

LOCAL PEACEBUILDING FORUMS: Rationale and methodological hypotheses.

Andries Odendaal

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The paper argues that local peacebuilding should receive more attention during national peace and reconstruction processes. Specific attention is paid to Local Peacebuilding Forums, which are particular mechanisms to promote local peacebuilding. Following a brief typology, a number of hypotheses regarding their methodology are outlined. The aim with the paper is to encourage more rigorous attention to the effectiveness of Local Peacebuilding Forums in light of the fact that their use is increasing worldwide.

Why local peacebuilding?

Paul Risley and Timothy Sisk (2005) have produced an important document titled “Democracy and United Nations Peace-building at the Local Level: Lessons Learned”. They convincingly argued the case for conceiving careful strategies for local peacebuilding - against the background of a disconcerting lack of attention to this matter. They quoted Tschirgi (2003): “Despite lip service being paid to the centrality of local ownership of peace-building, it is not clear that international actors have developed effective strategies for assessing local needs, setting priorities, allocating resources, or establishing accountability.” Risley and Sisk continued (2005: 11): “This deficit in international engagement has been especially true at the municipal or city level, where in fact many of the wars of the recent years have been waged.”

The reasons for paying serious attention to local peacebuilding are compelling. We should consider, on the one hand, the challenges faced by local communities in post-violence conditions and, on the other hand, the constructive contributions that local peacebuilding may make towards the sustainability of peace. Regarding the first, let us consider the following somewhat generalized, but not unrealistic scenario.

When national peace breaks out, the collective leadership of local communities are called to deal with the following tasks:

- They have to overcome the effects of their brutalization and deal with their trauma. In today's wars local communities bear the brunt of violence and destruction. Their experience of violent conflict is direct, personal and personalized (in that the enemy is not an abstraction, but known community members).
- They have to make peace with the peace process itself and deal with their internal psychological resistance to reconciliation. The decision to make peace was not necessarily theirs. Their ownership of peace could be as weak as their ownership has been of the violent confrontation. The very same persons who have exhorted them to use violence against the enemy, are now instructing them to collaborate with the enemy. These are very significant mind-shifts that have to take place. Furthermore, the psychological stumbling-blocks to reconciliation are at times more intense in small scale communities than at the macro or at the elite level (where there is less personalization of conflict). At the same time, however, the need for reconciliation is stronger at local level because of high levels of interdependence.
- They have to implement transitional local governance processes that are new to them, and have to do so *with* fellow community members whom they distrust and resent deeply.
- They have to deal with the urgent humanitarian and development needs of the community – needs that are at times contradictory – and do so in a manner that, as a minimum, does not deepen distrust and anger. In addition they have to manage the general social restiveness that characterizes such transition periods. This refers to all the public protest and lobbying activities in the form of strikes, boycotts, public rallies, marches, etc. It is an almost impossible task that they have to accomplish with less physical and administrative infrastructure available than before violence broke out and with insufficient financial resources.
- They have to deal with political instructions that come from the top and ongoing efforts to manipulate them by national politicians, spoiler groups and - it must be said – national and international NGOs that come with the temptation of resources, but only in so far as it serves their agendas. At the same time, though, they lack the political clout to get their own issues prioritized on the national agenda.
- They are called to do all of the above, but often they lack the fairly sophisticated skills needed to manage such complex political, administrative and emotional processes.

It is hard to escape the impression that local communities in post-violence situations are left alone on the margins of the national process to lift themselves up by their own meager bootstraps. If only for this reason, local peacebuilding deserves our fullest attention.

But local peacebuilding is also important because of its potential to make significant contributions to national peacebuilding. There are four considerations in this respect. Firstly, local successes in reducing violence and solving problems relieve stress on the national process. “Disruptions from below’ ... increase insecurities, exacerbate differences, challenge capacities for security and reinforce intolerance” (Risley and Sisk 2005: 10). It therefore seems logical that the capacity to deal with the threat of violence at its source benefits a national peace process.

Secondly, local ownership of a peace process counters the exclusive nature of elite pacts. Peace agreements that follow periods of intra-state war or violence are almost by nature an elite pact. There are very few examples of a peace agreement that was thoroughly discussed and endorsed at the grassroots level before it was signed. Elite pacts, however, have obvious disadvantages, including the vulnerability of the peace process to the fluctuating movements of elite interests; weak buy-in or ownership of peace at the district level; and the inattention to root causes of the conflict, specifically as they affect the non-elite. Local peacebuilding strategies, if done well, have the potential to anchor the peace process locally. They enable local communities to engage with those problems or issues uppermost in their minds and to inform the national process.

Thirdly, local capacity to manage conflict in inclusive and constructive manners has an impact on democratization. It locates the responsibility for conflict management with the collective local leadership, holding them jointly accountable for peace, which is inherently democratic. Furthermore, joint problem-solving processes are, by their nature, contrary to authoritarian decision-making. The very fact of including all relevant stakeholders in a problem-solving exercise and holding them jointly accountable for implementation strengthens a democratic culture.

Fourthly, local peacebuilding capacity has important implications for sustainable development. In a context of severe stress on humanitarian and development resources and acute needs, the capacity to facilitate joint problem-solving processes is highly important. Furthermore, the experience of dealing successfully with such competing demands contributes substantially to the collective confidence of a community that they can take charge of their future.

Local peacebuilding, therefore, should be a necessary component of national peacebuilding strategies.

Local Peacebuilding Forums: a rough typology.

In what follows, a particular local peacebuilding mechanism will be discussed. I shall make use of a generic name “Local Peacebuilding Forums” (LPFs) to refer to this mechanism.

LPFs usually consist of representatives of local political stakeholders, government officials and civil society and have a mandate to secure peace locally and prevent further violence. LPFs are increasingly used across the world as primary local peacebuilding mechanisms. They have a proven capacity to enhance mutual tolerance, reduce violence and resolve disputes. They have substantial potential to impact on post-conflict stability and development because they promote joint local ownership of peacebuilding. However, their potential is not fully realized because of a lack of scrutiny and rigorous assessment of appropriate methodology. Their contribution to peacebuilding is not being considered sufficiently in serious literature, with the result that little collective learning is taking place.

A working definition of a LPF is that it is a body formed at the level of a district, municipality, town or village with the mandate to encourage and facilitate joint, inclusive peacebuilding processes. A LPF is by its nature *inclusive* of all stakeholders, including protagonists. It has the task to promote peace *within its own context*. A LPF's strategy is characterized by its emphasis on dialogue, promotion of mutual understanding, trust-building, constructive and inclusive solutions to disputes, and joint action that is inclusive of all sides of the conflict and that is aimed at reconciliation.

For the purpose of our discussion here I shall only discuss those LPFs that have formal status in the sense that they have been established by virtue of a national peace accord or an inclusive formal decision at national level. There is an array of LPFs established by civil society that lack such a national mandate. Though they are by no means ineffective or unimportant (see Van Tongeren, Brenk et al. 2005), the emphasis of this paper is on local peacebuilding as a formal aspect of a national peace process.

LPFs can be categorized either according to their mandating authority or their main focus areas or objectives. These typologies (that include civil society initiatives) are work in progress and therefore incomplete.

Table 1: LPFs according to Mandating Authority:

Mandating Authority	Country Examples	Comments
National Peace Accord	South Africa, Northern Ireland Macedonia Nepal	National Peace Accord Good Friday Agreement Ohrid Framework Agreement Comprehensive Peace Agreement
Cabinet	Ghana	Cabinet
National Statutory Bodies	Sierra Leone Malawi	Political Parties Registration Commission Electoral Commission
Civil Society	Kenya, DRC, Liberia, Sri Lanka, etc.	NGOs or INGOs. No national mandate or linkage system.

Table 2: LPFs according to Main Focus Areas:

Main Focus Area	Country Examples	Comments
Peace and	Nepal	LPFs to promote peacebuilding,

Reconciliation		conflict management, reconciliation and trust-building.
Violence prevention	South Africa	LPFs to prevent violence and intimidation through monitoring and dispute resolution
Problem-solving	Ghana	LPFs to promote cooperative problem-solving in communities.
Ethnic relations	Macedonia	LPFs to solve ethnic disputes and improve relations.
Elections	Sierra Leone Malawi	LPFs to monitor Code of Conduct and deal with inter-party disputes.
Security	Northern Ireland	LPFs to facilitate police accountability to community and enhance trust.
Governance/Justice	Kenya	LPFs to deal with cattle-rustling.

Methodological hypotheses:

There are many factors that inhibit the successful implementation of LPFs, most important of these the lack of political will amongst some or all of the main protagonists. Methodology, however, also plays an important part. The general lack of rigorous research and academic discussion regarding methodology is inhibiting the successful implementation of LPFs. For the purpose of our discussion here I want to state the following methodological hypotheses:

1. It is preferable that a formal national mandate for LPFs should be in place. The dilemma, of course, is that ‘local ownership’ and ‘national mandate’ are in a sense contradictions. The ideal of peacebuilding should at all times be to promote local ownership (Bush 2004). There are indeed many examples of civil society initiated local peacebuilding projects that have been very successful precisely because they have promoted local ownership. A national mandate is therefore not a necessary condition for successful LPFs. In fact, a ‘national mandate’ may render LPFs ineffective because it translates into national coercion and political manipulation, leaving very little if any space for local ownership.

Yet, nationally mandated LPFs have the advantage that they operate in a coordinated manner; that they have access to national resources and support (both political and financial); that they have greater clout because of their mandate and are therefore able to engage all local actors with greater effectiveness; and that there are well established lines of communication and accountability between local and national levels. These are significant advantages.

The challenge, therefore, is to frame the national mandate in such a way that it confers legitimacy and credibility to LPFs; formalizes lines of communication and establishes feedback loops between LPFs and national leadership; provides access to national leadership and resources; but establishes sufficient space for local leadership

to take ownership of their own LPF and to determine their own priorities regarding its composition and functioning.

2. The composition of a LPF is a critical condition of its success. The ideal is to have a good mix of ‘hawks’ and ‘doves’ on the LPF. It is important that local political leaders participate in the LPF even though they sometimes adopt hard-line positions and embark on disruptive actions. It is not possible to build sustainable peace without engaging them. It is at the same time necessary to have people on the LPF who are committed to peace and who may establish a middle-ground. Wehr and Lederach (1991) have called such people ‘insider partials’, describing persons who mediate conflict in their communities from a position of connectedness and belonging to the community. Their defining characteristic is therefore not impartiality, but rather the trust that they enjoy because of their integrity and character. Their presence on the LPF should create a sufficient middle-ground to make problem-solving and trust-building possible.
3. LPFs should not have the power of arbitration, but rely exclusively on the ‘soft’ approaches to dispute resolution such as dialogue, confidence-building, facilitation or mediation. The danger of granting decision-making power to LPFs is that it will thereby become just another platform for continuing the power struggle. The unique contribution of a LPF is that it allows inclusive dialogue in a non-threatening space. At most it should be allowed to make recommendations to decision-making bodies.
4. LPFs should receive sustained, professional support. Given the background of challenges faced by local communities, it is unrealistic to expect of them to achieve peacebuilding all by themselves. They need support in at least the following three areas:
 - LPFs need access to a fairly professional level of facilitation that is located outside the local community. The processes that lead to the formation of the LPF should best be facilitated by an outside, professional body. In addition, at times the LPF may need professional facilitation or mediation support to work through specifically divisive issues.
 - LPFs need sufficient orientation regarding the roles expected of them and some skill in performing those roles.
 - LPFs need a logistical support structure that should include links to the national level. They should be able to access funding, feed information to the national level, request information from the national level and seek support where necessary from higher profile actors. LPCs cannot by themselves create such a support structure. It has to be established as part of the national peace infrastructure.

What LPFs cannot do:

There are specific limitations to what LPFs can do. LPFs have been criticized for failing to achieve outcomes that were never in their power to achieve. LPFs have, as it is, a very difficult task and they are not helped by overburdening them with naïve expectations.

Firstly, LPFs cannot enforce peace. They are effective in reducing violence, but cannot forcibly prevent violence. They are only successful in so far as the ‘soft approaches’ to peacemaking are effective.

Secondly, LPFs would find it difficult to implement peace agreements if, at national level, there is a lack of political will to do so. If either key political players or security/rebel forces lack commitment to a national peace agreement, it cannot be expected of LPFs to be successful (Ball 1998).

Thirdly, LPFs cannot address the root causes of a conflict if those causes are located in the national constitution, laws and policies. LPFs have been accused that they facilitate ‘negative peace’; that they address symptoms and not causes (International Alert 1993; Adan and Pkalya 2006). LPFs, however, cannot control the national debate on the nature of peace and what policies need to be implemented. LPFs, at most, allow local leaders to negotiate measures that would minimize damage to their community and maximize collaboration in dealing with their specific challenges.

Fourthly, LPFs cannot substitute for local government or local policing. Their task is not to govern, but to strengthen the necessary social cohesion that makes governance possible. LPFs could facilitate more effective local governance by mediating disputes and building consensus, but they cannot assume political and financial responsibilities for which they have no mandate. They can facilitate better community-police relationships, but they cannot and may not form an alternative command centre for the police.

In conclusion:

In order to unlock the potential of LPFs, much further research is necessary to validate the above hypotheses and to enhance the particular methodology that is used. Stedman (2001), in a study that analyzed 16 case studies to better understand the determinants of successful peace implementation, identified the strengthening of local peacebuilding capacity as one of the two most important contributions that, at relatively low cost, could have large payoffs for longer-term peacebuilding. (The other is reform of civilian police and judiciaries). The consideration of LPFs as a useful instrument for local peacebuilding is therefore necessary and urgent.

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