Exiting Conflict, Owning the Peace

Local Ownership in International Peace Operations

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- Local ownership is regarded as a desirable outcome of international peace operations, which enables local people to control reform and reconstruction processes, and internationals to eventually scale down or end their presence in a country.

- Yet, beyond this broad characterisation, local ownership is an unclear and contested idea, which provokes mis-understandings among local and international constituencies, and makes it harder to achieve outcomes which are satisfactory to all of these groups.

- A study of three cases of late-stage intervention - Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan - shows why ›local ownership‹ is a problematic concept in these contexts, and reveals the need to find new ways of framing and organising increasingly dysfunctional relationships between external actors and locals, to restore trust, effectiveness and legitimacy in peace operations. These could include human security peacebuilding contracts, a change in communications strategies and re-thinking the ›local‹ dimension in conflict affected societies.

International
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Introduction

How do we generate positive outcomes to long-running peacebuilding operations? How do we define an exit from conflict that is driven by the people and their needs? The idea of ›local ownership‹ is frequently put forward as a way of answering these questions and legitimising external intervention, through transferring power from outsiders to locals, and at the same time providing the means by which the international community can withdraw, summarised in the phrase ›going local to go out‹.

The aim of the study project undertaken by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the London School of Economics, was to explore the concept of ›local ownership‹, and the way it is linked to achieving a satisfactory end to external intervention. We wanted to know if ›local ownership‹ was a useful concept and practice in the discourse of peace- and statebuilding, particularly in cases of late-stage intervention. To do that we had to first clarify what is understood by the term and how it is used on the ground.

The study began with the assumption that ›local ownership‹ has developed as a shorthand way of describing the relationship between different local and international actors. Our approach was to substantiate ›local ownership‹ as a relational, interactive concept through examining these actors' expectations and desires concerning the intervention. The study was also guided by the observation that ›local ownership‹, and the quality of peacebuilding relationships assumed greater significance in mature interventions with a heavy international footprint. The longer and more intense the international community's engagement, the more critical the power balance and interaction between peacebuilding actors become. This is the case in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan where the international community has been engaged in statebuilding for between one and almost two decades. In each case, locals and internationals expect intervention to deliver reforms which cement and sustain peace. However, time is also a critical element in this process as all sides now want to move beyond a situation where outsiders dominate security and governance in the country. In all three cases, intervention has yielded only partial gains and the balance of power between actors remains in flux and unsettled.

The project had an important characteristic which distinguishes it from other studies on this topic. It adopted a human security approach, meaning that it focused on the needs of individuals and groups within peace- and statebuilding processes, and emphasised principles such as a bottom up perspective, and the creation of legitimate political authority. Local ownership is an expression of those principles which is why it is also a critical component in delivering human security.

A human security approach also determined our methodology. We undertook comparative bottom-up case studies of Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan over a period of 18 months – 2 years, with fieldwork carried out by local researchers. The study targeted four groups for interviews: internationals, local elites, local NGOs and grass roots civic representatives. In each group 5-10 interviewees were selected, with efforts to include a representative mix between ethnic communities, ages, genders and an urban-rural split. In total around 100 people participated, with a bias in the case of locals, towards those with existing contacts with internationals. A standard research questionnaire was adapted to each location and formed the basis of structured conversations with interviewees, framed in terms of three key questions:

1. What do different stakeholders define as legitimate outcomes of peace operations?

2. What are the processes and strategies by which these outcomes can be achieved?

3. What do stakeholders see as the main risks and threats to achieving the desired outcomes?

Findings of the Research

1. Understanding ›Local Ownership‹: Language and Terminology

One of the main findings of the research was that the key term of the study was itself contested. To international actors, the English word ›ownership‹ has a figurative sense, referring to the locus of political control or responsibility for political processes. When an international discussant observed, for example, that ›it is impossible to tell who is the owner of the political process‹, he means that ultimate responsibility for political decisions cannot

be determined. For local discussants in Bosnia and Kosovo, understanding of the term is strongly influenced by the experience of a paternalistic state, where physical assets such as housing and factories were ›owned‹ and controlled by the government, and relates more to property rights than to political control. In Afghanistan, ›local ownership' is generally understood as the progressive transfer of responsibilities to the Afghan state, and thus is associated with sovereignty and independence, although ownership as a process is contested and ambiguous.

There are also potential problems with using a term or concept which reflects more an aspiration than reality. Many respondents, both local and international, were clear that local actors have not directed the policy agenda in the post-war era. Many felt that international priorities for peacebuilding are often influenced by external factors, such as the domestic politics of intervening states or disputes among members of the international community. There is also a common view among local respondents that when the international community is determined to push a particular issue (such as visa liberalisation in BiH), it is generally implemented. This suggests that the international community risks appearing hypocritical in emphasizing ›local ownership‹, when it is widely acknowledged that the involvement of local actors is significantly constrained.

2. Dysfunctional Relationships

A prominent finding in the research is that of a dysfunctional relationship between all stakeholder groups in peacebuilding. At the heart of the idea of 'local ownership' is an ongoing interaction between these groups. However in all the cases studied in this project, multiple constituencies, each with an active role in reform and reconstruction, meant that local ownership depends on a series of overlapping and complex relationships which are constantly evolving, between and within local and international actors. Multiple relationships are problematic because of the complexity and opacity they bring to external-local interaction. Among externals, some countries are particularly vociferous, others are content to take a back seat role, although policy-makers in Brussels and national capitals may be less passive. Unclear and confusing mandates add to this complexity. So do frequent

changes of international personnel among internationals which is a feature of all the missions studied.

One effect of this complexity is that it becomes difficult to locate ownership. Multiplicity makes it impossible to tell who among different groups holds real power. Discerning the local interest is made further difficult by fractures within different local stakeholder groups, and the presence of gatekeepers which block transparent communication. ›Local interest‹ is reduced to the interests of the elite class by internationals, in the absence of a robust working relationship between them and the grass roots. Similarly, internationals are enmeshed in the local political processes, so that they are part of local games, and the dividing lines between internationals and locals can often seem blurred. Internationals are in fact domestic political actors. However they cannot be considered a coherent actor but rather represent, as some Afghan interviewees described it, a ›tribal community‹, which is itself composed of various sub-groups and factions and is highly heterogenous. Instead of effective interactions, multiple and complex relations result in dysfunctionality, which clouds a clear sense of agency – both on the part of internationals and locals. Whereas effective relationships are more likely to lead to a sense of local empowerment and lasting and beneficial reforms, dysfunctional relationships obscure these aims.

Relationships in all three cases are also marked by an underlying tension between each group's security needs or agendas. An example is the priority given to ›stability‹ by internationals versus concerns for justice which is more marked among some but not all local stakeholders. Similarly, internationals tend to focus on state and institution building, whereas local priorities centre much more on the need for socio-economic reconstruction, including improved job prospects. Employment generation tends to receive less attention than security issues in peacebuilding, reflecting a disjuncture between the greater ability of internationals to determine agendas and a relative weakness among local constituencies to direct the reform process.

3. Consequences of dysfunctional relationships

Other scholars have highlighted the deteriorating relationship between the external and local actors over the

course of mandates, resulting in outright resistance and opposition. By contrast, this research into mature interventions deconstructs this dysfunctionality to highlight specific dimensions of the relationship that are not working. Thus one of our unanticipated, but key findings points to a local demand for re-engagement – albeit on different terms- rather than for a straightforward exit which would imply resistance and opposition to governance by outsiders.

Interaction between international actors and locals suffers from the ever-present risk of intervention failure and pressure to ›keep the mission on track‹. While every peace- and state-building operation is an assymetrical exercise in terms of power distribution, there is a lack of agency in governance processes which reflects the dysfunctional nature of peacebuilding relationships. This dysfunctionality manifests itself in the following tendencies:

■ **bargaining** between external and local actors, which is conducted in an ad hoc manner depending on the urgency of the particular issue at stake. This bargaining takes place within a predetermined framework of policy targets and conditionality, and results in minimum, common denominator outcomes which distort the coherence of peacebuilding and ultimately the ideal of ownership itself as an exercise of local agency.

Bargaining is not a flexible and progressive process. It reflects, and at the same time perpetuates, mutual feelings of disempowerment by those involved – locals in the sense that they are conscious of their subordinated role and dependence on international engagement which may be unreliable and inconsistent; and internationals because of the difficulty of locating the sites of local power and of exerting meaningful influence.

■ **squeezing:** concluding bargains which justify the peacebuilders' mandate and ensure its implementation often implies squeezing local political autonomy without paying adequate attention to the potential impact of such a strategy on the relationships among various groups. For example, interviews suggested that certain actors are short-circuited in the outcome-oriented search to deliver a given policy. Internationals used NGOs to advance policies which local authorities were reluctant to adopt, in an example of how one stakeholder group can be used against another.

■ **fragmentation** occurs as different groups of actors strive to derive maximum gains from this unstable and unpredictable constellation of local-local and local–international interactions, and it leads to ultimately counterproductive alliances and strange bedfellows. External actors choose deals with local power-holders which exclude civil society (both NGOs and grass-roots at large), while there are also examples of both internationals and local elites conducting ad hoc partnerships with NGOs in order to validate their policies, in moves which ultimately misrepresent the interests of the population at large. At the other extreme NGO consultations which are usually restricted to a small elite concentrated in the capitals and do not represent civil society at large, work against a general understanding, buy-in, and resonance of externally-driven policies, and create neglected and marginalized groups, often at the grass-roots. Fragmentation diminishes the open political space for dialogue about the goals and the process of peacebuilding and the respective roles, responsibilities and accountability of all those involved. It also produces compromises over ›shallow ownership‹, where groups settle for limited forms of agency, which are neither substantive nor durable. An example of this is government ministers fronting announcements of reforms which are really settled by internationals.

4. The affective dimension of ownership

Research in the three locations revealed a significant affective dimension to ownership, consisting of mutual mistrust, lack of respect among various groups, and the tendency to put the blame on ›the other side‹ for the failure to achieve specific goals. The perception of local elites as actors who are driven by self-interest, opportunism and incompetence, and sustained by the inconsistent engagement, self- interest, double standards and incompetence of the international community dominate grass-roots views. There is deep resentment at the perceived subordinated role of ›locals‹ and in particular the absence of instruments that would allow genuine grassroots involvement in the peacebuilding process. These views are paralleled by a similar distrust among grass roots and local elites of the role played by NGOs. International actors for their part tend to see local elites as disingenuous, self-serving, manipulative and incompetent for their nominal roles. Whilst formally endorsing civil society activities, in actual fact internationals tend to subordinate

local information, knowledge and expertise to that which is externally produced. These mutual perceptions affect the communication between peacebuilding actors, their level of engagement and tolerance, and the exercise of accountability and responsibility which shape the local experience of ownership.

Policy Recommendations

1. Break the link between exit and ownership

While ›local ownership‹ is an attractive objective for international policy makers seeking to disengage from resource-intensive peacebuilding operations in a legitimate way, the study shows that the term is poorly fixed as a concept and thus unreliable as a policy goal. Discussions of ownership which are driven by an international desire for an ›exit strategy‹ risk becoming tied more to the exit itself rather than to meaningful local engagement. Instead, the focus should be on the level and quality of international engagement, and equal attention should be paid to ownership of the processes as well as the legitimacy of the outcomes.

2. Change of Communication Strategy

Communication is one of the most readily available ways of addressing the roots of dysfunctional relationships between external and local actors in mature interventions. Given the power asymmetry built into external interventions, communication is a critical tool both for legitimation and effectiveness of policies initiated and implemented on behalf of local beneficiaries. Examples of where clearer communication is needed are:

- Role clarification instead of ownership talk

Discussions of ownership, which as this research shows does not travel or translate adequately to other non-Western concepts, have proved only of limited benefit. Instead, more can be gained by setting clear boundaries of responsibility, scope of roles, implications of co-operation, and, conversely, non-cooperation, as well as processes of governance among all stakeholders.

- Manage expectations

Role delineation, clarification and communication of mission mandates are directly linked to better management of expectations, with particular attention to the fact that the winding-down of the intervention in terms of a military withdrawal, may not necessarily always mean scaling down the intervention by external governance actors. By contrast, the idea of exit raises expectations of palpable achievements prior to the departure of external actors.

- Address the affective dimension

Mature interventions, as this research shows, are prone to become mired in a deep sense of distrust, of which a logical consequence is a pervasive blame-game for inadequate outcomes. While the relationship between the internationals and locals represent the main fault line, the sense of dignity and respect are also shaped by dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in governance processes and consultations among different groups of local actors as well. Establishing and restoring communication channels on all aspects of policy is the first task in addressing the sense of marginalisation and exclusion. This should take place at the level of perpetually revisited/revised overall mission goals and mandates, and, in parallel, a focus on specific policy areas. A publicly available record of consultations, logged by policy area and also according to who engaged in the consultation would further contribute to transparency.

3. Reframe relationships

The key challenge for peacebuilding missions, identified by this research, is to be able to gauge from the bottom-up, and more accurately than at present, what local populations want and need from peacebuilding policies, whoever ultimately delivers them. Relationships between internationals and locals need to recognise that gatekeepers among local elites and ›organized‹ civil society are likely to be poor filters for policy preferences, in the absence of robust democratic institutions, and will reflect self-interest, often ethnically framed, that is disconnected or even opposed to the interests of a broader society, unrepresented either by NGOs or political parties. Equally internationals alone cannot unilaterally, or as a result of shady alliances with selective local constituencies, deliver acceptable policy reforms. Consequently,

peace operations must disaggregate the local political landscape, paying particular attention to those whose voices have not been heard in the process, and define new instruments for understanding the needs and aspirations of different constituencies in the reform process. Peacebuilding operations must frame relationships within the reform process which can adapt and respond continuously and more effectively to the ever changing landscape of long term interaction between multiple local and international groups.

Concretely, consideration should be given to supplementing mission mandates after a certain period with peacebuilding compacts. Although these compacts would not replace mandates as legal documents, they would be an additional means by which to regulate the relationship between different groups within the peacebuilding process. There are various models of ›compacts‹ in Sierra Leone, Burundi, Afghanistan, Iraq and Timor Leste, and scholarly literature on this aspect of peacebuilding. They attempt to provide a public framework for engagement between externals and locals on the basis of mutual accountability and joint commitment. Going beyond ›compacts‹, we propose the idea of a human security contract to supplement mission mandates (or indeed follow on from them where these run out and are not renewed once formal missions end). Human security contracts would represent a two-way political agreement, to rebuild the diminishing legitimacy of outside interveners in mature peace operations, reset peacebuilding relationships and address the affective deficits noted in extended interventions (such as trust, respect, dignity).

Human security contracts would be context specific, negotiated in a transparent process, at regular pre-determined intervals, and generate a formal sense of responsibility and accountability. The process of developing such a HS contract is as important as the outcome, initiating a broad dialogue in between all stakeholder groups with a focus on arguing, convincing and negotiating instead of bargaining, commanding or squeezing. Their principal aim should be to promote public dialogue on the objectives and priorities of peacebuilding, and to define the roles and relationships of external and local actors. Their ongoing functioning would necessarily also include a consultative process, including the possibility of participation by all stakeholder groups and unaffiliated individuals; soft accountability mechanisms such as benchmarking, two-way (local-external) monitoring and evaluation,

mechanisms for agenda setting and prioritisation and a platform for co-opting additional donors and stakeholders. To redress the asymmetry of power relations attention could be paid to processes of mutual learning and shared experiences as part of peacebuilding dialogues. A human security contract could help to institutionalise such a new type of interaction between multiple local and international groups, while making it clear that all groups have something to gain (and to learn) from more intense co-operative interactions.

However the main point about human security contracts as successors to mission mandates is that they are not just ceremonial or symbolic on the one hand, nor largely unilateral, on the other – both characteristics which define current peacebuilding arrangements. In order to counter the complexity and dysfunctionality of existing relationships which this research has observed, and to address the emotional and psychological hazards which long-term intervention produces, a new relationship has to emerge which is performative, verifiable and which offers dignity to all parties.

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