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Civil Society and Post-Conflict Peace Building: Ambiguities of International Programs Aimed at Building 'New Societies'

Béatrice Pouligny*

pouligny@ceri-sciences-po.org

http://www.ceri-sciences-po.org/cherlist/pouligny.htm

Most of the recent peace operations and related programs aimed at peace building contain objectives and components (and more particularly those relating to human rights and electoral process) explicitly geared toward working with NGOs in the countries where they are undertaken. Other aspects of the mandates (refugee repatriation, preparation of the post-conflict phase...) usually anticipate working with international and local NGOs. This approach reveals the increasing recognition that non-governmental actors play a large role in both the domestic and international scene. In war-torn societies, the creation and consolidation of NGOs are considered as part of the process of democratisation. As one of the constituents of the local civil society, through monitoring and lobbying activities, they may push the local state to fulfil its responsibility for implementing the rule of law – an important focus in the current crisis management approach. More pragmatically, this corresponds to an attempt by outsiders to identify 'civil society' against a 'failed' state, to play NGOs, intellectuals, women, religious groups or 'elders' against 'warlords', 'low politics' against 'high politics'.

While these motivations and attempts are praiseworthy, they are not necessarily supported by the way the vague, highly polysemic and ambiguous notions of both 'NGOs' and 'civil society' are generally referred to in such contexts. In this contribution, I would like to concentrate on three main issues that effect the utilization of these references, in addition to the consequences this may have on peace building strategies and practices. My reflection will

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* Dr Béatrice Pouligny is Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for International Studies and Research (CERI / Sciences-Po / CNRS) and Professor at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris. She has had previous field experience with the UN and NGOs in different parts of the world. Most of her research is focused on conflict resolution and the different dimensions of rebuilding war-torn societies, focusing on the perceptions and strategies of local actors and the interactions between local and international processes. She has just published: *Ils nous avaient promis la paix. Opérations de l'ONU et populations locales*, Paris: Sciences Po, 2004 / *When the Blue Helmets Arrive*, London : Hurst, forthcoming.

be driven by a few key questions: Who are we speaking about? How outsiders identify their interlocutors? How do they work and interact with them? A close analysis of these elements will reveal some political ambiguities present in peace building strategies and actions aimed at building a 'new' society in post-conflict settings. In so doing, the limits of this contribution will not allow me to distinguish NGOs according to their main activities and to the moment of their intervention in the crisis management spectrum, something which would need to be done in a more detailed and sophisticated analysis. Rather, I will speak in general terms given the limits of this discourse. Nevertheless, I strongly believe that the trends identified here are widely applicable and that a thorough consideration of their consequences is important if we are serious in our wish to contribute to further sustainable peace building.

A micro-sociological analysis of who is representing the local 'civil society'

The idea of 'civil society' actually refers to very different realities, and has been weighed down by an excessive load of meanings present since its origin. Historically, this idea has derived sustenance from philosophical trends that do not concur (Sunil, 2001). 'Civil society' in Locke, the Scots thinkers of the eighteenth century or Hegel – to name only three decisive stages in the development of this subject in the Western hemisphere – has to do with greatly differing representations of social reality. But contemporary discourse on 'civil society' seems both to have forgotten this historical variety and to have become rigid in its use outside of the original western context. This has three main consequences for our current practices. First, it narrows the range of organizational modalities considered. Second, it conveys the idea of a clear distinction between what is political and what is not. Third, it tends to conceal the distinctions made between indigenous and outside NGOs.

Local 'civil societies' are diverse

When working in non-Western contexts, most outsiders tend to look for structures representative of a 'civil society', i.e. something which corresponds, in reality, to the form it has taken in modern western societies – NGOs, trade unions, etc. – albeit with historical and cultural varieties. Either they do not find this representation of society and thus create one (like UNTAC did in Cambodia during the peace process in the early 1990s), or they may find groups mirroring western society that suddenly emerge and claim this label. But such groups are far from covering the range of different modalities of a collective organization

(Afghanistan offers many recent examples). Moreover, these groups (often limited to a few number of individuals) have difficulty in establishing links with other existing arrangements, especially at the community level. In many cases, this approach leads to a *de facto* exclusion of the so-called 'traditional' forms of arrangements existing in the society, and as such ignores the extent to which these may participate in a local experiment of 'modernity'. Their role may be all the more important in contexts where the social fabric and all mechanisms of regulation have been weakened by years of violence, repression, and the negative impact of international interventions. The 'community' (having a different, moving definition and content according to the local context and history) may appear to be the last resort for surviving. Even in areas of utter desolation, as in some regions of Eastern Congo or Sudan, during the last few years, and still more in refugee camps, generally social life is quickly reorganised within community networks, structures of control included in this process. Even with this ambiguity, they may well be the most vivid actual civil society in most post-conflict settings.

What happens in the 'interstices' of societies contributes to a greater 'density' of social ties, and in turn promotes a greater confidence in oneself and others. From that point of view social exchange is like the sense of civic responsibility: as it is used, so it grows and imposes its usefulness. This is essential in view of one of the main challenges to any peace process: ensuring that individual and collective choices now give priority to peaceful means of resolving conflicts. Finding out how 'bridges' between communities and groups are built, encouraging and boosting such bridges, should be among the priorities of peace building interventions. Indeed, the timid forms of reconstruction identified in community settings are an essential stepping stone if a larger political project is to develop. Now, these are often saturated with many different outsiders that rush into the peace building and democracy market place. Not only occupying many spaces themselves, they often encourage a veritable explosion in the local NGO sector, supported both by the ideology of promoting 'civil society' and the arrival of substantial funds targeting specific issues (such as gender issues). Those local NGOs, oriented first toward the outside world, may have difficulty finding their place as intermediaries at the community level; they are also often diverted by local political networks (which sometimes create them) into patronage channels. There is a major double issue at stake here. First, to avoid withdrawal into the community as a way to guard oneself and to re-enforce the marginalization of large portions of the population; many exit strategies are observed in war-torn societies as a means to defend oneself and survive. Second, returning

to a partially reinvented community space – as the space has been so turned upside down by years of war, repression and forced displacement – may also resemble a retreat into a more intensified identity due to ill-treatment. Re-essentialized identities may well offer concrete ways of re-inventing citizenship and enhancing economic and physical security. In such circumstances, what is needed is to ensure mediation towards the political sphere concerning what happens at the community level. That is the way forward, so that identity-based particularities can effectively appear as a mode of participation and redistribution.

At the end, most outsiders tend to reduce the main characteristics and richness of any civil society: its diversity. In our frequent quest for homogeneity, we tend to seek a 'consensus' or a 'common view'; however, this does not exist in any society (post-war periods being an excellent example!). A so-called common belief is neither necessary nor desirable for remedying the real problem: a long, contradictory process of defining a new social contract. Historians and sociologists have shown us that such processes rarely unfold in sanctified harmony but are rather the outcome of successive negotiations or, indeed, of concrete struggles. Neither can they result from 'dogmatic voluntarism' alone. Yet most donors and agencies continue to believe in this process, as shown by the creation and sponsoring of a countless number of consortiums and platforms. Not to mention the multiplication of coordination meetings of all kinds which, among other consequences, justify the complaints of leaders of local organisations that they no longer have time to actually work!

Local 'civil societies' are part of political games

The second limit of the 'civil society' concept, as it is commonly used, is that it conveys the idea of a clear dichotomy between what is supposed to be or not supposed to be political. Obviously, even in Western contexts, this distinction is far from being so clear-cut; but it tends to be considered in an even more rigid way in places where 'civil society' is presented as an alternative to a dysfunctional or even 'failed' state. Situations on the ground show the limitations of such an approach, especially in conflict or post-conflict situations.

In Kismayo, in the south of Somalia, in the early 1990s, humanitarian organisations and UNOSOM learned, at their expense, that local actors did not entirely develop in separate worlds, that many changing ties of solidarity linked them. Similarly, some of the people they

had contact with assumed many roles within the community including: faction representative, traditional elder and intellectual. The configuration of political forces may explain the limited space for organising interests autonomous of the parties to the conflict. Situations as diverse as El Salvador, DRC, Bosnia-Herzegovina or Afghanistan have clearly illustrated this. Thus, registers for action can be confused, because individuals can pass from one network to another and introduce themselves to outsiders under different guises. It often happens that heads of NGOs who interact as individuals with outsiders are close to political parties and simultaneously undertake many roles, using the resulting ambiguity to manipulate their contacts with foreigners.

Such questions are often seen as ‘taboo’ because they are perceived as a way of discrediting the individuals concerned. However, a minimal analysis of this type is essential to understand the various dynamics at work in local societies. As some analysts have pointed out, one must guard against the tendency to ‘romanticise’ the ‘civil society’ sector. In practice some sectors of society are just as discredited as the state (Lemarchand 1992).

International and local NGOs should not be blended into a single category

Our analyses and practices too often consider that the ‘NGO’ world ignores borders and national identities. In fact, there is much more proximity between northern or international NGOs (which are often the same as there are very few transnational NGOs) and Inter-governmental organizations (IGOs), than between the northern and southern NGOs. The first two categories share the same codes and to a large extent the same historical culture. IGOs officers fall prey to the natural tendency of collaborating with like people and thus “easier to collaborate with”. Therefore, there is a strong temptation to create or instigate the creation of ‘home-grown’ NGOs, more malleable and capable of forming a true patronage network. I have often heard representatives of local NGOs clearly denouncing that which they call “collusion”, at their expense, between northern NGOs and the United Nations or other IGOs. Therefore, when there is an ongoing peace operation for instance, INGOs are not perceived by local NGOs as potential mediators between the UN and them. Moreover, although in various UN operations several staff members came from INGOs that had previously been in contact with local NGOs, this did not improve relations. The competition between outside and inside NGOs is also very high and largely unequal. They partly compete for the same money and for the same ‘symbolic space’. When a ‘crisis’ is discovered by the

'international community' and comes to the front through different channels, international NGOs are part of the real 'invasion'. Hundreds of international organisations are present in the capital, occupying a space no longer available to local actors and therefore have a detrimental effect on local economies: great increases in salaries, prices in the stores and house rents which impede local organisations from functioning properly.

These distinctions are important when considering the current efforts being made to strengthen and support the local civil society. In most cases, the reality is that, while pretending to work with the local civil society, outsiders actually collaborate with other outsiders, in other words, with themselves. Those who work in this domain probably have plenty of examples of meetings pointing to this scheme.

The consequences on the way the support to 'civil society' may actually contribute to post-conflict peace building

The resulting consequences affect the way in which international, trans-national and local actors interact in post-conflict contexts and, accordingly, in the way actual 'civil society' may contribute to post-conflict peace building. Three dimensions particularly come to my attention in the different situations where I have worked for the last 20 years. First, we have difficulty taking into account local knowledge and resources as major inputs in rebuilding strategies. Second, we generally fail in scheduling outside interventions so that they will reinforce local processes. Third, the fact that relationships with local civil societies are very asymmetric and of a patronage style has concrete consequences for those rebuilding, and as such, support for these processes by local people remains an uncertainty.

A 'new society' cannot be re-built with only outside resources

Acknowledging and fully considering the actual knowledge and experience people have of their own situation is difficult. One concrete illustration of this is the fact that the UN or other international organisations will more commonly cite reports of northern human rights NGOs rather than local ones, albeit local organisations may possess a more profound knowledge of the situation. There has been clear progress in that direction but much more needs to be done. Identically, a foreign 'expert' or 'academic' is more easily chosen over a local one to brief outsiders on the local situation. As a researcher, I can testify to the reticence shown by many of my colleagues when I explain that I work with both local and outside researchers, and even more when I explain that war survivors are not only victims but also authentic actors, capable of rethinking their situation and commenting on it – in other words, these victims possess real expertise and their narratives should be valued as such. This is also a matter of ethics: who is writing history? And for whom? In research as well as aid programs, local staff is mainly hired as a low-cost manpower in a subordinate position, and rarely as a main actor in the strategic process.

Most outsiders falsely believe that the date of their arrival is year zero for the country, as if nothing had happened before them. In other words, we tend to function as if we could rebuild a society without first identifying and recognizing local existing resources. In all cases, even the most devastating, some local resources are not only already in place, but more deeply rooted in the complex cultural interpretations of the consequences of trauma in that particular place than are outside resources. They are most naturally accessed by survivors, who immediately try to make sense of their world and find ways to reconstruct it back together in a variety of subtle and small ways. In Mozambique and Sierra Leone, the actions undertaken by traditional healers for children traumatized by war and former child soldiers demonstrate the success of strategies deeply rooted in the social and cultural context. Not all traditional practices lead to peace, however; for example, traditions of vengeance may support continuing feelings of rage and a conviction that evil abides in others, laying the ground for future conflict. Local practices and beliefs can result in negative as well as positive outcomes. Nevertheless, local and traditional resources will naturally be used in the aftermath of conflict, and must be understood for that reason. Those that are in support of peace will prove more beneficial than outside interventions with no connection to local perspectives. The importance and effectiveness of local practices should influence us to supply external support to local

processes rather than imposing external methods. Our objective should be to initiate a process in which local resources, knowledge and information are taken seriously, supported and valorised, instead of being duplicated or simply ignored. These are essential conditions if we want to have a positive effect on local processes.

Outside interventions need better scheduling in order to play a positive role in local processes

Another aspect of this is the importance of timing in our interventions. While everybody understands the importance of outside support during the first years after a war, the following period is generally even more critical for the members of the local civil society. The current situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina is a good example of such effect. After some years, the conditions of 'peace' are more difficult to grapple with. Bosnian colleagues use the same words to describe the post-war 'vacuum' that replaced the hope that people had been able to retain: that peace resembles something real. The accumulation of tiredness and stress in the trauma cycle itself may explain why many activists and professionals face more difficulty in their daily functioning, and tend to have much more psychosomatic problems. There is more tension between people, more divorces and quarrels in families, etc. In other words, coping with daily life is more difficult. At precisely this moment local civil society organisations have much difficulty securing funds from outside as the amount of global aid given to the country has been reduced drastically. More energy is expended to acquire less outside support and advice at a period when perhaps more is needed. Paying more attention to the local contexts and processes also implies fine tuning the terms of programming the support.

Outside interventions induce perversions in processes of legitimization

Relationships between outsiders and insiders are very asymmetric and of patronage nature. Various clientele approaches and intrusiveness related to issues of internal governance (see the information requested and criteria applied for grant applications), not only divert important time and energy from more central issues, but often appear as an unacceptable double standard. We tend to ask for more accountability and better governance on the part of our interlocutors, while the 'international community' keep making arbitrary decisions regarding local situations and changing what local people have decided. We keep asking about our interlocutors' representativeness and legitimacy yet put ourselves in positions in which we legitimize them through providing access to crucial symbolic and material resources. As to an extent with political actors, legitimacy does not arise from any social basis

but must be granted by outsiders. International and local mechanisms of legitimating may actually contradict one another. For an activist or a professional from a war-torn society who becomes caught in the international sphere, the issue is a disconcerting one: how to keep your contacts and roots and actual interaction with 'your base' while the international sphere transform you (the way you talk, the systems of reference your use, the way you arrange your agenda, etc.), desired or not, and occupies you most of your time. Many feel that, at some point, they must choose between the two.

The political ambiguities of programs aimed at building 'new' societies in post-conflict settings

If there is some common ground in what I have just tried to describe, then we should quickly think of the main contradictions generated by our approach to these questions. First, we are pretending to build 'new' societies while excluding the large majority of their members. Second, we are pretending to build states while draining its political substance. Third, we think in terms of 'stability' when we should think in terms of 'change'.

We are pretending to build 'new' societies while excluding the large majority of their members

We largely deprive ourselves of the means necessary to understand how, in what circumstances, with what means local people try to answer fundamental questions they ask:, life and death, good and bad, their past, present and future. As a consequence, the 'peace' that we pretend to rebuild might as well be an empty project. We may help rebuild economic and socio-political infrastructures and institutions but they are no more than 'empty boxes', because we have given little consideration to the conceptual roots of social and political life. In other words, we quite simply forget that politics must be understood in its 'substantial' aspects, its diverse conceptions and properties, and not only its formal appearances (Balandier, 1991). Reconstruction efforts have to see with changing identities and group boundaries, the difficulties of communicating across boundaries, justice and 'reconciliation', the distribution of property, land and wealth, the writing of history, the rebuilding of trust and the capacities for new political systems. Yet behind these lies a host of cultural meanings which are usually unremarked and unanalyzed. These offer conflicting and often contradictory answers to a certain number of questions people are constantly asking

themselves, while surviving and trying to cope with the trauma and their individual and collective consequences: what happened to us as people, who is to blame, what vengeance is due, who are we as people, what is our nation, what is the state, whether there is any point in rebuilding at all, thus setting the stage for action or inaction. What are we pretending to (re)build if we are not able to face this, to listen to this? How can we pretend to support the reconstruction of a society if we deny its members their existence as political subjects, as subjects of law and not only objects of humanitarian assistance?

We are pretending to build states while draining their political substance

Indeed, most programs of assistance are based on this fundamental ambiguity: they pretend to help rebuild a society or even a 'civil society', while continually reducing this process to highly technical dimensions, depriving it of all political substance. This attitude has to do with the recurring flaws in many interventions: lack of preparation and improvisation explain why action is too often based on 'kits' that may indeed be useful in emergencies for building of makeshift hospitals, nutrition centres or refugee camps, but are absurdly over-systematised when to comes to institutional rebuilding. But it is also directly inspired by a liberal messianism which is not limited to the Bush administration. When outside interventions deprive the state of most of its substance, of the means to play its central role – i.e. to define and ensure that some common interests may be guaranteed and served – they also work against the society. In its most liberal assumption, the US approach to 'nation building' emphasizes the need to 'liberate civil society' from the orbit of the state and subsequently give it a free hand in reconstruction. This approach largely bears the legacy of the post-war occupations of Germany and Japan but was applied elsewhere, particularly during the cold war, from Latin America to Asia. It not only amounts to believing in some kind of 'invisible hand' of civil society but clearly apply a highly ideological vision of what politics and the state-society relationship are about.

We think in terms of 'stability' when we should think in terms of 'change'

In the same line of thought, most interventions think about 'stability' when they should think in terms of 'change'. Indeed, understanding the conditions in which peace can be built in a given society means trying to make the numerous changes in its structures and its rules intelligible, so as to assess the bases on which reconstruction is possible. In fact, far from being the intangible foundation to which the 'international community' readily refers,

'peace', the 'rule of law' (with its various definitions) is the product of concrete histories, the expression of world views and of social relations (Norbert, 1998). It is a project built up through successive compromises and processes. As the anthropologist Georges Balandier has reminded us, this enterprise involves renunciation: to a way of thinking that attaches order to stability, to a concept that rejects the irrational and the imaginary in the aim of achieving, at all costs, a society of reason (Balandier, 1988, 247-248). War is not only destroying a society; it also deeply transforms it. The transition from war to peace (not a linear one: many cases may well be pre-during-post war at the meantime) involves extending this transformation, and accentuating some of its dimensions. The current emphasis put on stabilisation may be caricatured in situations where, as in Haiti or Afghanistan today, the 'international community' seems to be willing to "stabilise the chaos it created" as local people say. The interests of the intervening forces may find common ground with those of the local elite: 'consolidating' the status quo or redistributing cards without stimulating any major change, which obviously contradicts the ambition to 'build peace'.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The highly formal and – it must be said – 'elitist' approach generally favoured by aid programs aimed at supporting civil society in post-conflict situations ignores a large portion of the changes occurring within the societies concerned. However important the role of different local elites may be, that group constitutes one side – and not necessarily the most important one – of a much larger story which is also written at the community level. From one situation to another the idea of 'community' contains highly variable forms of organisation and mediation. In the countries' recent history, the modalities of organisation and projection in the public space have often undergone profound transformation. The change stemming from various factors: contacts with national and international NGOs intervening in the area of humanitarian aid or development, according to a project-oriented approach that implies the existence of a certain type of 'organised' partner on the ground; effects of repression and war, leading in particular to major displacements of people to refugee and displaced person camps or to cities, which hastens the break of former community ties according to the imperatives of survival; effects of violence within the group, especially when this violence has been used by political entrepreneurs; transformation of identities and frameworks of reference, etc. To grasp this, an accurate and dynamic analysis of each social fabric is requested. Such analysis

must assume that outsiders overcome the impression of disorganisation, or even anomie, often given by societies at war or just emerging from conflict. In fact, war profoundly transforms social and political foundations, at least as much as it destroys them. From this perspective, the community-oriented analytical approach should help to understand how collective life continues to organise itself, even amid many difficulties. Such an approach implies fundamental changes in outsiders' intelligence and communication capacity, in order to better understand local contexts and, more particularly, identify the local actors likely to be the major motors for change. It does not assume years of study and expertise, but simply taking stock of what various social science disciplines have to say about the situations under consideration, and using that knowledge in an operational analytical approach, constantly updated. Practitioners intervening in war-torn societies need to be better trained and should receive guidelines to help them identify their interlocutors in contexts where actors may no longer play the same role as before the war, new hierarchies and values may have emerged and been transformed. Any outsider – not only members of analysis units or military intelligence cells – must have at his disposal relevant tools of analysis to understand and monitor what is changing in the societies in which he is working. The preparation, pre-briefings, continuous training, monitoring and debriefing of missions' staff should be a priority. This should include specific psychological support, particularly when the staffs have to be deployed in violent contexts. This implies a political decision to be made so that this is considered as a priority in aid program and outsiders cease to consider the local people either as passive recipients of their largesse or as potential obstacles to the smooth progress of their work. This is the first front that we must fight on if we want to start 'being serious' in our desire to contribute to peace building in other countries.

In the same vein, we need to re-conceptualize how IO or international NGO staffs conceive of their role in any peace building process. Contrary to what they may be inclined to feel or believe they are not the main actors, but should think of themselves as facilitators of a leverage process. This means that one needs to be modest, flexible, patient, and unobtrusive: this is almost the opposite of what actually informs most of the current practices. It may also contradict what any organisation may need to ensure its visibility, self-promotion and fund raising, or what any staff may seek to get a good performance record. Therefore, the role of facilitator, the leverage effect and the actual objectives of both processes need to be better conceptualized, including in their various interactions with local political processes (such as

in the legitimating process) so that they accurately inform program and job descriptions.. Finally, this also requires that concrete steps be taken in order to improve outsiders' actual accountability towards local peoples and partners; for the moment, it is close to zero. In the UN system, in particular (but not only), reforms are desperately needed to change a system rightly qualified by the Brahimi Report as diametrically opposed to meritocracy (United Nations, 2000). Such reforms need to be vigorous, and include an effective performance assessment and sanction system.

This implies a mental revolution in which we must all – as analysts, policy makers, practitioners – play our part. Our societies have always been preoccupied with winning wars. It is time that we reflect on ways of winning peace. How can we pretend to build peace in societies where our actions *de facto* exclude the large majority of their members? How can we pretend to support the rebuilding of states and societies if we drain most of the political substance of that project? How can we pretend to support local processes aimed at changing a local social and political fabric when we merely think in terms of 'stability' and 'containment' of crises that could 'contaminate' us? The evolution of our thoughts and perceptions of insecurities for the last twenty years may explain our obsessive fear that the 'world at war' and the human beings inhabiting it would catch up with us. This seems to have induced us to raise 'a barrier between [our] intelligence and [our] humanity', to paraphrase the French analyst Raymond Aron. This is the next and probably more important wall to destroy.

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