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On Peacebuilding Practice: Meaning, Explicitness, Impacts and Opportunities

Much of the current popular literature on water and environmental conflict emphasizes the potential for international "resource wars" and increased civil unrest in an increasingly industrialized, urbanized and globalized world. This dynamic, however, is only one element of a much larger story that requires an integrated understanding of both *cooperation* and *conflict* as a consequence of concurrent social and environmental conditions. While competition associated with achieving and maintaining environmental security can serve as a dividing and polarizing force in societies, the basic human need for access to natural resources, such as water, can also contribute to cooperation and peacebuilding. With a heavy emphasis on the negative manifestations of competition, there remains a limited understanding of the correlated potential to cooperate and build peace through joint management of environmental resources, particularly in the context of otherwise contentious dynamics in divided societies. Experience demonstrates the potential for positive social outcomes through "environmental peacebuilding" – as seen in the Nile Basin Initiative, the forests of Southeast Asia, and the drinking wells of India. By observing human experience we can develop a holistic understanding of resource conflict and cooperation, and this knowledge in turn can contribute to the development of sustainable and peaceful communities through environmental peacebuilding practice. A full understanding of these relationships requires a more contextualized and integrated analysis of environmental conditions, social conflict, and peacebuilding practice than has previously been offered. An important unit of analysis and a critical point of departure in this study is the meaning of the terminology we use, and in turn the effect that terminology has on our practical interventions in the field.

Much of my work, which focuses on conflict-sensitive approaches to development, is developed around the assumption that "peacebuilding" and "sustainable development" are mutually reinforcing. Yet, as George Orwell would argue, these terms lose their meaning and become distorted with overuse. I would argue that, more specifically, their meaning becomes convoluted, and that this has implications for peacebuilding practice.

It seems appropriate to begin by returning to the basics, asking *what is 'peacebuilding'?* Or at least, what do *I* mean by it? The environmental security literature, which is foundational to current thinking about "environmental peacebuilding", emphasizes the importance of a systems approach in both conflict analysis and conflict resolution practice.[1] The systems approach is underpinned by a theory of practice that aims for peacebuilding "writ large", which is determined by the philosophy that durable peace demands reflective and multidimensional approaches. *Peacebuilding writ small* (the traditional conception of "peacebuilding", and a component of peacebuilding writ large) aims for "conflict transformation" and "provention",[2]described by Dennis Sandole as: "[dealing] with the long-term relationships among the surviving occupants of the house, and between them and their 'neighbors,' such that, 'next time,' they can resort to less lethal means of conflict handling than burning down the house".[3] Peacebuilding writ small, as such, engenders social resilience, inclusion and cohesion through focused, localized practical activities that exercise provention. *Peacebuilding writ large*, outlined in Pillar Three of Sandole's "Three Pillar Approach to Conflict Resolution" embodies a multi-faceted, multidimensional approach to conflict resolution, which merges *peacebuilding writ small* with four additional intervention areas: (i) violent conflict prevention (preventive diplomacy), (ii) conflict management (peacekeeping), (iii) conflict settlement (coercive peacemaking), and (vi) conflict resolution (non-coercive peacemaking). This type of intervention, in its philosophy, emphasizes a holistic approach aimed collectively to include these five dimensions. Peacebuilding *writ large* facilitates the establishment of "positive peace" (Galtung, 1996).[4] The development projects I have taken as cases in my research on environmental peacebuilding and conflict-sensitive approaches to development are examples of *peacebuilding writ small*, although they are related to peacebuilding writ large in that they have multiplier effects that reinforce *peacebuilding writ large*.

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[1] Louise Diamond and Ambassador John W. McDonald, *Multi-Track Diplomacy: A Systems Approach to Peace*, 3rd ed. (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1996).

[2] John Burton uses the invented term "provention" to avoid the negative connotations of containment associated with the term, "prevention". Provention is both theory and practice based on basic human needs theory, which implies that when one's basic human needs (i.e. physical and psychological needs) are not met there is potential for conflict. Provention, as a theory of practice, determines the necessity of addressing the factors that prevent individuals from satisfying their needs. Provention, thus holistically embodies both conflict "resolution" and "prevention" (Burton, 1990). Peacebuilding "writ large" thus is synonymous with provention.

[3] Dennis J.D. Sandole, "A Comprehensive Mapping of Conflict and Conflict Resolution: A Three Pillar Approach," *Peace and Conflict Studies* 5, no. 2 (1998): 5.

[4] Johan Galtung (1969 *as well as* 1996) is the architect of the distinction between "negative peace" (the absence of "direct" violence) and "positive peace" (the absence of "structural" and "cultural" violence). For example, when a ceasefire is enacted, negative peace begins. Positive peace is characterized by positive social developments such as restoration of relationships, creation of social systems that serve the needs of the whole population, and constructive conflict resolution and prevention. "Peace" does not mean the total absence of conflict. It means the absence of violence in all forms and the capacity for affected societies to manage conflict in constructive ways.

In considering opportunities for peacebuilding through various interventions in conflict-affected communities it is useful to explore the role of *social construction* both of conflict issues, and first and third party roles in conflict-making and resolution. A social constructionist perspective on social relations asserts that humans, through their own associations, create meaning to understand their surroundings. Discourse and discursive processes have become a significant unit of analysis in the endeavor to understand human relations, social structures and conflict. For example, bringing parties to talk about "peace" and "conflict" explicitly promotes transparency in meaning and intent, and brings to light perceptions on contentious issues and social relations. For third parties, being explicit about "peacebuilding" creates an opportunity to deconstruct these socially constructed interrelationships that manifest conflict and violence.

However, even when "we mean what we say", baggage comes with the words we use. The terminology we use as third parties, like "peacebuilding", is also socially constructed from a practitioner's perspective, and reconstructed by engaged first parties. Using this terminology can have different effects in different contexts depending on the dynamics of the situation. A local Program Officer from the Sarajevo office of CARE International once told me while discussing the successes and failures of peacebuilding programs in post-war Bosnia: "Reconciliation often happens best when we do not call it that".[5] The correlation is that we narrow the scope of impacts when we put the word "peace", "peacemaking" or "peacebuilding" on the work we do. The concept of "peace" is tied up in politics, it leads to self-censorship and self-selection in programs that have the "peace" label, and it treads touchy ground for organizations that either have an a contrasting political position toward "peace" or that are explicitly apolitical. Yes, there are benefits to "calling a spade a spade", but there are also strategic benefits to being more discreet.

This assertion from an experienced NGO practitioner in the field furthermore reinforces that projects both explicit and non-explicit about their peacebuilding objectives can each generate peace dividends and positive social impacts that fall under the rubric of "peacebuilding". Thus, if "peace happens" even when we do not try to make it happen, and if we are not quantifying those outcomes, then as conflict resolution experts we are still missing half of the story with regard to our knowledge of peacebuilding. My research on conflict-sensitive approaches to development considers this question of "explicitness", and the effect that

[5] Interview, Sarajevo, 22 March 2003.

explicit peacebuilding objectives can have on project outcomes. Of foremost importance in this exploration is the assumption that although non-explicit environmental management projects do not proclaim to "do peacebuilding", they can, and they often do.

As a function of management large organizations often silo areas of knowledge and management. In international development, for example, "water" is done by "water specialists", "environment" by "environment specialists", "social" by "social specialists", "conflict" by "conflict specialists", and so on. Interdisciplinary approaches are challenging enough – bringing together engineers, economists, and social scientists to work together toward a common development objective. But interdisciplinary approaches are even more difficult when collaboration also requires working across organizational boundaries and managing the internal politics of departmentally allocated responsibilities. The intent of the theory of practice of "peacebuilding writ large" is not to be *siloed*, but rather to be *integrated* into a multidisciplinary perspective on sustainability. By breaking down these silos within our organizations we can find new opportunities for collaboration. Overcoming institutional barriers and compartmentalized knowledge within the field of "development" (and even "relief" for that matter) we can capitalize on the breadth of relationship building opportunities that exist, overcome organizational shortsightedness, and ultimately *snowball peacebuilding impacts*.

Conflict-sensitive approaches to development are not only to ensure that we, as practitioners, "do no harm". They must also be about "doing development better". Many aid agencies, particularly after seeing the fallout from their policies in the late 80s and through 90s, began developing new "safeguard" policies and more socially sensitive approaches to ensure "inclusion" and "participation". Institutionally, especially when dealing with the bureaucracy of large organizations (within the UN system, bilateral agencies), this has manifested an expansion in *procedures*. But has it manifested better outcomes? Probably in many cases, yes. However, the bureaucratic ramifications of an emphasis on "do no harm" can limit the vision, enthusiasm and creativity that feeds our best work in the realm of peacebuilding. Our *best work* should consider the opportunities for peacebuilding that are inherent in development and other kinds of "non-explicit" interventions in conflict-affected communities.

Thus to make real progress with regard to *peacebuilding*, we need not just to include it more explicitly in our list of organizational priorities, funding mechanisms, and project literature. As conflict and violence are

interlinked within a web of causal and escalatory factors, third party attempts at enabling resolution and peacebuilding should be approached with equal analytical complexity. As practitioners in the fields of *conflict resolution* and *development* we need to think more integratively about linkages between our fields, and within the problem space at the first party/conflict and third party/organizational levels. We will then be better equipped to facilitate the positive social change that we envision.