

# Construing Top-down as Bottom-up: The Governmental Co-option of Peacebuilding “From Below”

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## ABSTRACT

Since the mid-1990s, the authoritarian character of international peacebuilding operations has come under increasing criticism. In response, the United Nations, international financial institutions, bilateral aid agencies and international non-governmental organizations have worked to incorporate “bottom-up” strategies into their existing programmes. However, this incorporation of bottom-up peacebuilding has been a co-option rather than adoption of what had been a critical agenda. The resulting peacebuilding programmes can be usefully understood through Foucault’s notion of “governmentality”. This article examines the shifting rhetoric of conventional peacebuilding operations and applies an analytics of governmentality to a case study in Afghanistan.

As the Cold War came to an end at the turn of the 1990s, the United Nations (UN) was freed of the constraints of a bipolar international order. It was thus able to expand its mandate to engage in large-scale state-building operations within countries newly emerging from civil war. These missions involved what came to be known as comprehensive peacebuilding, initially understood as post-conflict reconstruction by a UN trusteeship of the infrastructure and institutions needed to establish liberal market democracies.

Critics, however, decried this “top-down” approach to peacebuilding as authoritarian (Chopra 2000; Paris 2002). They proposed instead an alternative whereby individuals affected by violence would be supported to voice their own diagnoses of, and advance their own strategies to deal with, the violence they faced (Curle 1994; Lederach 1995). This “bottom-up” approach to peacebuilding was soon incorporated into large-scale post-conflict reconstruction operations. However, the transformative agenda included within bottom-up peacebuilding—as initially articulated—was largely excluded when the concept was incorporated into post-conflict governance. This exclusion was effected by construing the target community not as a source of critical diagnosis and strategic action, but

rather as a circumscribed locus wherein lay both the causes and solutions to the violence it faced. Thus, as I argue here, the “mainstreaming” of bottom-up peacebuilding is best understood as the co-option rather than adoption of what had been a critical agenda.

The co-option of bottom-up peacebuilding can be most effectively understood through the framework of what Michel Foucault (1991) termed “governmentality”. By this he meant a manner of liberal government whereby the sovereign authority works through the freedoms of its citizens to achieve specific finalities in support of what it deems the common good. There is, of course, nothing fundamentally pernicious about attempts to resolve disputes within communities without resorting to violence. However, such attempts become problematic when community-level mechanisms for resolving conflict are co-opted to achieve other finalities of government. And they become especially problematic where the specific finalities deviate from the expressed interests of those being governed.

In the case of post-conflict reconstruction this contradiction is most commonly manifest in the implementation of particular neoliberal policies which exacerbate the economic inequalities that lie at the heart of so much contemporary armed conflict. Insofar as these policies seek to establish a new post-war neoliberal order, “reconstruction” has actually involved constructing something that was never there before.

Yet, whereas conventional peacebuilding models have construed violence as an aberrant event, subsequent critical responses have construed it as solely a symptomatic effect of a generalised neoliberal system of governance, at the state or international level. Taking a fundamentally oppositional stance, critical responses, as voiced by Mark Duffield (1997) and others, have so far failed to provide any practicable strategies for direct solidarist engagement with those affected by violence. Between these two extremes—technical governmental intervention and staunch opposition—it is possible, I believe, to reclaim a transformative agenda that allows for direct engagement and strategic action. However, in light of the important critiques by Duffield and others, this would require avoiding co-option as a tactic of government in the service of specific finalities that contradict the expressed interests of those affected by violence. Such an approach would allow for solidarist engagement by external actors to address the more immediate and proximate causal factors of violence, as diagnosed by those affected.

In order to illustrate the problematic co-option of bottom-up peacebuilding into large-scale post-conflict (re)construction, this paper is organised as follows. First, in the following section I examine the origins of conventional peacebuilding as a form of neoliberal state-building and summarise the initial critiques that arose regarding its authoritarian character. I then examine bottom-up peacebuilding and

its incorporation into conventional peacebuilding operations. Following this, I frame community peacebuilding as a tactic of government and apply an analytics of governmentality to a case study of community peacebuilding in Afghanistan. I then engage with some critical responses to community peacebuilding as situated within a broader neoliberal development agenda. Finally, I suggest some limitations of the critical responses of Duffield and others and propose possible steps to move beyond a restrictive oppositional stance.

### From Top-down to Bottom-up

The origins of the Liberal Peace Thesis (also known as the Democratic Peace Theory) are conventionally traced to the arguments of early liberal thinkers such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant. In his 1795 essay *Perpetual Peace*, Kant (2010) argued that most citizens of a republic would surely opt to avoid war whenever possible. An international system comprised of liberal democracies would therefore be the most effective arrangement to prevent the emergence of violent international conflict. Although Kant's argument was focused on peace *between* liberal democracies, the thesis was later adapted by others to argue that violent conflicts were also less likely *within* such polities. This dual notion of the Liberal Peace Thesis was most famously advanced by Woodrow Wilson—privileging American-style free-market democracy—as part of his post-World War I efforts to establish the League of Nations (Paris 2004: 40). However, the collapse of the League of Nations and the onset of World War II foreclosed the widespread implementation of Wilson's plan for global democracy promotion.

It was not until the end of the Cold War that liberal market democracy, as a political ideology, achieved clear hegemonic status internationally, substantially displacing socialist and dependency theory models of appropriate international orders (Duffield 2001: 23-26). Indeed, it was at this time that Francis Fukuyama (2006 [1992]) published *The End of History and the Last Man*, arguing that historical debates and conflicts over competing ideologies had ceased with the collapse of the Soviet Union, leaving liberal market democracy reigning supreme, having vanquished all other contenders to the dustbin of history.

Amidst an apparent void of ideological challengers in the early 1990s, the UN, international financial institutions (IFIs), bilateral aid agencies and international “non-governmental” organisations (INGOs) were able to advance a comprehensive framework for (re)constructing the institutions of liberal market democracies within countries newly emerging from violent internal conflict. The emergent “peacebuilding” paradigm was affirmed in Boutros Boutros-Ghali's *An Agenda for Peace* (United Nations 1992). As outlined in the UN report, peacebuilding was to be understood as a form of post-conflict reconstruction

involving “rebuilding the institutions and infrastructures of nations torn by civil war and strife” (Art. 15). The aim of such operations was to “identify and support the structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict” (Art. 21). The various finalities subsumed within this framework included establishing institutions deemed necessary to maintain (electoral) democratisation, human rights protection, the rule of law, a strong civil society and neoliberal economic reform (Richmond and Franks 2009: 3). Although such state-building is fundamentally political in character, international peacebuilding interventions in war-torn countries have conventionally been described as “technical assistance” (Paris 2004: 13).

Alongside the implementation of an increasing number of UN-led peacebuilding missions, scholars, practitioners and those affected by interventions began to voice critiques about the authoritarian character of these operations. The macro-level peacebuilding epitomised by the institution-building projects of the UN, IFIs and bilateral aid agencies was deemed to be “imbued with self-interest” (Murithi 2009: 8). UN operations in post-conflict countries were seen as new forms of trusteeship implementing an updated version of the colonial-era “*mission civilisatrice*” (Paris 2002). A former UN official, for example, likened the UN transitional administration in East Timor to a “pre-constitutional monarch in a sovereign kingdom”, which obstructed Timorese involvement in governance so as to ensure the influence of the UN (Chopra 2000: 29, 31). Furthermore, in contrast to the espoused goal of bringing sustainable peace, these operations were increasingly seen to involve activities that actually exacerbated conflict (Bush 2006: 26).

As an alternative to the authoritarian practices of macro-level peacebuilding operations, a number of scholar-practitioners advanced arguments for an “elicitive” and “transformative” approach to peace-building “from below” (also known as “bottom-up” or “community” peacebuilding). Betts Fetherston, for example, argued that such an approach would be “counter-hegemonic” (Ramsbotham et al. 2005: 217). This strategy involved a focus on the capacities for peacemaking that were intrinsic to communities in conflict situations (Curl 1994: 96). Advocates of this approach argued that “bottom-up” peacebuilding, in contrast to macro-level “top-down” operations, involved providing support for those affected by armed conflict in order to allow them to more effectively develop and voice their own diagnoses of the problems they faced and to challenge and transform the wider relations and structures in which violence was embedded. This approach therefore begins with the premise that those who are most impacted by violence and who must live with its effects are in the best position to devise appropriate solutions and responses to it (McDonald 1997: 2).

The theoretical framework of bottom-up peacebuilding is closely bound up with the theories of conflict transformation developed most famously by John

Paul Lederach. Lederach has argued that episodes of violent (or potentially violent) conflict cannot be understood in isolation from wider relations of power. Trying to “resolve” or “manage” conflict while bracketing out problematic relational and structural contradictions will therefore be fundamentally ineffective, and potentially insidious (Lederach 2003: 3). Strategies of conflict transformation must therefore include critical activism and confrontation in order to bring about social and political change through the establishment of relationships and structural conditions supportive of peace and social justice (Lederach 1995: 13-15). This approach is “community based” not because it isolates the problem and solution within a given community, but rather because it takes as a point of departure the diagnoses, prescriptions and initiatives of those individuals directly affected by violence.

### From Bottom-up to Top-down

As the notion of bottom-up peacebuilding became more widely disseminated, the big players in post-conflict (re)construction—the UN, IFIs, INGOs and bilateral aid agencies—sought to incorporate (some of) the insights of this approach into their ongoing programmes (Ramsbotham et al. 2005: 221-222). The World Bank, for example, established its Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction Unit with a mandate that included the “revitalization of local communities, and restoration of social capital” (2003). Humanitarian actors have also sought to incorporate as policy the argument—taken from Mary Anderson’s (1999) influential book *Do No Harm*—that aid should be delivered in such a way that bridges are built at a grassroots level across conflict lines.

This “mainstreaming” of bottom-up peacebuilding has, however, been a co-option rather than an adoption. The democratic impulse that lay behind the initial critiques of top-down post-conflict (re)construction has been marginalised. Rather than “community” being the locus within which diagnoses are developed, transformative agendas set, and strategic action initiated, it has been circumscribed as an isolated entity within which lie both the causes and the solutions to the violence that afflicts it. The final goal remains the establishment of liberal market democracy under existing relations of power; the diagnosis and prescription, at a fundamentally political level, are not open to debate.

What was a critical response to authoritarian post-war state-building has thus been co-opted as a technical intervention aimed at managing episodes of conflict without challenging the broader relations and structures that fuel them. Indeed, most of the literature on large-scale peace interventions has avoided theoretical critiques and focused instead on technical questions in adherence to what has been called a “cult of policy relevance” (Paris 2000: 44).

In pursuance of neoliberal state-building through technical intervention, international actors and internationally-backed post-conflict governments have adapted bottom-up peacebuilding to work *through* communities. Richmond and Franks (2009: 6) describe it thus: “In terms of bottom-up peacebuilding, different actors contribute to the liberal peace model by installing forms of peace-as-governance associated with the regulation, control and protection of individuals and civil society.” Community peacebuilding has thus become just another tactic of government. As such, it fits within the framework of governmentality, as initially outlined by Michel Foucault (1991). The concept of governmentality (as discussed below) is indeed useful for better understanding how bottom-up peacebuilding as a transformative agenda has been co-opted in the service of an order-preserving strategy of creating liberal market democracies through post-conflict (re)construction under international trusteeship.

### Community Peacebuilding as Governmental

In his short essay on governmentality, Foucault (1991) outlined how an “art of government” emerged in Western liberal democracies during the 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. According to this perspective, a sovereign governs for “the common good” using liberal means, rather than for purely self-interested goals using coercive means. By “the common good” Foucault was referring to the general welfare of a population as determined by the sovereign authority. To this end, the sovereign employs not primarily the coercive apparatus of the state, but rather tactics of government intended to work *through* the freedoms of individual citizens in order to guide their actions towards specific finalities. Foucault (1991: 95) explains it thus:

With government it is a question not of imposing law on men, but of disposing things: that is to say, of employing tactics rather than laws... to arrange things in such a way that, through a certain number of means, such and such ends may be achieved.

The concept of governmentality has been usefully elaborated by later scholars. Barbara Cruikshank, for example, applying Foucault’s ideas to specific American cases, explains that rather than treating individuals merely as autonomous political actors, the tactics of liberal government both construct the citizen’s agency and treat her as “an instrument of political power” (1999: 5).

The work of Nikolas Rose is particularly useful for the arguments of this paper insofar as he employs the concept of governmentality to examine the increased interest of liberal democracies in governing through communities. Rose

locates the emergence of government through community in the period following the collapse of the socialist bloc at the end of the 1980s. The strategy of government through community was considered a “third way” because of its apparent position between state socialism and liberal individualism (Rose 1999: 167). What Rose meant by this approach was that “a sector is brought into existence whose novel programmes and techniques... encourage and harness active practices of self-management and identity construction, or personal ethics and collective allegiances” (1999: 176).

While the concept of community is, of course, not new, it has only become governmental when it has been “made technical” (Rose 1999: 175). An analytics of governmentality can therefore usefully serve to expose the ways in which community peacebuilding, as one tactic within a broader post-conflict (re)construction programme, functions as a technical intervention aimed at ensuring social stability and acceptance of the larger project of neoliberal state-building. Indeed, Rose enjoins us to employ an analytics of governmentality to analyse political power. By this he means “to start by asking what authorities of various sorts wanted to happen, in relation to problems defined how, in pursuit of what objectives, through what strategies and techniques” (Rose 1999: 20). Taking Rose’s interrogative agenda as a point of departure, the following section employs an analytics of governmentality to assess the relations and practices of power in a case study of internationally-implemented community peacebuilding in Afghanistan.

### Case Study: Community Peacebuilding in Afghanistan

The following case study draws primarily on an official 2008 publication prepared by Matt Waldman, an international policy advisor for Oxfam International. The report, entitled *Community Peacebuilding in Afghanistan: The Case for a National Strategy*, presents an analysis of a 500-person “security survey” conducted in six Afghan provinces, a review of existing community peacebuilding projects implemented by Oxfam and other international and internationally-funded organisations in Afghanistan, and makes an appeal for a comprehensive national peacebuilding strategy as part of the country’s larger (re)construction process. In the remainder of this section, I will outline the analysis of the problem, as explained in the Oxfam report, describe the author’s proposed solution, and then highlight several shortcomings to the proposal, as I see them.

The Oxfam report laments the failure of existing strategies to promote peace within Afghanistan. The reason, writes the author, is that “little has been done to try to ensure that families, communities, and tribes—the fundamental units of Afghan society—get on better with each other” (Waldman 2008: 3).

Thus, rather than a function of factors occurring at the provincial, national or international level, the insecurity, disputes and problems faced by “the vast majority of Afghans” have “local causes” (3-4, 28). Amongst these “local” causes, the report identifies poverty as primary. The insecurity resulting from poverty has primarily emerged out of disputed claims to land and water. Those disputes associated with land claims have been the most common source of conflicts due to “the seizure of private and public land by successive power-holders” (9). The salience of poverty and limited access to resources, as causal factors of violent conflicts, has been exacerbated because social benefits are not provided to the unemployed, many of whom have to support large families (9).

In the face of these challenges, Waldman is critical of existing peacebuilding work in the country because it has been focused at a “political level” while largely neglecting “the capacity of Afghan communities to resolve their own disputes” (3). These top-down approaches will remain inadequate unless they are bolstered by “nationwide peace work at ground level” (3). In response to the violent conflicts analysed in the report, Oxfam’s policy advisor proposes an integrated national strategy for community peacebuilding involving a national-level steering committee and funded by a consortium of international donors pledging a multi-year grant.

This community peacebuilding strategy would be driven by a “participatory, bottom-up approach” aimed at strengthening the capacities of communities to peacefully resolve disputes, to “develop trust, safety, and social cohesion within and between communities; and to promote inter-ethnic and inter-group dialogue” (4). Traditional community institutions like *jirgas* and *shuras* (councils of tribal elders) are deemed appropriate sites of intervention. In practice, peacebuilding goals would be achieved by building capacities (negotiation, mediation and other conflict resolution skills) within target communities, promoting peace education and supporting civil society participation in development and peacebuilding processes (4).

Despite stating that peacebuilding is “not about imposing solutions, or preconceived ideas or processes,” (3) the report argues that the national peacebuilding strategy that is to guide the programme should be developed through a national conference whose participants would be international and local NGO staff, government officials, parliamentarians, representatives of the UN and other “experts” (23). Conference participants would develop a national community peacebuilding strategy, delegate members to form a national steering committee, and facilitate provincial-level conferences to disseminate local strategies (3). The national steering committee would prepare a comprehensive training manual, which “peacebuilding experts and organizations” would use to train capacity builders (22). Long-term financial pledges would be spent on, amongst other things, “expert technical assistance in capacity-building” (25). In

these ways, the proposed national strategy would see community peacebuilding incorporated into Afghanistan's broader state-building and (re)construction agenda.

An on-the-ground example of the type of peacebuilding the Oxfam report is advocating here can be seen in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)-sponsored project "Coexistence Afghanistan" (Chen and Jalalzada 2008), which has been implemented as follows. First, UNHCR's local partner, the Sanayee Development Foundation (SDF), conducts its own assessment of the needs of a given target community. It then selects 30 representatives (initially solely male) of different ethnic groups who are invited to attend a two-week-long workshop where they are organised into an inter-ethnic "peace council" (modelled on *jirgas* and *shuras*), given conflict resolution training and asked to plan micro-level income generating projects that will jointly involve and benefit their respective ethnic communities. UNHCR officials then select grantees from amongst the projects proposed in the workshop. With small grant funding from the UNHCR, members of the multi-ethnic target community implement the selected projects under the guidance of the trained "peace council". The aim is that collective engagement in such projects will build bridges across lines of former ethnic tension.

In reviewing the Oxfam assessment of community peacebuilding in Afghanistan, alongside the UNHCR-sponsored project outlined above, two key shortcomings emerge relevant to the overall argument of this paper. First, there is a lack of any strategy to engage with the structural factors perpetuating—indeed exacerbating—economic inequality in the country. Community peacebuilding, the author of the report explains, is meant to promote restorative justice, rather than redistributive justice (Waldman 2008: 16). This is especially problematic given that inequality has been identified by other analysts as a key factor in Afghanistan's ongoing violence. According to the Afghan Research and Development Unit (2010), the political and economic transformations that have occurred under the US-led occupation have led to increased income inequality. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) likewise notes that Afghanistan's economic growth following the US-led invasion "has done little to alleviate poverty and has worsened inequality" (2004: 46). The UNDP further observes that this economic inequality threatens to (re)ignite violent conflict in the country (2004: 27).

To be sure, the Oxfam report defines peacebuilding as not only social, but also structural in character (Waldman 2008: 16). Structural peacebuilding, the author explains, means "creating structures, institutions, and systems that support a peace culture", and which may also involve the "promotion of more equitable and participatory systems of governance" (16). However, nowhere in the report is there any indication of if (or how) the planned capacity-building of tribal elders is

supposed to reform the political-economic structures perpetuating inequality or affect systems of governance.

The second notable shortcoming in the proposed peacebuilding programme is the lack of local control. The report’s author reiterates that the process is to be participatory and solutions are not to be imposed (4, 16, 19, 23, 24). However, the strategy already appears to be largely worked out, with clear objectives, and with the process to be kept firmly within the control of the national steering committee of state-level politicians and international experts. Upon completion of the national conference, project officers are to disperse to provincial conferences in order to disseminate local strategies that are to be adopted by target communities (3). Given such pre-determined results, this “participation” appears open to charges of manipulation and tyranny, if not bad faith (Cooke and Kothari 2001).

The connection between these two shortcomings, neoliberal state building and the practice of governmentality can be seen in the convergence of Afghanistan’s current water crisis and the implementation of UNHCR’s “Coexistence Afghanistan” project. In a 2007 report, the organisation Water Aid ranked Afghanistan last internationally in terms of the percentage of its population (92%) lacking access to clean water and hygienic sanitation facilities; a crisis which has resulted in high rates of waterborne diseases (such as dysentery) and related deaths. Despite high levels of international aid to the Afghan government, investment in the infrastructure and services needed for clean water and sanitation remains a low priority for the current administration (Herold 2010: 3). Marc Herold (2010: 3) argues that this is due to the fact that the Karzai government has been drawn from a privileged minority, which has benefited from post-Taliban economic liberalisations and thus has limited interest in addressing the water crisis given the availability of private sector alternatives in the country’s new two-tiered economy.

While this critique of the current administration is relevant, inadequate government support for social welfare provisions should be seen more broadly within the internationally-backed project of neoliberal state building. After all, as Abdulhadi Hairan observes, the Karzai government has only been following the dictates of the international community (Latifi 2011). Inadequate investment by the Afghan government in water and sanitation is thus just one example of a more widespread neoliberal displacement of responsibility for social welfare away from the state and onto the individual, alongside the promotion of private sector alternatives (Harvey 2005: 168).

Given Afghanistan’s water crisis, informants in the area surveyed for the Oxfam report understandably identified inadequate access to water, resulting from poor water management and inadequate irrigation infrastructure, as the second most common basis of conflict, following land disputes (Waldman 2008: 9). In

line with these findings, dam construction and aqueduct repair were among the peacebuilding initiatives most commonly proposed by participants of the “Coexistence Afghanistan” workshops (Chen and Jalalzada 2008: 5). Workshop participants identified these projects (along with other infrastructure works like road repair and school and clinic rehabilitation) as appropriate for macro-level implementation. However, the UNHRC’s mandate (and allocated funds) for “Coexistence Afghanistan” restricted acceptable proposals to short-term, micro-level income generating projects, which would promote economic self-sufficiency rather than rely on government support (Chen and Jalalzada 2008: 11). Ironically, rejecting proposals for macro-level initiatives while seeking to divert participants’ energies towards short-term, micro-level income generating projects was itself “frequently a source of tension and mistrust” between target communities and the UNHCR (Chen and Jalalzada 2008: 5). In the context of severely inadequate government investment in social welfare, this attempt to promote self-sufficient, community-driven alternatives as part of a national peacebuilding strategy set by government officials and international “experts” is exemplary as a governmental tactic of neoliberal state building.

The two shortcomings outlined in this section (lack of structural engagement and local control) are reflective of a growing set of criticisms comprising a critical response to peacebuilding more generally, and to its incorporation of community-level conflict-resolution training more specifically. There is, of course, nothing fundamentally pernicious about councils of tribal elders helping Afghan civilians to peacefully resolve their disputes. However, this mechanism does become problematic when it becomes governmental; that is, when such councils are used as a means to achieve broader political objectives (such as neoliberal state-building), which may very well conflict with the expressed interests of the individuals so governed.

## A Critical Response

As community peacebuilding became increasingly mainstreamed in the dominant post-conflict (re)construction agenda, scholars working from a critical theory perspective began to voice critiques about its underlying assumptions and practical implications. These critiques have largely focused on the problem of structural violence, being both harmful in itself and in its fuelling of direct violence. The concept of structural violence was initially defined by Johan Galtung (1969: 171) as a systematic state of affairs commensurate with social injustice, thus involving an unequal distribution of power and resources with a harmful impact on those disadvantaged under existing relations of power. A key point raised by Galtung was the—albeit rather intuitive—relationship between structural and direct forms of violence. Specifically, he argued that “manifest

structural violence presupposes latent personal violence. When the structure is threatened, those who benefit from structural violence, above all those who are at the top, will try to preserve the status quo” (Galtung 1969: 179).

Along these lines, Mark Duffield presents a critique of internationally-implemented conflict resolution training as part of a broader argument against a hegemonic development discourse in which neoliberal values and practices dominate. Under the influence of the neoliberal model, conflict has come to be seen as a problem of underdevelopment rather than a function of an unequal distribution of power and resources (Duffield 1997: 85). Neglecting the connection between structural and direct violence, the neoliberal development model frames conflict as “essentially irrational” and thus potentially rectifiable without challenging existing relations of power (Duffield 1997: 90). Duffield (1997: 80) sums up his position on conflict-resolution training within the framework of development in the following way:

While the present neo-liberal approach is often regarded as harsh or even unjust, it is nevertheless widely accepted as the optimal model for maximising global welfare. Through attempts to transform expectations and approaches, the task of development has become one of helping people better adapt to this environment. Inequality, economic growth and resource redistribution per se are no longer the main issues. . . . It is how people cope with their situation and the means by which they can be supported in mitigating the risks and stresses involved... Ideas of empowerment and sustainability are refracted through a lens of behavioural and attitudinal change.

By employing a socio-psychological model of conflict, rather than one connected to relations of power and the unequal distribution of resources, conflict resolution training presents “little serious threat to those in power” (Duffield 1997: 97).

Rather than a psycho-social aberration, Duffield argues that violent conflict and internal wars are, in fact, rational survival strategies employed by those at a marginal position to the global economy. Yet this analysis, he argues, has been largely excluded from internationally-funded and implemented conflict resolution projects targeted at the community level. The “community” is therefore deemed not to be the source of agency in terms of diagnosis and critical action, but rather a circumscribed locus within which lie both the source and solution to violence.

Duffield specifically targeted his critique at the contradictions of NGO involvement in community-level conflict resolution projects. Since that time, however, a number of scholars have applied his argument to broader critiques of international peacekeeping and UN-backed peacebuilding operations. These

critiques have focused on the unequal balance of power intrinsic to the contemporary international order. Michael Pugh (2004: 53), for example, argues that the contradictions inherent in the capitalist economy as propagated through international neoliberal peacebuilding engender the very instability which peacebuilding seeks to manage. Yet, by locating the source of conflict as isolated within politically-excluded areas, the dominant international rhetoric has placed the project of neoliberal state building and conflict management beyond reproach (Pugh 2004: 47). Along similar lines, Alex Bellamy and Paul Williams (2004: 198) argue that contrary to “the more celebratory accounts of contemporary globalization, the current regulation of the global economy and orthodox development practices are encouraging configurations of inequality, exclusion, and under-development that are increasing the likelihood of violence in the world’s least developed states.”

Taking an even more sceptical view of neoliberal state-building in post-conflict countries, Naomi Klein (2007) argues that it is precisely because of the crisis situation following internal wars that political and economic elites and IFI executives are able to push through a radical neoliberal agenda that would be otherwise resisted by a democratically enfranchised population. This process of peacebuilding-cum-radical-liberalisation, Klein continues, has in all cases resulted in the emergence of “a powerful ruling alliance between a few very large corporations and a class of mostly wealthy politicians” (2007: 15).

### Re-claiming “Bottom-up” Peacebuilding

The critical responses to conventional international peacebuilding initiatives, as outlined above, raise a crucial insight for understanding the continuance of violent conflict. Essentially, the insight is that the contradictions in the political-economic structures of the neoliberal order at both the national and international level (re)produce inequalities of wealth and power through capital accumulation and subaltern dispossession. It is this inequality between dominant and subordinate groups, rather than absolute poverty *per se*, which underpins so much protracted conflict around the world. Attempts to resolve conflict as an isolated phenomenon within a community, while neglecting the broader national and international structures that foster it, may not only fail, but can also be ethically insidious if implemented and/or financed by national elites and international hegemony in their efforts to establish and maintain an unequal political-economic order from which they disproportionately benefit.

With this said, however, I see three main limitations to the critical responses outlined above. The first is a potential for economic reductionism in which *all* violence arises *solely* due to political-economic structures at the national or international level. From this point of view, efforts to prevent

violence and/or resolve conflict outside of systemic political transformation are pointless. This problematic conclusion represents the opposite extreme to treating direct violence as solely a psycho-social aberration erupting within inter-personal relations at the community level.

It is worth pointing out here that while Galtung argued that inequitable political-economic structures can (and often do) foster direct violence, he did not argue that *all* direct violence is *solely* rooted in such structures (1969: 178). A similar argument has been made more recently by Amartya Sen. Sen argues that, while poverty and inequality play a major role in fuelling conflict, the likelihood of violence arises through the interaction of these stimuli with other social and cultural factors (2008: 12). Macro-level explanations citing inequality-producing political-economic structures are therefore unable to explain micro-level variance. Furthermore, reducing causal factors to inequitable political-economic relations at a systemic level risks legitimising *all* non-state violence as necessary blood and toil on the long march to social justice. Such an explanation can be highly misleading and ethically unsettling where structural factors fostering violence include social-cultural issues like racial/ethnic prejudice and discrimination based on gender or sexuality. Even where violence is influenced by political-economic factors and occurs alongside a discourse of inequality it has not always been employed to reform structures towards greater justice and equity for all. After all, even Hutu activists in Rwanda employed the rhetoric of inequality to incite the massacre of 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus (Sen 2008: 12).

A second shortcoming of the critical responses outlined above is their neglect of strategies (short of systemic transformation at the national or international level) to engage with unequal relations of power of more immediate concern through more proximate tactics. Indeed, progressive critique has been often plagued by a dearth of proposals for practical positive action (other than simply determined resistance), attributing everything that occurs to a malevolent and “all powerful first cause” such as neoliberalism (Ferguson 2010: 171). Michael Pugh, for example, after decrying the deleterious fallout of the capitalist world, offers as his alternative to conventional peacebuilding “a radical change in the global trade system and its problematic institutions” (2004: 39). To be sure, this is a fine goal and one that would no doubt facilitate a reduction in violent conflict around the world. Yet, it misses all opportunity to engage with more immediate concerns, which may very well align more closely with the diagnoses of those directly affected by violence. Furthermore, strategic action targeting more proximate points of engagement need not be reactionary. Possibilities include critical advocacy on domestic issues, promotion of legal rights for the poor, and support for labour unions and peasant associations. Key requisites, however, include starting from locally articulated grievances and recognising the

strategies through which those affected by violent (or potentially violent) conflict are already working to address their concerns.

With regard to the “Coexistence Afghanistan” project, it is relevant to consider what the workshops might have looked like without the organisers’ rejection of participants’ proposals for macro-level action on social welfare projects. Organisers might have offered to put participants in contact with Afghan and/or international advocacy groups working on the specified issues of concern; to facilitate discussion of direct action strategies, such as those employed by other Afghan communities agitating for similar government action; or to support participants’ efforts at networking with existing Afghan political movements seeking redress of the identified grievances. Additionally, given that workshop participants came from different ethnic communities, their own proposals for macro-level social welfare projects indicate shared grievances across ethnic lines based on shared material interests. Cross-ethnic solidarity would presumably only strengthen through collective struggle to advance these interests.

A third and final limitation of the critical responses voiced by Duffield, Pugh and others is their potential reproduction of the anti-democratic and exclusionary practices of conventional post-conflict state-building. This point is fundamental to the first two shortcomings outlined here. After all, individuals affected by violence (both direct and structural) may have alternative diagnoses of the challenges they face and their own strategies to improve their situation, as in the Afghan case. In such cases, local diagnoses and strategies may focus on social-cultural relations of power and/or more immediate concerns outside of systemic international or national-level political transformation.

Rather than restricting diagnoses of conflict to political-economic systems at the national or international level, those sincerely interested in supporting conflict transformation in solidarity with those affected by violence should begin by listening to local articulations of grievance and supporting local initiatives based on local diagnoses. Such a determinedly democratic approach needs to be at the heart of any critical agenda. Of course, local diagnoses may very well entail grievances about national or international political-economic systems. Yet, whether this is so can only be known by listening to those affected by violence.

## Conclusion

In the paper above, I have outlined the problematic co-option of bottom-up peacebuilding into conventional post-conflict (re)construction using an analytics of governmentality. I have highlighted not only its continued anti-democratic tendencies, but also its deep limitations to actually transforming the political-

economic structures which lie at the heart of much of the inequality that continues to fuel so much present day violence.

These limitations put “mainstreamed” community-level peacebuilding at odds with the transformative agenda held by the initial proponents of the approach. Peacebuilding initiatives which exclude the possibility of political-economic transformation are fundamentally anti-democratic and quite possibly ineffective. Yet, so too are critical agendas which bypass local articulations of grievance and restrict solutions to systemic transformation of the existing political order.

Unequal access to power and resources resulting from inequitable political systems is, of course, a significant factor fuelling contemporary armed conflict in much of the world. However, causes of all violence cannot be logically reduced solely to monolithic international or national orders. Such analysis misses opportunities to address more proximate issues of concern. It also neglects social-cultural structures like racial/ethnic prejudice and discrimination based on gender or sexuality, which, though related to political-economic arrangements, cannot be reduced to them. Thus, a determinedly democratic and solidarist approach to bottom-up conflict transformation would take as its point of departure the diagnoses of individuals directly affected by violent and potentially violent conflict. It would then support locally devised strategies of engagement, rather than imposing external agendas or working only *through* communities to achieve governmental goals in opposition to locally expressed interests.

## Notes

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