Article

Review of 'Peacebuilding and friction: Global and local encounters in post-conflict societies'

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Abstract

This review critically engages with two chapters from Peacebuilding and Friction: Global and Local Encounters in Post-Conflict Societies—Chapter Five, "Sites of Friction: Governance, Identity and Space in Mostar" by Annika Björkdahl and Ivan Gusic, and Chapter Six, "The Imagined Agent of Peace: Frictions in Peacebuilding through Civil Society Strengthening" by Willemijn Verkoren and Mathijs van Leeuwen. The review explores how liberal peacebuilding initiatives often clash with local post-conflict realities, using Mostar, Bosnia, as a central case study. Björkdahl and Gusic examine how the divided city continues to experience political, social, and spatial tensions driven by ethnonationalist identities and elite power struggles, which undermine democratic governance and civic unity. Similarly, Verkoren and van Leeuwen interrogate the romanticized role of civil society in peacebuilding and highlight how political infiltration and competing interests can compromise its intended transformative power. Drawing parallels with the post-conflict dynamics of Sierra Leone, this review underscores how hidden political divisions and elite manipulation persistently threaten democratic consolidation and sustainable peace. The review concludes that while international peacebuilding frameworks emphasize democracy, inclusivity, and civil participation, these ideals often encounter resistance when confronted with entrenched local interests and identities. The text is recommended for students and scholars of peace and development studies seeking to understand the complexities and contradictions of peacebuilding in deeply divided societies.

Introduction

The liberal peacebuilding which supports and promotes the liberal values including democracy, civic identity and shared space deeply clashes with post conflict realities of the local realities of Mostar. They have argued that cities divided by violence such as Mostar divided between Bosnia and Croat, experience continued contestation after peace agreement has been signed and this has proved resistance to the peacebuilding process or initiative. Annika and Ivan present to the readers how liberal peace interplays with the conflict realities of the divided city of Mostar. They identified some sites of frictions including:

- Where democracy encounters ethnocracy;
- Where civic identity encounters ethnonationalist identity and
- Where the peacescapes encounters the ethnoscape

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General Analysis

On material and social sites of frictional encounters in divided city, both Ivan Annika opine that site of friction are manifestations and products of interactions and agency. Such site, they argued, displays negotiations, mediation, coercion and resistance, where alternative forms of peace may emerge. According to Ivan and Annika, when local initiatives of peacebuilding interact with international industry, local actors will either accept, comply, adopt, resist or reject the international peacebuilding interventions. This will now produce an outcome that contains both elements i.e. international flavour and local flavour. During this process, new forms of culture will emerge affecting the parties involved.

They have further expressed that divided city of Mostar shows how governance, identity and space are closely connected and intertwined. They say that the city of Mostar has been divided on political, social and spatial ground after the ceasefire agreement. It experiences a breakdown of the early urban governance structure; central government support for the entire city is interrupted, formerly shared and inclusive identities are undermined and often replaced by ethnonational and exclusive identities, that leaves no rooms for enter ethnic contact or interaction or corporation. In Mostar, Ivan and Annika opine that there are political entrenchment and struggles for domination clearly presents themselves politically, socially, economically and geographically (spatially) in their everyday behaviour. They believe that this divide and struggle experienced by both liberal peacebuilding initiative and that of the local peacebuilding process in any post conflict country, grossly undermines that democratic consolidation process.

Similar display of behaviours is evident in a post country like Sierra Leone, after conducting six democratic elections, yet the peacebuilding and its democratic consolidation process is grossly affected by the unconscious division of the country on regional or ethic compositions, which is being reinforced by partisan politics. Though it is not a physical divide, but one feel its division. This is often manifested during political times, where people will be afraid to freely move within the country. For instance, people from the north and some parts of the West will find it problematic travelling to some parts in the south and east of the country and vice versa. People have unconsciously divided the county of Sierra Leone on political grounds. Even Freetown as a city in Sierra Leone is politically divided and supporters of each political party pray for the party in power to fail so they will have their way into governance. This has affected the interaction, development, and democratic endeavours, and the peacebuilding initiatives of the country.

In Mostar, Ivan and Annika state that urban divides sharpen the existing tensions in the city, tearing apart the urban social fabrics and creating an imaginary wall in the minds of people who no longer see themselves as one unified people. Although the divides, according to Ivan and Annika, were created by the war, but are maintained, reproduced, and reinforced by local ethnonational elites, as well as by the international peacebuilding efforts such as the ethnically biased power-sharing system. Ivan and Annika have defined democracy as a form of governance in which all eligible citizens are allowed to participate and have equal say in the decisions that affect them. They have argued that in a liberal democracy, the fundamental human rights of people are respected irrespective of their backgrounds, colour, religion, class, status, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. The rule of law stands so supreme in a democratic state. In sharing their views on democracy encountering with ethnocracy, they argue that

governance in divided society resembles that of ethnocracy rather than democracy. The minority are always marginalized in terms of extending political opportunities. This type of governance structure, they have said, challenges the universal idea of democracy, which is pursued by the international peacebuilding efforts. A class occurs when the international peacebuilding efforts would want to transform the ethnocratic arrangement typically reinforced by the local elites.

Ethnocracy in Mostar was established by the ethnonationalist power holders from the war to ensure that Croat continued to hold on power while Bosniaks also wanted to have their influence or presence felt. Two different sets of administrations were set up to manage the urban space and crossing to the other side of the city was difficult. This territorial division of the city, according Ivan and Annika, was cemented. This struggle crippled the international peacebuilding and democratization efforts by the international community.

The European Union Administration of Mostar (EUAM) was established after the ceasefire agreement in 1994 made the reunification of Mostar a top priority. The establishment of democratic institutions, however, clashed with the ideas and practices of the ethnocratic elites who only demanded an ethnocratic governance system due to the bountiful emoluments therein. This greedy political endeavour of the ethnonationalist elites led to the division of the city into six decentralized and ethnically homogenous municipalities (three Croatians in the west and three Bosniaks in the east) with the city council having limited executive power. The international peace builders thought that by this institutional division, ethnonational political practice would be avoided and helped foster interethnic cooperation. However, this did not achieve it desired effects, as the three Croatians municipalities united and started functioning coherently in western Mostar and the three Bosniak municipalities also did likewise. This created little or no formal political interaction between the two. Even the two mayors (one Croat and one Bosniaks) became figure heads of unity and had political influences only in their respective areas. This disrupted the political and democratic consolidations process of Mostar as a house divided against itself will not stand.

When this did not work, Ivan and Annika note that the Office Human Rights in 2004 took over the supervision of the city after EUAM had left. A new measure of administration was composed and instituted by abolishing the six municipalities in favour of only municipality where executive powers were transferred to the city council who had limited power under the EUAM. Even with this framework, little was achieved to reunite the spatially divided community, to transform the two ethnocracies into one shared democratic politic system, which was due to the continuation of ethnonationalist tensions and political stalemate which paralyzed decision making process.

As seen above, the liberal peace thesis which is very highly structural, technocratic and administrative, ensuring the promotion of democracy clashed with the local practices which were political and self sustaining. This encounter generated friction or conflict which resulted to a flawed democratic system of governance with a complex decision-making process and malfunctioning institutions. For example, in 2004, there were many ethnic protests against corruption and unemployment.

Ivan and Annika argue that one of the main aims of peacebuilding process is the efforts gearing towards the integration of the post- conflict society into a homogeneous whole which includes the process of transforming an exclusive and ethnic identity in inclusive civic ones.

They were very apt when they said that "in divided cities efforts are thus made to promote a civic identity and to build a city that embraces differences and diversity and uphold to the city for all" where unity will be seen operating among all. But in their fight to secure this kind of environment that is inclusive and civic, comes in sharp contrast with the ethnic and exclusive identity produced by the conflict situation. This tells us that international peacebuilding process is usually frustrated to the point that it produces undesired effects. Development programmes meant for all are usually diverted into the hands of a few people.

Ivan and Annika opine that Mostar as a divided city experienced this shock when the internationally promoted civic identities that enhanced everyone's participation into the governance dispensation became undermined by the ethnically identity ideology of the ethnonationalist. The definition advanced by Ivan and Annika for civil society is very apt. They have referred to "civil society as the sphere of organised society that exists outside government and the private sector" They opined that civil society may constitute a wide variety of factors ranging from internationally operating development organisations to localized initiatives and traditional forms of association. It may include the media, labour unions, political parties, human rights activists, NGOs, traditional and religious institutions, and sports, and welfare associations. They have underscored the validity that civil society grew to be the 'imagined agent of development' being considered more effective than – and thus an alternative to – governments in providing development needs for the citizens. Where state institutions fail in providing security, accountability, and basic services civil society is seen influencing the activities of the government on behalf of its citizens. Here, civil society would represent the forces in favour of peace in a society, and was seen as more representative of and closer to the grassroots than government institutions

They have argued with intellectual lucidity that a strong civil society is a key component of democratization and peacebuilding, as it would contribute to reforming state-society relations and fostering responsive and legitimate institutions that could deal effectively with conflict. According to them, the World Bank has lists seven functions for civil society in this regard: protection, monitoring/early warning, advocacy, socialization/peace education, social cohesion, mediation, and service delivery. Over the 1990s, it is argued that the creation and consolidation of civil society organisations became a central element of strategies for peacebuilding. International non-governmental organizations, donor governments, and UN agencies alike regarded civil society organisations as the most appropriate channel by which to work on peace and restructure governance.

Conclusion: Lessons from Mostar for Sierra Leone's Peacebuilding and Democratic Consolidation

Such analyses into Mostar's post-conflict dynamics, like Annika Björkdahl and Ivan Gusic's, as well as Willemijn Verkoren and Mathijs van Leeuwen's examination of civil society's peacebuilding role, provide competently an informed lens into Sierra Leone's present-day sectoral crusade of peace and democracy consolidation. Although the physical division of urban space present in Mostar is not fully represented in Sierra Leone, the original argument of the impossibility of peacebuilding in the absence of shared civic identity, while taking into account the reality of multi-ethnic societies, is wholly relevant in the Sierra Leonean context.

The Clash Between Liberal Peacebuilding and Local Realities

The friction between international peacebuilding and local ethnonationalist elites in Mostar illustrates the challenges of imposing model European liberal democracies on post-conflict societies. A similar story holds true for Sierra Leone's peacebuilding process, which was largely successful in ending the country's civil war, but has struggled to reconcile liberal ideals with local realities. The country is still sharply divided along regional and ethnic lines, a divide that is often deepened by partisan politics. For example, while the north-south divide in Sierra Leone is not a strictly geographical one, it has played out in elections in which support for political parties tends to follow ethnic and regional lines. Instead, democracy was replaced by ethnocracy as in Mostar, which further hinders democratic consolidation. Mostar's experience can teach Sierra Leone how to ensure that its peacebuilding initiatives are more than just "peace from above" but something organically grown out of the local context. This involves tackling the ongoing structural inequalities and historical grievances that drive regional and ethnic polarization.

The Role of Civil Society in Peacebuilding

The presentation of civil society as an "imagined agent of peace" in Mostar reinforces its potential to connect institutional and public political levels. From Sierra Leone: Civil society organizations (CSOs) have been a key driver of peace, accountability, say, and development in Sierra Leone. For example, CSOs played a critical role in providing services and advocacy for marginalized groups during the Ebola emergency and through the COVID-19 epidemic. Yet, the root of the problem quite often lies in the fact that external factors (civil society funding, political interests) and local power structures could undermine the impact that civil society has, such as in Mostar.

In order to properly empower Sierra Leone's civil society, we must work to strengthen its independence and inclusivity. Rather, CSOs should not simply act as intermediaries in the flow of international aid but rather contribute to defining national peacebuilding agendas. That includes encouraging interethnic dialogue, teaching civic history, and making political leaders responsible for their rhetoric. The seven functions of civil society in relation to the World Bank—protection, monitoring, advocacy, socialization, social cohesion, mediation, and service delivery— highlight concrete ways in which Sierra Leone could improve the role of CSOs in its peacebuilding process.

Governance, Identity, and Space

Mostar's experience speaks to the interconnectedness of governance, identity and space in post-conflict settings. That further consolidation of the city's division into ethnically homogenous municipalities reinforced ethnonationalist identities and undermined efforts at creating a common civic identity. In places like Sierra Leone (where there is no physical wall but similar psychological and political divides along regional and ethnic faultlines), the same issues are at play. For example, the capital, Freetown, is considered politically polarized; members of competing parties look at each other with suspicion.

The same applies in Sierra Leone; we cannot deny that we need inclusive governance that is not based on ethnicity and region. These could involve reforms to the electoral systems to make them more representative, as well as efforts to promote interparty dialogue and a

national identity that embraces and recognizes diversity. The creation of independent institutions, like the Anti-Corruption Commission and the Human Rights Commission, is a positive development, but further action is necessary to guarantee their functionality and autonomy.

The Need for Long-Term Commitment

Mostar in part serves to illustrate the insufficiencies of these short-term international interventions as means to establish a sustainable peace. Although the EUAM and later the Office of Human Rights worked towards this goal, the local interests of the elites prevailed. In the same vein, a long-term engagement by both national and international actors is vital for Sierra Leone's peacebuilding process. This means tackling the underlying drivers of conflict such as poverty, inequality, and youth unemployment that continue to pose a threat to the country's stability.

My Like for the Book

This review is very informative and stimulating for me, as it examined the tensions between liberal peacebuilding and the local situations of post-conflict societies. While siting the analysis of Mostar's divided city dynamics, Björkdahl and Gusic are to be applauded for providing such a framework to draw parallels with more than conflicted media environments wherein deeply entrenched actor identities produce negative feedback loops vis-a-vis that which is perceived to be the enemy, and in turn, seed renewed violence — one such case being Sierra Leone. Discourse on post-conflict recovery is not without its nuances, and the review does a commendable job of drawing attention to the complexities of peacebuilding, governance, and identity.

The review's emphasis on the tension between international peacebuilding efforts and local realities strikes a particularly familiar chord with Sierra Leone's post-conflict experience. In that context, drawing parallels between Mostar's ethnonational divides and Sierra Leone's regional and ethnic ones offers a helpful lens through which to view the country's continuing peacebuilding difficulties. The review is good at unpacking how governance, knowledge systems and identity relate in divided peoples. The struggle between ethnocracy and democracy is especially salient for Sierra Leone where partisan politics and regional allegiance frequently hinder inclusive governance and national cohesion.

The reviewer provides depth by including Willemijn Verkoren and Mathijs van Leeuwen's work on civil society. It highlights the significance of grassroots efforts in peacebuilding, which resonates with the context of Sierra Leone where civil society organizations have been instrumental in fostering accountability and social cohesion. However, if you read the review thoroughly you would realize that the review does not gloss over shortcomings observed in liberal peacebuilding practices, thus for international interventions and local practices the review provides wise lessons. This perspective is critical to recognize for understanding why peace efforts often fail to achieve their aims.

In learning lessons from Mostar's experience, the review offers competent insights for policymakers and peacebuilders in Sierra Leone. It highlights the importance of inclusive governance, long-term engagement, and context-sensitive approaches to peacebuilding that are essential to ensuring the sustainability of peace in the country. The review was well-

structured and written clearly, so the complex concepts are accessible to a wide audience. And, with our premise in mind, the particularity of some examples — the European Union Administration of Mostar (EUAM) and Sierra Leone's regional divides to illustrate core premises — can be quite convincing.

Final Thoughts

Sierra Leone's path towards peace and consolidation of democracy is not unlike the difficulties found in Mostar. Although there have been great strides since the civil war, lingering regional and ethnic divisions, partisan politics, and a top-down view of peacebuilding illustrate the necessity for more contextual and inclusive peace processes in the nation. Arguably, by taking note of Mostar's lessons, Sierra Leone can enrich its civil society, enhance inclusive governance, and embolden a national identity collective. In the end, sustainable peace demands more than the absence of violence; it demands justice, equity and opportunity for all citizens. In summary, this review is a useful read for those interested in peacebuilding, governance, and post-conflict recovery. It is relevant to Sierra Leone as it is for many countries and therefore a good read in terms of its analysis and practical implications. For researchers, policy makers and practitioners in peace and conflict studies, I strongly recommend it.

Declarations

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