World Peace Is Local Peace

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Peace does not rest in charters and covenants alone. It lies in the hearts and minds of all people. And if it is cast out there, then no act, no pact, no treaty, no organization can hope to preserve it without the support and the wholehearted commitment of all people.

–John F. Kennedy
Address to the United Nations General Assembly, September 20, 1963[1]

Building world peace has always required local peace, as John F. Kennedy stressed in his final speech to the United Nations General Assembly in 1963, during a time when interstate wars presented a much more substantive threat to international stability than they do today. Today we live in a world where the majority of wars are no longer interstate, a development that over the last few decades has often left members of the international community, in particular the United Nations as it was originally conceived, ill equipped to respond. Despite broad recognition of this reality, large multilateral institutions have not adapted to it and the potential spread of civil war remains one of the most persistent and deadly threats to neighboring states.[2] The nimble action required for contemporary conflict resolution and peacebuilding therefore primarily lies in the hands of local actors and states, sometimes supported by international actors. This indicates that there needs to be a shift away from international involvement being primarily focused on elite-level negotiations and toward international actors working with local actors to build peace within war-torn states. In many ways, this shift in focus presents an enormous challenge and the expanded concept of peacebuilding is infinitely more complex than the original mandate of the UN, which was in large part statist and espoused cosmopolitan principles such as "maintain[ing] international peace and security" and "strengthen[ing] universal peace."[3] Finding ways to connect local needs for building long-term sustainable (world) peace with international efforts to support everyday local efforts raises numerous questions. This short essay will attempt

to address a few of the pertinent questions related to the local-international nexus in peacebuilding, including the following: What does it mean to work locally and how local is local enough? Which agendas—local, state, or international—should be prioritized? How can we more effectively problematize peacebuilding for positive conflict disruption?

How Local Is Local Enough?

When we speak about local action, it is often unclear what is meant by "local," and the word can vary depending on context. Typically, when international actors refer to "locals" or "local actors," they mean state or substate actors, sometimes civil society actors. However, the local is also the everyday, ordinary individuals who live in villages and neighborhoods, or the "local-local" as Oliver Richmond has put it, which is also how I will use the term in this essay.[4] When investigating the relationships between "top-down" actors, such as the United Nations and foreign governments, with "bottom-up" actors, such as villagers in a remote area of Northern Uganda, we encounter issues of scale and representation. In other words, we must ask questions about who speaks for whom and how mostly bounded, sometimes idiosyncratic, issues can be dealt with on a large scale. The difficulty of dealing with such concerns is what leads national and international actors, in a technocratic effort to systemize peacebuilding, to often focus on regional or subregional issues, rather than attempting to deal with the messiness of local-level dynamics. Yet, this kind of strategy often fails in peacebuilding because war affects individuals, and communities react in very different ways depending on factors such as location, history of previous conflicts, state presence, cultural traditions, and access to livelihoods. Therefore, finding ways for local-local actors to communicate local efforts and local needs for building peace to international actors is important in the relationship-building exercise between these parties, especially when state actors are absent or negligent at the local level.

Having powerful international actors pay attention to the politics of voice and power is essential if they are to learn how to work with local actors. Understanding the different narratives that underpin a war-torn society is integral to learning how to attend to it. In the context of sustained violence and war, only by closely listening to and taking seriously the narratives, contradictions, and understandings of everyday life told by those most directly affected by violence can we begin to recognize the complicated everyday reality of human experience in war. Scholars

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have shown the importance of using tools based on meaning-making and concept development to understand and engage conflict through the transformation of narratives.[5] Undertaking such an endeavor can only be done through careful examination of multiple conflict realities within a larger war-affected context. In other words, the large-scale technocratic approaches referred to above will flounder if they are not accompanied by contextualized understandings of the differing conflict narratives present in a society affected by violence. This also means communicating local perceptions of peace by using subjective measures, such as those produced by community-generated indicators, including, for example, the Everyday Peace Indicators project, which will be explained in more detail below. Prioritizing localized conceptions of peace allows us to study the social and cultural dimensions of war and peace, which can reveal hidden links between violence in war and violence in peace, while at the same time allowing us to examine the systems both of oppression and of opportunity that can emerge in complex, conflict-affected contexts.[6]

Whose Agendas Should Be Prioritized?

Another challenge in the conceptual scoping process of linking international and local actors is the potential for competing claims and agendas. In other words, what happens when international, state, and local community agendas conflict? Are there tensions between agendas within each of these levels? For example, rather than having a single well-defined and easily identified "local agenda," there are often several competing local agendas. Recognizing this reality, there are organizations, movements, and processes that attempt to coordinate and organize the collective agendas of local actors in an effort to build peace.

I co-created one such effort called the Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI) project, which asks community members to identify their own measures of peace in an attempt to create meaningful indicators for communities affected by conflict. EPI is based on the premise that local community members are those who are best placed to identify changes in their circumstances, rather than relying on external "experts" to identify indicators for them. It is also based on the premise that peace (and conflict, security, and development) is experienced and embodied at the local level. It is often nested within other scales, but the local and the immediate are what matter.[7] The resulting community-generated indicators, which are produced by representative groups of residents of a village or neighborhood, can

consequently be analyzed to identify local priorities and understandings in relation to those residents' everyday peacefulness.

Our research has shown the complexity and tensions embodied in the relationships between local, state, and international actors as they conduct peace processes. One EPI research project that demonstrates these tensions is an ongoing effort in Sri Lanka, a country with a recent history of civil war.[8] Here, our attempts to collect localized indicators in thirty villages across the north, east, and south of the country have been interrupted by both a political coup and a terrorist attack. Despite these disruptions, the indicators we have collected continue to be highly localized and reflect everyday priorities and power dynamics in different parts of the country. The project is enormous and multilayered, as well as ongoing, but some preliminary observations demonstrate that perceptions may sometimes matter more than realities in contexts like Sri Lanka.

For example, we collected indicators in Ellepola, which is a *grama niladhari* division (the smallest local geographic designation in Sri Lankan political life) in the Kandy district, a locality primarily inhabited by Sinhalese people (the country's majority ethnic group), but with a significant Muslim-minority population. Ellepola was proximate to the Sinhalese anti-Muslim riots that took place throughout Kandy district in 2018. It is worth noting that the Sinhalese won the Sri Lankan civil war, and thus in many respects they do not really see a need for reconciliation or even conceptualize it in ways outsiders might usually expect. The EPI process highlighted this, as community members identified indicators they were using to assess levels of reconciliation in their communities, thus revealing what issues they prioritized when they conceptualized peace and reconciliation. The everyday indicators developed by the Sinhalese residents of Ellepola revealed high levels of perceived overt discrimination by Muslims in this Sinhalese-majority village. For example, one such indicator says that a sign of reconciliation would be a condition in which "aid received by Muslim politicians is not distributed among Muslim areas, but in other areas equally." Based on the inclusion of this indicator, we can conclude that some residents believe that the opposite is currently happening. According to the Sinhalese-created indicators, other signs of reconciliation include the following:

- The Theldeniya Police do not work the way the Muslims want them to
- Police do not treat Muslims better because they (Muslims) have more money

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- Police enforce vehicle parking laws in the Digana town among Muslim people equally[9]

Each of the above indicators shows that the Sinhalese people have a level of distrust and perceived discrimination vis à vis their Muslim neighbors. Communities that choose such discriminatory reconciliation indicators receive interventions that address the issues that they raised. At the same time, other indicators they identified demonstrate perceived hope for a different future, with people choosing to focus on positive steps that community groups could take to mend relations, such as the following:

- In the case of tension between Buddhists and Muslims, religious leaders from both sides have discussions
- Sinhalese from the village are invited to activities organised by the Muslim mosque in the village
- Sinhala, Muslim, and Tamil children in the Ellepola village all study together[10]

These indicators illustrate the importance of gathering local details, which can reveal complex and contradicting priorities among conflict-affected communities. Locally defined indicators also show us the importance of perception—what people *perceive* as being important to them in a conflict can have enormous consequences for conflict deescalation and peacebuilding, perhaps more so than the actual reality of the situation on the ground. For example, Muslims in the Ellepola area may not in fact receive preferential treatment from law enforcement or politicians. However, the perception of ethnic favoritism by the Buddhist Sinhalese population may nevertheless heighten tensions between the two groups.

In contrast, of the twenty-three UN Sustainable Development Goal indicators for peaceful and inclusive societies, which are outlined in Goal 16, only four are perception based:

- **16.1.4**: Proportion of population that feel safe walking alone around the area they live
- **16.6.2**: Proportion of the population satisfied with their last experience of public services
- **16.7.2**: Proportion of population who believe decision-making is inclusive and responsive, by sex, age, disability and population group
- **16.B.1**: Proportion of population reporting having personally felt discriminated against or harassed in the previous 12 months on the basis of a

ground of discrimination prohibited under international human rights law[11]

The other nineteen indicators focus entirely on collecting event-related or population data, homing in on empirical data such as statistics on homicide, conflict-related deaths, financial flows, and so on. The four perception-based indicators focus on subjective personal experiences, but they do not specify what factors are most important for measurement purposes and they are necessarily general in order to be applicable in all contexts. For example, indicator 16.6.2 does not give us any information about which public services should be the focus of concern or how respondents should specify which problems constitute their dissatisfaction. Unlike the EPI indicators, the SDG 16 indicators also do not provide any policy or planning guidance for policymakers, only telling them that people are generally satisfied or unsatisfied.

Facilitating a productive local-international nexus requires not only taking into consideration local priorities and understandings of peace but also accounting for the importance of perception in volatile contexts, as well as valuing context and specificity. Without a focus on how individuals perceive their environments and, consequently, how they make decisions about their priorities, outside actors have little hope of engaging local ones. This is particularly the case in conflict-affected contexts, where individuals can easily begin to experience what Émile Durkheim termed "anomie," to refer to a feeling of disconnection, because they no longer see their values reflected in their own societies or leaders.[12]

Creating policies and practices based on local priorities does not have to clash with international priorities if external actors carry out careful analysis of different experiences, contexts, and localities within a conflict to determine where there may be mutually reinforcing points of entry for advocacy. For example, in a recent study using the EPI methodology, Eliza Urwin and I found that there were clear entry points for advocacy focused on women's rights in rural Afghan villages in the Kunar and Nangarhar provinces, but that these entry points were centered around girls' education and womens' professional opportunities, rather than on the political and civil rights outlined in the primarily Western-led 2004 Afghan constitution.[13]

LOCAL PEACEBUILDING

Although there is a widely held assumption that peacebuilding is central to establishing the basic necessities for domestic peace, the term itself and how it relates to

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local actors is often unclear. What kinds of activities the term peacebuilding actually includes has been hotly debated for over a decade, yet clarity on the issue has been elusive for peace and conflict scholars and practitioners, particularly as practice in this area has continued to evolve over time.[14] Over the years, the conventional use of the term has referred to external actors building peace in war-torn societies, and this continues to be the dominant framework. Of course, local actors clearly can and do build peace in their communities; and the idea that outsiders might be the only ones to engineer peace in a society affected by war can be perceived as idealistic at best and imperialist at worst.

In my recent book *Reclaiming Everyday Peace: Local Voices in Measurement and Evaluation after War*, I distinguish between "small-*p*" and "big-*P*" peacebuilding efforts in order to shed light on different kinds of international efforts and their interactions with locals, and to offer conceptual clarification surrounding the concept of peacebuilding and how it is being used by practitioners.[15] Big-*P* Peacebuilding, as I call it, refers to large-scale interventions that include everything from sustainable development assistance to global health and infrastructure. Typically, we see international organizations such as the UN and the World Bank use the term peacebuilding in this way, as well as political scientists empirically studying peacebuilding.

In contrast, small-*p* peacebuilding refers to more localized and relationship-oriented efforts to build peace at the community level. These efforts include exercises related to dialogue, memorialization, and reconciliation processes, as well as other efforts to strengthen the social fabric of communities. When local and international civil society organizations dedicated to building peace refer to peacebuilding efforts, they are usually speaking about this type of small-*p* peacebuilding. Conceptual clarification is important because without understanding succinctly what is meant by the term peacebuilding, we are unable to determine the boundaries between what is included and what is excluded.[16]

The results of the study I present in *Reclaiming Everyday Peace* illustrate that small-*p* interventions are fundamental to building peace in contexts that have received a significant number of big-*P* interventions. In other words, conflict-affected localities that have received interventions from multiple international actors are *more likely* to require assistance in building community ties and social cohesion than those that have received little or no peacebuilding assistance at all. In contexts where there have been big-*P* Peacebuilding interventions alone, societies were not likely to be any more peaceful (according to their own

community-generated indicators of peace) than those with few or no interventions.[17] This suggests that if external actors do not address the community ties that get broken by war and acknowledge the important role of community members in mending them, international peacebuilding efforts will not always lead to local and sustainable peace. This process requires attention to local conflict dynamics and perceptions, as well as to opportunities for local actors to articulate community knowledge and concerns in order to inform peacebuilding interventions.

The Local-International Nexus in World Peace

In this essay, I have argued that world peace is impossible without local peace and that understanding the local-international nexus is more urgent now than it has been in the recent past because of an inward-facing reorientation of armed conflict and war. Critics may point to the fact that elite-level international negotiations are still relevant and that international relations and negotiations continue to be critical for sustained world peace. I do not disagree. In fact, I have argued for harmonizing the relationship between elite international and local actors.[18] Far from romanticizing the local, my argument is that world peace is necessarily a local project, as it must focus on those actors bearing the brunt of war and carrying the burden of conflict resolution in a world where wars and violence are mostly internal to nation-states. If I am at all guilty of romanticizing, I am guilty of romanticizing peace. According to Alex Bellamy in his new book *World Peace (And How We Can Achieve It)*, this makes me something of an outlier.[19] It is war that continues to be highly revered and romanticized, with society honoring military successes and referring to soldiers as heroes. Peace, on the other hand, could use some celebration.

NOTES

[1] John F. Kennedy, "Address to the United Nations General Assembly," September 20, 1963, www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/united-nations-19630920.
[2] Alex J. Bellamy, *World Peace (And How We Can Achieve It)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 93.
[3] Article 1, Charter of the United Nations, ch. 1.
[4] Oliver P. Richmond, "De-Romanticising the Local, De-Mystifying the International: Hybridity in Timor Leste and the Solomon Islands," *Pacific Review* 24, no. 1 (March 2011), pp. 115–36, quote at p. 117.
[5] Sara B. Cobb, *Speaking of Violence: The Politics and Poetics of Narrative Dynamics in Conflict Resolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[6] Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philipe I. Bourgois, eds., *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology*, vol. 5 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 21.
[7] For more information, visit the project website for Everyday Peace Indicators at everydaypeaceindicators.org. This project has been funded since its inception in 2012 by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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8 The name of the project is "Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Project (SCORE) Collaborative Analysis of Reconciliation Dynamics tool (CARD)." EPI is conducting this project in collaboration with the United States Institute of Peace and USAID (the United States Agency for International Development).

9 Indicators are from EPI's SCORE CARD project and have been left in the original translation from Sinhala without additional editing in order to remain as close to the original meanings as possible. These unpublished indicators were compiled in Sri Lanka in 2018.

10 Ibid.

11 "Sustainable Development Goal 16," Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform, sustainable-development.un.org/sdg16.

12 Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).

13 Pamina Firchow and Eliza Urwin, "What Afghan Women (and Men) Really Want: Access to Employment and Education Are Local Priorities. Here's How the West Can Work with the Taliban to Ensure Those Rights," *Foreign Policy*, May 9, 2019, foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/09/what-afghan-women-and-men-really-want/.

14 See Michael Barnett, Hunjoon Kim, Madalene O'Donnell, and Laura Sitea, "Peacebuilding: What Is in a Name?," *Global Governance* 13, no. 1 (January 2007), p. 35. See also Elisa Randazzo, "The Paradoxes of the 'Everyday': Scrutinising the Local Turn in Peace Building," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 8 (January 2016), pp. 1351–70.

15 Pamina Firchow, *Reclaiming Everyday Peace: Local Voices in Measurement and Evaluation after War* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2018), ch. 1.

16 For more on conflict disruption, see Roger Mac Ginty's book *Everyday Peace: How So-Called Ordinary People Can Disrupt Violent Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), ch. 7.

17 Firchow, *Reclaiming Everyday Peace.*

18 Pamina Firchow and Roger Mac Ginty, "Measuring Peace: Comparability, Commensurability, and Complementarity Using Bottom-Up Indicators," *International Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (March 2017), pp. 6–27.

19 Bellamy, *World Peace,* p. 89.

Abstract: Today we live in a world where the majority of wars are no longer interstate, a development that over the last few decades has often left the international community, in particular the United Nations as it was originally conceived, ill equipped to respond. The nimble action required for contemporary conflict resolution and peacebuilding now primarily lies in the hands of local actors and states, sometimes supported by international actors. But it is not always clear who these local actors are or what they need in order to achieve sustainable peace. As part of the round-table "World Peace (And How We Can Achieve It)," this essay looks in more detail at what we mean by "local" in conflict-affected contexts and asks how local is local enough when resolving conflicts and building peace. It identifies tensions and concerns such as the need for the international community to have a well-defined and easily identified "local agenda" when, in reality, there are often several competing local agendas. The essay presents the Everyday Peace Indicators project as a vehicle that can be used to help communicate these local needs to international actors, and argues for the importance of understanding people's perceived realities in addition to, if not more than, their actual realities when trying to understand peace and conflict trends. In order to do this, we need to more effectively problematize peacebuilding for positive conflict disruption.

Keywords: peacebuilding, peace, local, bottom-up, everyday, indicators, Sri Lanka, measurement, participatory