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FROM LITTLE TO LARGE: WHEN DOES PEACEBUILDING ADD UP?

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Keywords: peacebuilding, adding up, peace writ little, Peace Writ Large, cumulative impacts, theories of change, assumptions, linkages, More People, Key People

Introduction

Contemporary peacebuilding theory and practices have recognised the value of working at multiple levels of society. This understanding has emerged, in part, from critiques of 'top-down peacebuilding' focused at the national level and top leadership only. As the concept of local-level peacebuilding has expanded in recent years, questions have emerged about its effectiveness: how and when do these 'local' or 'grassroots' level 'peace writ little' (p.w.l.) interventions contribute or add up to 'Peace Writ Large' (PWL) — the broader society-level peace?

This briefing summarises insights gathered from two collaborative learning processes led by the Collaborative for Development Action's (CDA's) Reflecting on Peace Practice Program (RPP) during 1999–2003 and 2007–2011. They involve a total of 42 case studies and over 40 consultations and feedback processes with practitioners, researchers and policy-makers on this question.¹

Conceptualising peace writ little and Peace Writ Large

In its first phase (1999–2003), CDA's RPP found that it is not adequate for smaller local-level peacebuilding efforts to be held accountable for achieving their immediate goals *only* if affecting PWL is a stated objective or claim. Their contributions to PWL also need to be meaningfully considered (Anderson & Olson 2003). Being accountable to PWL, however, does not necessarily require visible, national-level impacts; these may only become apparent as cumulative effects of a number of small interventions. However, one can assess whether and how programmes address key drivers of the broader conflict at the level the programmes operate. When they address key drivers, they are likely to contribute to broader peacebuilding impacts.

Many p.w.l. initiatives catalyse community-level changes or address issues that improve people's lives in significant ways, without impacting on PWL. PWL is concerned with the 'bigger picture' of a conflict (Anderson & Olson 2003). It encompasses the termination of violence and destructive conflict as well as supporting a just and sustainable peace by addressing political, economic and social factors that drive conflict (ibid.). This 'bigger picture' can and often does mean national-level conflict dynamics (or in some contexts, sub-national dynamics). Many programmes are focused on and have important local-level impacts — for example, on community or interpersonal conflicts. As such, they contribute to p.w.l.: sustainable peace at the local or community level, or within a limited geographical scope. They may also have effects on groups or sectors at the national level (e.g. school conflicts, youth, police-community relations) without influencing the dynamics of the broader conflict. Context matters: the connections between p.w.l. and PWL and the ways p.w.l. can influence PWL differ from context to

context. The critical point is to reflect rigorously on whether and how p.w.l. actions and effects impact on the bigger picture of conflict.

Such p.w.l. efforts should not be devalued because they have not had macro-level effects (see Metz 2013). However, RPP has found that many practitioners *assume* that local-level changes, or p.w.l., will somehow automatically lead to or support PWL. As one practitioner noted, 'All of our good efforts must be adding up. With so much good stuff happening, the effects will become clear someday' (Anderson & Olson 2003, 6). While there is often a relationship between local and national peacebuilding, this does not automatically mean there is a *linkage* between actions at the local level and impacts at the broader, macro level. It is important to unpack and test common underlying assumptions about this relationship to understand when and how p.w.l. can affect and add up to PWL.

Navigating Assumptions: Insights from CDA's Cumulative Impact Case Studies

A widespread, overarching assumption observed in the case studies and in our work with agencies is captured in the following: 'If we can achieve a lot of peace writ little, it will add up to Peace Writ Large.' In other words, local-level work, by definition, is assumed to be relevant to PWL. Variations of this theory of change have been formulated as follows:

- 'If we can contain or mitigate local conflicts, we will prevent violence that will reignite the war and spread to other areas.'
- 'If people from conflicting groups cooperate on local projects of mutual interests, trust, friendship and mutual interdependence will increase, and people will resist violence and support peace and reconciliation.'

- 'If we can improve governance and conflict resolution at local level, people will become less polarised and supportive of violence, as the state will gain legitimacy and grievances will be addressed.'

Yet while there are examples of small, local-level efforts having positively contributed to and even adding up to PWL, there is an equal number of cases where they have not. RPP found three conditions under which p.w.l. work contributes to and may add up to PWL:

- linkages between local- and national-level dynamics
- linkages between local- and national-level work
- linkages between 'More People' and 'Key People' and different levels of change

What linkages between p.w.l. and PWL are possible or effective, and what they look like, depends on context. For example, in many contexts power dynamics play a decisive role in determining the types of interactions that are possible between local- and national-level efforts; these need to be understood in a context-specific way. Each of the conditions is discussed below, providing further insights for both theorists and practitioners.

Linkages between local and national-level dynamics

Studies exploring the influence of local conflict in civil wars have found that violence often emerges from the *interaction* of dynamics at all levels (including local, national, possibly even regional — including cross-border — dynamics), or between the political and private spheres. They argue for the need to address local conflicts alongside national-level factors (see Darby 2001; Kalyvas 2006; Autesserre 2010; Odendaal 2013). RPP's findings regarding peacebuilding effects align with these insights. Evidence from the

cases suggests that p.w.l. programming can contribute to PWL when:

- *Community-level conflict dynamics are an important part of the broader dynamic, because they worsen violence or polarisation along the 'master cleavages'* (see Kalyvas 2006, 382). For example, in South Africa, p.w.l. efforts made a direct contribution to PWL partially because of the 'complex relationship between the national political process and local conflict systems' in which the political influenced the local, and the local expressed itself politically (Odendaal 2012, 96). Violence between local communities and the security forces was often triggered by local dynamics (ibid., 98). Local community organisations dealing with 'bread and butter issues' often 'escalated very quickly into more ideological discussions of the larger ideals' (Mulcahy & Mulcahy 2009). In these circumstances, the work of the regional and local peace committees established under the National Peace Accord (NPA) touched on issues and dynamics of national significance (ibid., 35). In relation to dynamics resulting from the Guatemalan Civil War (1960–1996), by contrast, 'it is not clear to what extent local interests, priorities or initiatives consistently "trickle up"', and people's diverse experiences of the war at the local level 'are a good example of local "realities" that find little echo in the ideological constructs at the national and international level' (Adams 2011, 53).
- *Specific communities are important, either for symbolic or real reasons, for the conflict.* This was the case, for example, in Mozambique, where local mediation, dialogue and conflict resolution training helped stem violence in areas considered to be 'crucibles of conflict', mitigating

macro-level conflict because of these communities' role in provoking broader conflict nationally (Murdock & Zunguza 2010).

- *Local or micro-level efforts address broader drivers of conflict, as they manifest at the local level.* In Liberia, where land conflicts stemming from multiple and overlapping land regimes are a significant driver of conflict, one agency's programme to provide alternative dispute resolution mechanisms in local communities for land disputes was singled out as 'particularly successful' by many people in contributing to PWL. This was because of the programme's focus on local manifestations of a key driver of conflict in Liberia, along with its efforts to link with other local and international NGOs and government to promote broader and sustainable national capacities for addressing land disputes (Kurz 2010, 30–33).

Linkage between local and national-level work

The South Africa case highlights an important condition for p.w.l. to contribute to PWL: the creation of *linkages* between work at different levels of society and across sectors. In this case, a big factor in 'adding up' was the setting up of various peace structures at national, regional and local level by the NPA, ensuring interaction and collaboration between efforts at all levels (Odendaal 2012; Mulcahy & Mulcahy 2009). Effective linkages do not always involve a mandated structure or policy framework such as the NPA. In South Africa, communication and linkage between levels were promoted through the media (pressuring government and informing the public). Support was provided for community organisations established to deal with 'bread and butter' issues to engage in the 'ideological' discussions and community-level implementation of

national PWL processes (such as truth commissions). Overall, such support made people feel that they were part of the broader process and had an acknowledged role to play (Mulcahy & Mulcahy 2009, 28).

In Mozambique, the churches played a key role as bridge-builders between national and local peacebuilding. They facilitated elite-level talks and simultaneously mobilised the population in communities through homilies, sermons and songs. They offered support for 'social integrators' to provide education, brokered local ceasefires and defused tensions as ex-combatants returned to their communities. The church had access to and influence with 'the middle, [and] both top level leaders and grassroots organizations and communities' and 'built coalitions and support from State actors, business people and other civil society organizations within the country and around the world', effectively linking the 'bottom' and the 'top' (Murdock & Zunguza 2010, 58).

Many organisations wrongfully assume that efforts at the local level automatically trickle up. Linkages have to be consciously planned. Simultaneously, national peacebuilding efforts do not automatically trickle down to the local level. However, many national peacebuilding strategies and narratives do not consciously build in spaces and opportunities for national and local efforts to interact in a meaningful way.

Linkages between 'More People' and 'Key People' and levels of change

Most peace initiatives usually focus on either 'More People' approaches or 'Key People' approaches. More People approaches aim to engage increasing numbers of people to promote peace. Key People approaches at any level focus on involving people or groups of people who are critical to the continuation or resolution of violent conflict, due to their

power and influence. RPP found in its first phase that approaches that concentrate on More People only, and do nothing to link to or affect Key People, do not add up to effective peace work. Likewise, approaches that focus on Key People only, and do not include or affect More People, do not add up to effective peace work either (Anderson & Olson 2003, 65–70).

Local-level or community-based work often (although not always) is 'More People' work — meaning it works with large numbers of people at the local level, but not necessarily those who can say 'yes' or 'no' to violence or peace. In this sense, RPP's findings suggest that to have an impact on PWL, p.w.l. work must engage, influence or link to Key People, or link strategically to other activities that engage or influence Key People.³ RPP's cumulative cases support this hypothesis. In Liberia, interviewees 'seemed to feel that true progress to peace could only be achieved at a larger level and is dependent ultimately on the government's actions' (Kurz 2010, 45). In Burundi,

[a] direct relationship was noted between the impact of [peacebuilding] programs on large numbers of people and their effects on key figures in the country. The maturation of civil society and the evolution and transformation of the perspectives, attitudes and behaviors of certain strata of the population had a definite influence on key people through lobbying, pressure and advocacy activities. Such activities pushed these key figures to advance the peace process. (Sebudandi et al 2008, 39)

Conclusion: Strategies for Strengthening p.w.l.–PWL Linkages

Establishing solid linkages between p.w.l. and PWL is not easy. What can practitioners do?

As one RPP participant noted during one of the consultations, 'Act where you can at whatever level you can, but keep the larger picture in mind in order to make sure efforts add up to transform the conflict.' Critical reflection on assumptions and goals is needed to enhance strategic relevance. Practitioners need to develop *better analysis* of the interactions between local- and national-level conflict dynamics. Many conflict analysis approaches and tools have been developed over the past years. However, much remains to be done. Many analyses are biased ('whose analysis?') and/or inadequately translated into strategy and programming. Synergies across the various organisations involved in conducting analysis in one and the same country or region could be enhanced significantly. They also often do not connect local (p.w.l.) and macro (PWL) level analyses: the ways in which national dynamics affect and are manifested at the local level, and the ways in which local conflicts may be resistant to or, conversely, may exacerbate national peacebuilding efforts.

Practitioners need to develop and test robust and contextually grounded theories of change about how local initiatives should be designed in a way that they not only contribute to achieving their specific objectives, but also provide the basis for longer-term societal change beyond specific-project outputs and outcomes. In addition, linking efforts at different levels and across sectors and constituencies is critical. There are many kinds of linkages: conceptual, e.g., when organisations share analytical and conceptual frameworks or work on a single issue from multiple perspectives and at different levels; joint policy frameworks (such as the NPA in South Africa); or coalitions and alliances. Finally, Key People in the conflict need to be engaged or influenced. These may include key conflict actors, but also key 'bridges' or connectors across levels, sectors or constituencies which can provide leadership in creating linkages.

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Endnote

¹ For further background on RPP's findings and CDA's collaborative learning methodology please visit: www.cdacollaborative.org

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