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Peacebuilding does not build peace

Tobias Denskus

The concept of peacebuilding is a buzzword of the development policy and practice mainstream. The recent introduction of managerial tools and the focus on measuring the 'effectiveness' of peacebuilding have marginalised and depoliticised critical questions about the causes of violent conflict, and have replaced them with comforting notions for donors that peace can be built and measured without challenging Western understanding of economy, governance, and social aspirations of people.

KEY WORDS: Conflict and Reconstruction; Aid; Social Sector

> *Everything becomes stories and it is not important when or where something happened, how it happened or whether it happened at all . . . Everything can be influenced in the telling and so nothing is how it is, nothing stays how it was once the telling begins, and everything can be told and you tell yourself as a story with every word, with every lie.* (Jäkle 2006)

The question of whether 'peacebuilding' builds peace remains highly relevant almost a decade after Charles-Philippe David's article of the same title (David 1999). 'Peacebuilding' first appeared as a word in a UN document (Boutros Ghali 1992), but it has turned into a 'non-place', like the airports or supermarkets invoked in Marc Augé's anthropological–philosophical account of 'supermodern' places. Incorporated into the new aid discourse of results-based management, and the subject of innumerable manuals and frameworks, 'peacebuilding' has lost any sense of context, and of the people in that context. The sites of peacebuilding have become 'non-places'. This article reflects on what has happened to a word that has lost the ability to tell us stories, to make us angry or happy, and to connect people affected by war and violence and those who are offering external advice through the international aid system for a more peaceful world. I take a critical look at the 'non-place' that peacebuilding describes and I consider what it would take to populate it with those whose stories might have something to offer in transforming contemporary approaches to development, and to war and peace.

What *is* peacebuilding?

> *The inclusion of so many activities, levels and actors under the umbrella term peacebuilding has rendered its definition so broad that it is in danger of becoming meaningless.* (Llamazares 2005: 2–3)

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The 'Agenda for Peace' is one of the cornerstones for the international debates on how to build peace after violent conflicts. When the Cold War ended and new – mainly intra-state – wars were on the rise, the international community needed new forms of engagement to continue the delivery of 'development'. Right from the beginning, 'peacebuilding' was not regarded as a concept that would seek to *transform* societies in or emerging from conflict, but to maintain stability. Beth Fetherston argues:

> *If conflict is caused, enabled, reproduced by particular social structures and institutions which favour a dominant group, we cannot hope to remove or alleviate those causes, without altering those structures. Then, peacekeeping becomes another aspect of a system which only seeks stability within the confines of that system, a system which already made the war possible.* (Fetherston 2000a: 196).

Ever more institutional arrangements and operational guidelines were adopted by international aid organisations to operationalise 'peacebuilding'. An entire industry of 'peacebuilding' consultants, experts, and practitioners sprang up to service these arrangements. After its failed engagement in Rwanda, the international community became more interested in the approach encapsulated by the 'do no harm' position (Anderson 1999). But the heavy weight of five decades of 'development' made it difficult to escape explaining 'contemporary processes and phenomena through a dominant conceptual framework marked by Northern economic and social philosophy' (Gosovic 2000: 447) and 'Western intellectual traditions – expectations, values and rationality' (Duffey 2001: 143).

The framing of 'peace' and ways of 'building' it led to a preferred set of methods and methodologies. As elsewhere in development, quantitative research – such as that of Paul Collier for the World Bank (Collier *et al.* 2003) – gained prominence, offering a powerful instrument to legitimise interventions by aid organisations. However, the deployment of such approaches to research not only served to erase the particularity of places and experiences through its inevitable generalisations, but it also had further costs. Fetherston comments: 'The trend towards increasingly complex statistical analyses tends to leave people out altogether. After all how can social space, cultures of violence and militarization, and discourses be statistically analysed?' (2000a: 194).

The 'peacebuilding' 'discourse coalition' (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003) that has emerged over the past decade or so relies on a web of academics/academic institutions, researchers and practitioners, and different units in different aid organisations. In the field of 'peacebuilding', new conceptual and organisational arrangements have been implemented to legitimise it for various constituencies in 'Northern' countries and 'Southern' capital cities. One example of a virtual (and therefore global) meeting place is the *Berghof Handbook* that features a range of contributions to engage with 'peacebuilding' but puts an emphasis on 'PCIA' (Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment) and related methodologies to merge 'peacebuilding' with the 'results-based management' needs of aid organisations (for example, Anderson 2004; Hoffman 2004).

Paffenholz and Reychler's 'aid for peace' approach is another such example, peppered with phrases from the world of international aid:

> *In presenting our approach we have shown that a* unified framework *is not only possible but also a useful starting point for all actors as it links the analysis of the conflict and peacebuilding environment with the implementation of interventions in conflict zones in a* systematic step-by-step process. *It also links the core of peace research (a theory of social change) with* operational requirements *and provides* methods and tools *to assess or anticipate conflict-related risks as well as effects* (outcomes and impact) *by introducing peace-and-conflict* results chains and indicators *as well as other tools*. (Paffenholz and Reychler 2005: 16, my emphasis)

By introducing managerial tools – such as the current focus on measuring the 'effectiveness' of peacebuilding (Paffenholz and Reychler 2007; Anderson 2004; Hoffman 2004) – critical questions about the causes of violent conflict and the future outlook of societies emerging from conflict are depoliticised (cf. Ferguson 1994). These tools have become part of the daily life worlds of people working on 'peacebuilding', as shown by the following small excerpts from a conversation between the author and a desk officer from the 'conflict unit' of a large bilateral donor agency in its European headquarters:

> *Part of my culture shock [when returning from a field assignment in Kosovo] was about the importance of manuals and check-lists that are perceived very differently in the field (. . .) The introduction of the new conflict matrix has created needs for [in-house] consultancy. If people from the field approach us, we provide them with manuals and check-lists or examples of TORs for external consultants (. . .) If you talk to some of the people in the field offices about the new conflict matrix, you get hit by the collected frustrations about development co-operation. This is a sort of 'anti-mainstreaming': People work with the conflict matrix to be left in peace [sic!], but they do not engage with the actual meaning and contents; this is similar to what I have observed with the 'gender' topic.*

In addition to the 'conflict matrix', the government of the country has recently approved a 'cross-sectoral policy concept' on peacebuilding and runs a special network of different implementing organisations that collect and disseminate 'best practices' on peacebuilding – among many other initiatives to 'professionalise' and 'institutionalise' peacebuilding. Such institutional and practical arrangements are tailored to the (perceived) need to present 'success' (Mosse 2005). But they never actively include those whose experience might help to turn them from the artefacts of a 'non-place' into something that could respond to the particular issues that matter in particular places – neither the field staff and development and peace workers of aid organisations, nor the people in (post-) conflict situations that should 'benefit' from the projects and programmes.

The limits of 'peacebuilding'

Critical literature on the limitations on 'peacebuilding' is available for all the countries where external engagement took place from the mid-1990s until today (Paris 2004). In the case of Latin America, for example, Colombia, El Salvador, and Guatemala are three countries where 'peacebuilding' has failed after decades of war and violence (comprising all aspects of 'gendered' violence against children and women as well as gang and criminal violence mainly involving men), and poverty is widespread (Preti 2002; Pearce 1999). This should come as no surprise, because although the 'root causes' of the conflict are known (including land distribution, income inequality, and a small powerful elite running the country), the engagement of the international community, especially of the international financial institutions (IFIs), showed that imposing short-sighted liberal governance frameworks helped to stabilise existing elite structures. Large sections of the elite had accepted the need for economic liberalisation, but had not accepted 'the need for redistribution or even responsibility to invest domestic resources in the reconstruction of the country' (Boyce 1999: 57). They let the international community take care of the '87 per cent majority' in Guatemala, because fundamental changes, for example through land reforms, were dismissed as 'left-wing, communist' experiments by US policy makers and IFI staff.

One could argue that these were early examples of 'peacebuilding', and that the special US history in this region makes it difficult to regard them as 'representative' cases; but the more general point here is that 'peacebuilding' as defined by the international community could

never carry transformative potential. Instead, it often became a cover for familiar development interventions. And, as elsewhere in development, there was little critical attention paid to systemic shortcomings, and to 'worst practices' from around the 'peacebuilding' globe (East Timor, Kosovo, Mozambique, Sri Lanka, or Rwanda, for example).

Augé remarks that 'certain places exist only through the words that evoke them, and in this sense they are non-places, or rather, imaginary places' (1995: 95). In the non-place of 'Aidland' (Apthorpe 2005), peacebuilding has become such a word; and 'building peace in [country name]' has certainly become an imaginary place. Discursive interactions, governed by accepted methodologies, terms, and frameworks, have established rules of engagement that are similar to the rules of the road and 'instructions for use' that Augé describes in his travels through 'non-places':

> *This establishes the traffic conditions of spaces in which individuals are supposed to interact only with texts, whose proponents are not individuals, but "more entities" or institutions (airports, airlines, Ministry of Transport; commercial companies, traffic police, municipal councils [or aid organisations, NGOs, think tanks,. . .]).* (1995: 96)

Kathmandu in 2006: donor amnesia in 'Aidland'

In Nepal, after five decades of 'development' and ten years of violent conflict between the army and Maoist insurgents/rebels/terrorists, Kathmandu has remained in a 'bubble of innocence', as one donor representative described the state of mind in the city that seems remarkably far away from 'underdevelopment' or 'war'. When the people formed a democracy movement in April 2006 and demonstrated on the streets of the capital, few conflict advisers and inhabitants of the bubble were able to predict the fundamental political changes that were about to happen. But they quickly shared their relief that the promising signs of the Maoist party joining 'mainstream politics', a forthcoming constituent assembly, and parliamentary elections will put Nepal back on the 'road to development'.

Some donors were relieved that they could now continue with work they had planned before the violent conflict, and that the small Nepali elite in Kathmandu seems to be willing to address the challenges, 'root causes' that have kept Nepal in 'poverty' for the past 55 years. In this fast-moving environment, people in Kathmandu did not or could not spend time to reflect on the conflict that has cost around 13,000 lives so far, but started to look forward to the bright 'post-conflict' future of the country.

INGOs, individuals, and aid specialists from other post-war 'non-places' quickly arrived in Kathmandu to share their approaches, always stressing that they needed to be tailored to Nepal, of course. 'Arms management', 'security sector reforms', 'transitional justice' – the Fall 2006 collection arrived in Kathmandu straight from the peacebuilding catwalks in Europe without looking outside the 'bubble', or searching for stories in the remote villages of Nepal, asking local people about the future direction of their country. A former 'conflict adviser' of a European donor observes:

> *When I first attended the meetings of the conflict advisors' group I was surprised to find them talking over simple and conservative conflict analyses and I immediately started to wonder whether these guys [all but one were men at that time] should know these things by now and before coming to Kathmandu.*

Harmonisation may be all the rage in today's Aidland, but, as this donor went on to comment, donor co-ordination in the peacebuilding industry seems somewhat over-enthusiastic: *'We had 400 meetings after the February 1 coup of the King in 2005. I knew more about what the Japanese and Americans were doing than about our projects in the field.'*

The professional life-world in Kathmandu was also matched by the sheltered private lifestyle of most international inhabitants of 'Aidland', because the Maoist violence never reached the Kathmandu Valley. As another donor representative remarked half-jokingly:

> *Travelling to the field was declared as 'too dangerous' from a very early stage of the conflict. So how did the international community experience 'the conflict'? During one of the longest* bandhs *[general strikes and blockades announced by the Maoists] people had to switch from fresh groceries to the canned* Dole-*stuff in the supermarkets and then had something to talk about for days!*

'Peacebuilding' is almost always linked to issues of 'governmentality' – making 'chaotic' and 'unsafe' places fit for (neo)liberal democracy. Nepal is doomed to be a success-story of how a violent conflict can be transformed through peaceful, democratic means and adoption of the latest fashion in 'peacebuilding'. Neither critical voices nor lessons learned from the failed development of Nepal, nor indeed the history of failed 'peacebuilding' interventions elsewhere, will enter the narrative of 'success'.

The end of history?

'Peacebuilding' has become a lifestyle for a small community of global 'cosmopolitans' who travel from aid city to aid city. As the current situation in Kathmandu shows, post-war engagement always seems to start from zero, without history or critical baggage. The simple word 'peacebuilding' has become a 'non-space', part of the supermodern aid industry. But even if it sounds paradoxical after such a devastating overview, we still know very little about the inner workings of this 'non-place'. Beth Fetherston points out that the 'irrationality of warzones' is not understood by those who promote 'peacebuilding':

> *Understandings of war implied in the definitions, researches and methodologies of conflict settlement and CR [Conflict Resolution] lack connection to the everydayness of the warzone. These kinds of descriptions of war and its aftermath fail to catch its complexity and deep effects on social space and meaning.* (Fetherston 2000b: 9)

Anthropological micro-studies have recently begun to emerge that raise uncomfortable questions about agency, participation, and inner workings of wars (Hoffman and Lubkemann 2005; Richards 2005; Utas 2005; Nordstrom 2004). Such accounts highlight alternative forms of 'governance' and order that 'peacebuilding' finds difficult to address, because they lie outside the normative framework of the liberal democratic model. They show that a great many people benefit from war, and some are even 'empowered' by it; and they challenge taken-for-granted understandings about the gender dynamics of war and peace. What such studies make apparent is that it is only by better understanding how social interactions change during war, and how relationships and power are maintained after its 'end', that the 'non-place' of peacebuilding can be peopled with the diversity of experiences of war and peace of those who live in situations of conflict.

To make sense of the disconnect between the virtual world created by the peacebuilding narrative and lived experience, further study is also needed of the outside actors who engage in 'peacebuilding', those who send dedicated and motivated people into 'post-war' situations or sit at the geographical or thematic desks in ministries, aid organisations, and research institutions. 'Aidnography' has emerged as a term to describe ethnographic research in the realities of aid projects to uncover relationships, negotiation processes, and the 'being' of development projects. This is also needed for the organisations and projects that aim at 'building peace'.

These two avenues of further inquiry are not separate, because they are both looking into complexity, the everyday reality of war and 'peacebuilding', and different forms of sense-making of the realities that constitute the 'non-place' of peacebuilding. The development workers in the headquarters in Europe, in the aid cities, and in the projects in 'the field' will be a key factor in pricking the 'bubble'. Listening to people living in war and in peace, acknowledging their stories and those of the people who inhabit Aidland, and naming the uncertainties and failures that are part of these worlds, can help to bring a transformative element into a debate that is currently buried under the high pressure of supermodern aid management.

Without these stories, and without more reflection on our own engagement and more qualitative insights into the social dynamics of war and peace, 'peacebuilding' will not even remain a buzzword. It will become another 'airport' on the global development travel routes – 'This is the final call for the *Aidlines* flight from "gender" to "peacebuilding", with a quick stop-over in "participation" '. Gillie Bolton's example from medical professionals could be an entry point for the development and peace profession as well:

> *Bringing our everyday stories into question is an adventure. No one adventures securely in their backyard. Professionals need to face the uncertainty of not knowing what's round the corner, where they're going, how they'll travel, when they'll meet dragons or angels, and who the comrades are. They even have to trust why they're going. A student commented: 'What a relief it is to know that this uncertainty is essential; knowing that makes me feel less uncertain of being uncertain. Now uncertainty is my mantra'.* (Bolton 2006: 210)[1]

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Note

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The author

After a critical learning experience at the Peace Studies Department at the University of Bradford, Tobias Denskus says he became a citizen of 'Aidland', 'working, living, listening to people and often shaking my head in disbelief at UNDP in Nepal, in a humanitarian NGO in Kabul Afghanistan, and through research into German peacebuilding projects in Macedonia'. He now has dual citizenship, as PhD student at the Institute of Development Studies (which sometimes appears to be 'Reflectionland') and in Aidland from time to time. Contact details: Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Participation, Power and Social Change Group, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK. <T.Denskus@ids.ac.uk>