way for imposition of external ways and norms. Capacity building driven by external actor itself is in potential contradiction with the notion of local ownership.

Faced with such challenges, external actors are often in the dilemma of retreating to merely technical, achievable tasks of capacity building, or engaging themselves more deeply with what might be called capacity disabling. Often in peacebuilding efforts, effective capacity building requires parallel efforts to disable domestic political power structures or local norms that obstruct effective establishment of new institutions (since new institutions threaten the position of those who are powerful in old institutions). Due to this almost necessary coupling of post-conflict capacity building and local capacity disabling, substantive local ownership is difficult to attain (Donais, 2009).

Due to the lack of local resources in a post-conflict situation, local actors are strongly dependent on external funding. The asymmetrical relationship can be a large obstacle for locals to freely pursue what they aspire as there is a large degree of dependency. Conditionality is for instance, a way of ensuring local’s behaviour to reform in the way that

external actors consider. Even if the project explicitly aims at creating local ownership, donors hinder substantive local ownership by controlling the budget, providing the benchmark and designing participatory program implementation (Mateos, 2011).

V. CONFLICTS WITH LIBERAL PEACE

The constituting elements advocated in liberal peacebuilding e.g. democratization, economic liberalization, neoliberal development, human rights, and the rule of law (Richmond, 2007) have been so widely adopted and propagated as non-negotiable principles that, in a sense, disregard society-specific history and politics (Mateos, 2011). However, the promotion of liberal democracy and market economics in volatile conflict-prone societies are increasingly contested. In addition to the question of legitimacy using top-down mediation between powerbrokers and building state institutions towards infrastructure rebuilding and stability, the imposition of liberal peace principles as “principles true in every country” ignores the fundamental causes of conflicts and suggests to some that the nature of the “peace” being built is not really inclusive or contextually sensitive (Sending, 2009). This perpetuates deep and unresolved internal contradictions in the peacebuilding project.

In reality, there are cases where domestic cultural and political practices e.g. clientelism, corruption or treatment of women, run counter to the norms promoted in liberal peacebuilding. In such cases, trade-offs are necessary between making peace and “good” governance. Decisions are to be made about which domestic practices should be allowed for sustainable peace without compromising the universal norms (Donais, 2009). Situation like this prove that local culture matters, especially amidst the propagation of local ownership. Outsiders cannot simply dismiss local perspectives or recreate them in their own image. As Duffey (2000) noted, the discourse of conflict resolution “has principally relegated cultural specificity to the background and diminished, even rejected, the importance of the diverse cultural milieus that conflict is embedded in.”

VI. CONCLUSION

The concept of “ocal ownership” is a premature and contested one, given that there are still many gaps in existence as discussed above. Its translation into implementation has also been slow and lacking (Pouligny, 2009), demonstrating the practical difficulty in its application. In addition, the conceptual risks being abused as a tool to increase hypocritical legitimacy and mask donors’ imposition, or works as a convenient excuse for early exit by donors. Although “local ownership” might have had its own virtuous intentions, it will remain problematic so long as the many issues highlighted in this paper are left unaddressed. The concept requires substantial reconsideration and clarification regarding its definition, purpose and practicality before any significant contribution to the field of peacebuilding is conceivable.

WORKS CITED

- Boughton, J. & Mourmouras, A., 2002, "Is Policy Ownership an Operational Concept?" New York, USA: International Monetary Fund
- Chesterman, S., 2007, "Ownership in Theory and in Practice: Transfer of Authority in UN Statebuilding Operations", *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 1(1): 3-26
- Diamond, L., 1999, "Multi-Track Diplomacy in the 21st century". In *People Building Peace. 35 inspiring stories from around the world*, edited by State of the World Forum, 77-86, The Hague, Netherlands: European Centre for Conflict Prevention
- Donais, T., 2009, "Empowerment or Imposition? Dilemmas of Local Ownership in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Processes", *Peace & Change* 34(1), 3-26
- Doyle, M. & Sambanis, N., 2006, "Making war and building peace: United Nations peace operations." Princeton, USA: Princeton University Press
- Duffey, T., 2000, "Cultural Issues in Contemporary Peacekeeping", *International Peacekeeping* 7(1):142-168
- Edomwonyi, O., 2003, "The Importance of Local Ownership of the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Process", *Conflict Trends* 4: 43
- International Crisis Group, 2006, "Countering Afghanistan's Insurgency: No Quick Fixes" *Crisis Group Asia Report No. 123*. Brussels, Belgium: Author. Accessed May 13th, 2013 http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/123_countering_afghanistans_insurgency.ashx
- Kievelitz, U., Kruk, G. & Freiters, N., 2003, "Joint Utstein Study of Peacebuilding - National Report from Germany." Eschborn, Germany: Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit. Accessed April 16th, 2013. http://www.ceipaz.org/images/contenido/Joint%20Utstein%20study%20of%20peacebuilding%20-%20national%20report%20on%20Germany_ENG.pdf
- Krause, K. & Jutersonke, O., 2005, "Peace, Security and Development in Post-Conflict Environments," *Security Dialogue* 36(4): 459.
- Kuehne, W., 2003, "Post-Conflict Reconstructing and War-Shattered Societies – What Actually is the Problem? What can be Done?" Unpublished Draft Paper Prepared for the UN Foundation, New York, in preparation for the report of the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Chance 2004.
- Mateos, O., 2011, "Local Ownership and Liberal Peacebuilding: From Rhetoric to Practice? Sierra Leone as a Case Study" Paper presented at the European Conference on African Studies, Uppsala, Sweden, June 15-18. Accessed June 2012 <http://www.aegis-eu.org/archive/ecas4/ecas-4/panels/1-20/panel-3/Oscar-Mateos.pdf>
- Miall, H., Ramsbotham, O. & Woodhouse, T., 2011, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, Cambridge, UK: Polity

Newman, E., Paris, R., & Richmond, O., 2009, "Introduction" , In *New Perspectives on Liberal Peacebuilding*, edited by Edward Newman, Roland Paris, Oliver P. Richmond, 3-25. Tokyo, Japan: United Nations University Press.

Orjuela, C., 2003, "Building Peace in Sri Lanka: A Role for Civil Society?" *Journal of Peace Research* 40(2): 195.

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) - Development Assistance Committee (DAC), 1996, "Shaping the 21st Century: The Contribution of Development Co-operation." Accessed April 12th, 2013 at <http://www.oecd.org/dac/2508761.pdf>

Ostrom, E., 1990, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Actions*. New York, USA: Cambridge University Press.

Pearce, J., 2005, "The International Community and Peacebuilding", *Development* 48(3):47

Peck, C., 1999, "A More Strategic Partnership for Preventing and Resolving Conflict", In *Searching for Peace in Africa. An overview of conflict prevention and management activities*, edited by Monique Mekenkamp, Paul van Tongeren and Hans van de Veen, 39-45. Dublin, Ireland: International Books.

Pietz, T. & Carlowitz, L. von., 2007, "Local Ownership in Peacebuilding Processes in Failed States," Workshop Report from Experts' Meeting, Centre for International Peace Operations, Berlin, Germany, April 20-21. Accessed May 15th, 2012. http://www.zif-berlin.org/fileadmin/uploads/analyse/dokumente/veroeffentlichungen/Local_Ownership_Workshop_Report_Dezember_07.pdf

Pouligny, B., 2009, "Supporting Local Ownership in Humanitarian Action", *Humanitarian Policy Paper Series 109*. Berlin, Germany: Center for Transatlantic Relations and Global Public Policy Institute. Accessed May 17th, 2012. http://www.gppi.net/fileadmin/gppi/GPPiPPR_local_ownership_2009.pdf

Pretty, J. N., 1995, "Regenerating Agriculture: Policies and Practice for Sustainability and Self-Reliance." Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press.

Reich, H., 2006, "Local Ownership" in Conflict Transformation Projects: Partnership, Participation or Patronage?" *Berghof Occasional Paper No. 27*. Berlin, Germany: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management. Accessed May 17th, 2012. <http://edoc.vifapol.de/opus/volltexte/2011/2544/pdf/boc27e.pdf>

Richmond, O., 2007, "Emancipatory Forms of Human Security and Liberal Peacebuilding," *International Journal* 62(3): 462.

Richmond, O. & Franks, J., 2001, "Liberal Peacebuilding in Timor Leste: The Emperor's New Clothes?" *International Peacekeeping* 15(2): 185-200

'LOCAL OWNERSHIP' IN PEACEBUILDING – A PREMATURE RHETORIC?

"UN Secretary General's Report: No Exit without Strategy: Security Council Decision-making and the Closure or Transition of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations." Apr, 2001. Accessed May 15, 2013 <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/PKO%20S%202001%20394.pdf>

Scheye, E. & Peake, G., 2005, "Unknotting Local Ownership". In *After Intervention: Public Security Management in Post-Conflict Societies – From Intervention to Sustainable Local Ownership*, edited by Anja H Ebnöther & Philipp H. Fluri, 235-260, Geneva, Switzerland: Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces

Sending, O. J., 2010, "Introduction." In *Learning to Build a Sustainable Peace: Ownership and Everyday Peacebuilding*, edited by Ole Jacob Sending, 1-5, Bergen, Norway: Chr. Michelsen Institute

Shinoda, H., 2008, "The Difficulty and Importance of Local Ownership and Capacity Development in Peacebuilding" *Hiroshima Peace Science* 30: 95-115

Stedman, S., 1997, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes", *International Security* 22(2): 5-53

Van Brabant, K. 2010, "Peacebuilding How? Broad Local Ownership." Geneva, Switzerland: International Peace Alliance. Assessed June 20th, 2012 http://www.interpeace.org/publications/doc_download/143-peacebuilding-how-broad-local-ownership-english

Van Tongeren, P., 1998, "Exploring the Local Capacity for Peace – The Role of NGOs." In *Prevention and Management of Violent Conflicts: An International Directory*, 21-26, Utrecht, Netherlands : European Platform for Conflict Prevention and Transformation

Van Tongeren, P., 1999, "Some Reflections on Peace-Building." In *People Building Peace* *People Building Peace*, 124-133, The Hague, Netherlands: European Centre for Conflict Prevention.