Ploughing Through the Field: An Introduction to the PCIA Handbook Debate

Martina Fischer & Oliver Wils

Over the last ten years, interest in conflict prevention and peacebuilding activities has increased significantly. Relief and development organisations working in places of civil war have raised awareness of conflict-sensitive planning and are seeking to integrate peacebuilding activities into their work. They have learned from recent experiences in war-torn societies that well-intended activities might have unintended outcomes and that development cooperation is never neutral in conflict situations. Under unfavourable conditions it may further entrench unjust power structures and prolong situations of war. This is also true of humanitarian aid. A series of problematic side-effects has been identified, showing that the influx of resources can induce dramatic changes in the political and economic situation on the ground and can cause turmoil in local markets. Equally dangerous are implicit messages conveyed by development or relief agencies and inappropriate or ill-reflected behaviour of the project staff which, often unintentionally, can fuel conflicts.

Whereas some humanitarian and relief agencies are interested in avoiding unintended negative impacts, others have engaged intensively in reflecting on the impact of their strategies. They want to contribute actively to peace processes and overcome structures of violence. State and non-state actors in these fields started to discuss how to combine strategies, methods and instruments of conflict resolution and transformation with their traditional approaches and working programmes. Moreover, in the late 1990s, organisations and institutions, which have gained experience in peace work and conflict resolution, began to reflect on the impact of their work. The question of how to evaluate activities aimed at peacebuilding and conflict transformation gained importance not only for researchers and scholars but also for practitioners. They wanted and still want to know which strategies work under which conditions, and they are asking themselves: Are we doing the right thing at the right moment? Could we do other things which could be more useful instead?

Finally, donor organisations which have opened up new budget lines earmarked for conflict resolution and transformation activities are also interested in improving practices and evaluation methods for

serious assessment of programmes and projects. Some donors even oblige their partners to deliver evaluation reports on their interventions. Others have become actively involved in discussions on the conceptualization of evaluation.

As a result of this interest, there is a high demand for "model" projects, good practices and "lessons learned" which are transferable to other projects and regions. At the same time, however, supply does not match this demand. There are still no quick and easy answers to the question of how best to assess, monitor and evaluate peace practices. On the contrary, experience shows that assessing and measuring the impact and outcomes of peacebuilding activities is actually a very complicated task. There are at least three major reasons for this: *First,* conflicts are by nature highly complex and dynamic. *Second,* the field of peacebuilding is a relatively young one as many organisations only emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. It is therefore not surprising that many strategies, methods and instruments still remain in a test phase and therefore need further elaboration and investigation. *Third,* under the label PCIA, we find quite different concepts and approaches. For some users, PCIA is a toolset that is applied for programme planning, while others regard it as a framework for evaluation and cross-country comparison. Similarly, some view it as a method to contribute and monitor the contribution of an intervention to peacebuilding, while others use PCIA for screening the impact of a conflict on the project itself.

The articles and response papers in this collection reflect the state-of-the-art in the debate on PCIA. The authors are scholars and practitioners involved in peacebuilding and / or development cooperation. They all have extensive experience in project and programme evaluation and can thus provide the reader with an excellent overview of the issues and questions at stake. The articles cover most if not all of the contested concepts and perspectives that PCIA offers so far. Nevertheless, the readers should not expect documentation which provides final answers. Rather, some contributors aim to challenge current assumptions and raise new questions rather than creating recipes or toolboxes.

Indeed, the initial intention of the Berghof Handbook Team was to initiate a discussion that drew out critical issues by holding contending positions next to each other. By "ploughing through" the stony field needs were identified for further investigation in the field of Action Research.

Mapping the Handbook Debate

In order to create a lively debate, the editors of the Handbook asked Mark Hoffman to write a comprehensive article that was then distributed for comment to other scholars and practitioners. Initially, Kenneth Bush and Christoph Feyen were asked to respond. Other authors such as Manuela Leonhardt, Marc Howard Ross and Jay Rothman joined the debate and offered their comments. The task given to the contributors was that (a) anything could be written as long as it was substantiated, taking a "free writing" approach, (b) any form could be used, whether inserted comments or a complete new article, and (c) within the parameters of the exercise – to be extremely provocative.

As already mentioned, the authors of the articles and response papers use quite different approaches to PCIA. Nevertheless, there are some basic topics that all articles focus on or, at least, touch upon. In order to map the debate, we can identify six topics or clusters of argument:

1. The question of **ownership** is a frequently debated issue in most of the articles. Kenneth Bush argues strongly that PCIA has the potential to empower actors from the South. He asks whether mainstreaming PCIA in (northern) donor organisations will not lead to substantial depoliticisation and commodification and control. Manuela Leonhardt cautions against oversimplifying the matter. According to her, different stakeholders have very different interests in and needs for PCIA, which includes potential for both empowerment and control. Thus, it is not the mainstreaming of PCIA *per se* which is at stake, but rather the underlying objectives and expectations. These should be brought into the open.

2. The question of ownership goes hand in hand with the **level of participation**: Are local stakeholders only information givers or do they play a central role in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of the projects? All authors emphasize the benefit of local participation, but to different degrees. The most radical perspective is given by Marc Howard Ross and Jay Rothman, who argue in favour of designing peacebuilding initiatives on the basis of local perspectives and knowledge.

3. Another area of discussion revolves around the **question of attribution**, especially addressing the **gap between micro and macro level**. Mark Hoffman argues that PCIA does not provide for a logical relation between the impacts of peacebuilding projects (micro level) and the structural (macro) level of the

conflict. This problem is, however, not new to evaluators. Leonhardt suggests evaluating projects on a realistic proportionality given their limited resources and scope of intervention. By drawing from experiences in development cooperation, she suggests measuring impacts on the macro level by combining empirical research and the use of "logical plausibility".

4. What is strongly disputed is the quest for **generally applicable indicators** as suggested by Hoffman. All other authors stress the importance of **specificity and context-relatedness**. The necessity of embedding indicators into the local and specific situation is clearly outlined. On the other hand, there are also benefits in more generalised sets of indicators that would allow for cross-country comparison or, as Hans Gsänger and Christoph Feyen mention, for practical application. It is only fair to mention that Hoffman asked for broad typologies of indicators, instead of a set of "pre-cooked" indicators independent from time and space.

5. Related to the dispute of generality versus specificity is the question of **standard operation procedures versus open and flexible approaches**. Hoffman's plead for a set of standardised criteria is strongly criticized by Bush. He emphasizes the importance of principles such as open-endedness, unpredictability and creativity in peacebuilding. However, Hoffman's point that a lack of clarity might hinder any serious effort of evaluation is not really solved.

6. Another topic touched upon in all articles is the **role of theory** and the **explicitness of hypotheses and assumptions**. All authors agree that the expected outcomes and impacts of projects are guided by underlying hypotheses and theories of social change. All contributors point out that it is important to make these underlying assumptions explicit. However, although the perspectives of the authors differ – some, for example, use a deductive methodology while others follow an inductive approach – there was only very limited discussion on how to make best use of theory.

What lessons can be drawn from the debate?

The debate allows us to draw some general conclusions that inform the further elaboration of PCIA:

- The variety of concepts and methodologies of assessing and measuring impacts makes it unlikely that a single concept of PCIA will emerge soon. In principle, there is no disadvantage in this multitude of approaches. However, confusion starts when similar methods have different labels, while very different approaches are summarized under the same heading, as is the case with PCIA. Assessing impact of projects *on* conflicts, for example, should be clearly separated from methods that focus on how projects are affected *by* conflicts. These are two different methodologies. Similarly, post-project evaluation tools should not be mixed with a monitoring and evaluation approach that is integrated into project cycle management.

- Most of the authors prefer a PCIA approach that takes the micro level of the project as the point of departure. The preference of the micro over the macro level is based on a) the uniqueness and specificities of local situations and projects, and b) an increasing tendency to involve local stakeholders in project planning and management. The challenge of PCIA is to link these individual projects with other initiatives and to develop a set of objectives and indicators at the meso and/or macro levels of conflict. Complex frameworks might result in a monitoring and evaluation design far too ambitious for most projects. Rather, a disaggregation is needed, with the levels and sectors which projects aim to have an impact on being clearly stated.

- The debate on PCIA demonstrates a deep cleavage between practitioners and scholars. Gsänger and Feyen argue that "PCIA is far from being a useful tool as the gap between the conceptual design and the practice has not yet been closed". Thus, a certain degree of pragmatism is required. In the first place, PCIA needs to be applicable in the field, and must be capable of being communicated to local partners and integrated into work routines. PCIA will be a dead end if it remains an academic exercise. Research can assist practical approaches by developing tools and methods to narrow the gap of attribution and to develop a more common framework for (cross-country) comparison.

- This leads us to the assumption that PCIA should be developed as an essential element of Action Research and within a

participatory framework guaranteeing that all relevant stakeholders in a project will be included in the evaluation process. In order to develop PCIA further, it is necessary to use it as a learning tool from the outset, not as a means of control. A culture of transparency and the willingness to share results would greatly enhance this prospect. Donors should motivate this process and create positive incentives for agencies, encouraging them to reflect critically on their peacebuilding activities. As long as projects are rewarded for good practices only, the willingness to discuss "failure" or negative consequences is reduced – and a learning opportunity missed. Funding criteria and "fashions" set up by donor agencies often contribute to inflexible or harmful practices as agencies are often reluctant to admit if conditions have changed and strategies they once suggested are no longer practicable. In order to create space for learning processes, donors therefore need to establish more flexible mechanisms and criteria.

Follow-ups and further discussions

It should be mentioned that the debate initiated by the Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation represents a cluster within an ongoing international discussion. Some partners of the European Peace Liaison Office (EPLO) have developed similar debates on PCIA and evaluation. Moreover, first results of the "Reflecting on Peace Practice" (RPP) project are under way and will be published soon. The RPP process was initiated by the US-based organisation "Collaborative for Development Action" (Mary Anderson) and the Swedish Life and Peace Institute three years ago as a follow-up of the "Do-no-harm" approach and the "Local Capacities for Peace" project. RPP has emerged as a joint learning project for agencies involved in working on Conflict. Scholars and practitioners from all continents and very different conflict areas have contributed studies to this endeavour.* This has included highly creative gatherings of experts and activists from around 100 "peace agencies". Among the most exciting conclusions from these events were the following:

- The majority of participants agreed that although evaluation and self-reflection on interventions are definitely needed, projects have to face the unavoidable problem that even if PCIA is applied, unintended effects might occur and projects could fail. Conflict-sensitive project assessments in the planning and implementation phase are necessary. But focussing too

* The RPP process is based on 26 studies. The Berghof Research Center contributed two cases (Bosnia and Cyprus).

extensively on the analysis of the project context and possible impacts might negatively affect the motivation of the people involved, if not paralyse the whole project. There is no ready-made recipe to overcome this dilemma. Rather, each organisation and its project staff have to solve it individually.

- Another open question which arose during the RPP process was how to measure success. Most agencies had no difficulties in identifying negative impacts (even if most of them were reluctant to admit failures openly and in public). But identifying positive impacts caused much more difficulty. One reason is the above-mentioned difficulty of attribution. Another problem is the lack of adequate criteria. What seems to be most important, however, is to answer the question about what should be looked at when trying to measure peace practices: "outcomes" or "processes"? It has become clear during the RPP process that this answer differs according to the different cultures, origins and histories of organisations involved.

The state-of-the-art in theory and practice of PCIA shows clearly that more debate is needed to foster exchange between different cultures of organisations, to widen perspectives and to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation offers a forum for further discussions on and studies of PCIA. We invite scholars and practitioners to contribute to this debate with innovative papers and think-pieces.