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**Empowerment or Imposition?
Dilemmas of Local Ownership in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Processes**

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Empowerment or Imposition? Dilemmas of Local Ownership in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Processes

Introduction: Bosnia and the Paradox of Peacebuilding

The term ‘local ownership’ has become increasingly central to the vocabulary of post-conflict peacebuilding. Emphasized by both theorists and practitioners, local ownership conveys the commonsense wisdom that any peace process not embraced by those who have to live with it is likely to fail. Indeed, students of peacebuilding often point to the divergence of international and local priorities as a factor in the decidedly uneven record of peacebuilding over the past decade. While the basic premise of peacebuilding, as Necla Tschirgi has suggested, is that peace cannot be imposed by external forces, military or otherwise, but must rather be nurtured through patient, flexible strategies carefully calibrated to the domestic political context, the empirical record suggests that peacebuilding in practice more closely resembles an externally-driven exercise in both state-building and social engineering.¹ Local ownership, in other words, is accepted in theory but rarely practiced.

Post-Dayton Bosnia provides a textbook example of this gap between theory and practice. Wolfgang Petritsch, the international community’s High Representative in Bosnia from 1999-2002, played an important role in promoting the idea that if peace was to take hold in Bosnia, Bosnians in general – and their elected officials in particular – had to be front and centre in the peace process. Petritsch’s call for local ownership, however, ran directly counter to the interventionist nature of his administration. Armed with the so-called ‘Bonn Powers’, given to the High Representative in 1997 by an international community exasperated by the slow pace of peace implementation, Petritsch imposed

literally dozens of pieces of legislation – on such crucial matters of state as the state flag, a new currency, and the creation of a state border service. He similarly dismissed dozens of local officials (including one member of Bosnia’s tripartite state presidency), many of whom were elevated to office in elections organized by the international community.

Petritsch’s term as High Representative, in fact, inaugurated what has been termed a period of ‘protectorate democracy’ in Bosnia, in which the international community promotes democratic governance and local ownership while simultaneously reserving for itself most key decision-making authority.² Reflecting on the record of Petritsch’s successor, Lord Paddy Ashdown, Gerald Knaus and Felix Martin likened the role of the High Representative to a European Raj:

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, outsiders do more than participate in shaping the political agenda – something that has become the norm throughout Eastern Europe, as governments aspire to join the European Union. In BiH, outsiders actually *set* that agenda, *impose* it, and *punish with sanctions* those who refuse to implement it.³

While the notion of protectorate democracy is rife with contradictions, in Bosnia’s case, at least, there is an increasingly strong case to be made that the country has turned a corner in recent years, and that this is largely because of, rather than despite, the assertiveness of the international presence. While only a few years ago Bosnia remained in a curious limbo between war and peace, today the champions of ethnic apartheid are on the defensive, competent state-level institutions are gradually taking root, and the idea of EU membership has for the first time become a genuine aspiration rather than a distant illusion. While the international community has made more than its share of mistakes in

Bosnia, from the perspective of early 2007 it is difficult to escape the conclusion that much of the recent progress is the result not of local ownership, but of international pressure and perseverance.

While Bosnia's recent experience may yet prove to be an anomaly in peacebuilding's overall balance-sheet, it does suggest that overly simplistic prescriptions for local ownership miss important elements of the peacebuilding dynamic. Rather than advocating a full swing of the pendulum from protectorate democracy to full local ownership, what may be needed is a more nuanced understanding of how international and domestic political forces interact in post-conflict situations, and what relationship between the two is most likely to be conducive to the goal of sustainable peace. The objective of this paper, then, is to unpack the notion of local ownership, and to explore the tensions between external imposition and local ownership in peacebuilding processes. It will argue that because the notion of local ownership has rarely moved beyond the level of rhetoric, little serious thought has been devoted to the question of how to manage the inevitable tensions between external imposition and local ownership that lie at the very heart of contemporary peacebuilding processes.

The paper unfolds as follows: the next section will explore understandings of 'local ownership' in contemporary peacebuilding situations. It will suggest reasons why local ownership questions aren't taken more seriously in post-conflict contexts, as well as reasons why they should be. After an examination of both domestic and international obstacles to greater local ownership, the paper subsequently considers the challenges of 'operationalizing' local ownership, and the difficulty of reconciling international norms with local cultural, political, and social realities. The paper concludes with an attempt to

re-frame the discussion of local ownership by acknowledging that ‘local owners’ are both part of the problem and part of the solution in post-conflict contexts. Given this, external actors invariably become part of complex and highly politicized post-war governance arrangements; the key question, it will be suggested, is not whether this is inherently right or wrong, but whether outsiders use their authority wisely and in the interests of war-affected populations.

Meanings of, and obstacles to, local ownership in peacebuilding processes

Coming to terms with questions of local ownership in peacebuilding processes requires, first and foremost, an acknowledgement of at least two competing visions of peacebuilding. The first, closely associated with eminent conflict resolution practitioners such as John-Paul Lederach and Adam Curle, emphasizes what has come to be known as ‘peacebuilding from below’. As Ken Bush has summarized this perspective, “the challenge of rebuilding wartorn societies is to nurture and create the political, economic and social space within which indigenous actors can identify, develop, and employ the resources necessary to build a peaceful, just, and prosperous society.”⁴ The alternative, top-down perspective sees peacebuilding as an effort “to bring war-shattered states into conformity with the international system’s prevailing standards of domestic governance.”⁵ According to this perspective, peacebuilding is about transforming war-shattered polities into functioning liberal democracies, with the liberal democratic framework seen here not only as the gold standard of good governance, but also as the most secure foundation for sustainable peace.

The debate between these two visions of peacebuilding mirrors the broader communitarian/cosmopolitan debate within normative international relations theory.

Peacebuilding communitarians hold that the right of societies to make their own way (and their own mistakes) in the world should take precedence, regardless of the degree to which the choices of individual societies correspond with emerging international norms (which are often viewed from this perspective as being less universal than Western). Peacebuilding cosmopolitans, conversely, insist that global norms surrounding principles of good governance *do* exist and *should* carry weight. Self-determination in the context of post-conflict peacebuilding, accordingly, is not an unlimited field of possibility, but rather a right balanced by responsibilities to respect and uphold international norms, particularly concerning human rights, democratic governance, and market-oriented economic arrangements. Global political circumstances in the aftermath of 9/11, and the heightened awareness of the dangers that failed, unstable, or war-torn states pose to other states in the international system, have bolstered the arguments of those who insist that responsible membership in international society requires domestic politics to be organized in a particular manner.

The concept of local ownership is the nexus at which these two perspectives intersect. Peacebuilding situations, in other words, represent a concrete manifestation of the erosion of the inside-outside divide that has long been a fundamental organizing principle of international relations. In post-war contexts, both outsiders and insiders claim legitimate political authority, and in the absence of effective mechanisms of accountability it is often an open question which of these sets of actors better represent the ‘best interests’ of post-conflict societies. Ultimately, then, peacebuilding situations raise hard questions about the meanings and limits of state (as distinct from national) self-determination in the aftermath of violent conflict or state failure, about the rights,

responsibilities and legitimate expectations of the outside actors who intervene in such situations, and about the character of sovereignty in states emerging from war.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, on questions of local ownership the broader international community has leaned towards the cosmopolitan viewpoint. From the perspective of most peacebuilding operations, local ownership has been much more about the responsibilities of good governance than it is about the freedom to choose among alternate socio-political and economic organizing principles. Here again, the Petritsch conception of local ownership in post-Dayton Bosnia is instructive. In Petritsch's public statements on the issue, the concept of ownership was always closely married to the idea of responsibility. The implication, as Caroline Hughes and Vanessa Pupavac have pointed out, is that local ownership is not about autonomy, but rather about domestic political structures taking responsibility for implementing a pre-existing (and externally-defined) set of policy prescriptions. In other words, "while responsibility for politics is to be placed back on the shoulders of local people, this is a disciplined politics, regulated by international norms."⁶ Far from restoring autonomy to local societies, this can be viewed as a fundamentally *disempowering* form of local ownership, with internal political forces expected both to uncritically adopt and to actively implement an external blueprint for post-conflict transformation.

As peacebuilding has evolved and become increasingly institutionalized in the post-cold war era, several key factors have combined to push peacebuilding practice in a cosmopolitan direction. The first of these is the extent to which 'liberal internationalism' has emerged as the contemporary commonsense of peacebuilding. As Roland Paris has argued, the wisdom of "transplanting Western models of social, political and economic

organization into war-shattered states in order to control civil conflict” continues to be taken as self-evident by most international agencies engaged in peacebuilding, even though the liberal internationalist paradigm doesn’t have a particularly impressive track record in post-war settings.⁷ Nevertheless, the absence of credible, coherent alternatives leaves the basic tenets of liberal internationalism unchallenged, to the extent that peacebuilding often comes to resemble a technocratic exercise in installing the basic pillars of the liberal democratic state. Given these assumptions, it is little wonder that the work of peacebuilding is often seen as best suited to Western technocratic experts, who are familiar with the mechanics of liberal democratic institutions if not the particular socio-political contexts of the societies in which they are working. As Keith Krause and Oliver Jutersonke have recently suggested, most outside peacebuilding interventions “follow a donor-driven, bureaucratic-institutional logic that conjures into existence a social field on which policies can be imposed by experts defined not by their local knowledge but by their grasp of institutional imperatives and pseudo-scientific models of society and social change.”⁸ In this technocratic version of peacebuilding, local perspectives are more often viewed as hurdles to be overcome or obstacles to be avoided than as potential sources of sustainable solutions. Coupled with the economic tenets of what Stephen Gill has termed ‘disciplinary neoliberalism’, characterized by an equally de-politicized, technocratic vision of economic reform backed by World Bank and IMF conditionality,⁹ the liberal internationalist vision leaves little room for dissent, local or otherwise, regarding the basic parameters of peacebuilding.

A second obstacle to more serious consideration of local ownership is what Hughes and Pupavac term the ‘pathologisation’ of post-conflict societies.¹⁰ Failed and

war-torn states, according to mainstream discourse, are framed alternately as ill, traumatized, dysfunctional, irrational, or immature, thereby legitimizing a shift towards ‘therapeutic governance’, whereby the international community takes over responsibility for a polity no longer capable of managing its own affairs. A discourse of pathologisation that characterizes post-conflict societies as comprised of hapless victims and psychotic victimizers enables paternalistic attitudes and disciplinary interventions on the part of outside peacebuilders. As locals are likely to be viewed by outsiders with either pity or suspicion, the implications for questions of local ownership are clear. Where permitted at all, local ownership unfolds under the careful supervision of responsible outsiders, who set the broad parameters of what is and is not permissible. As Paris has noted, there are clear echoes here of the colonial-era ‘*mission civilisatrice*.’¹¹ In the modern-day version, the powerful states of the international system feel a moral obligation to export the civilizing and pacifying effects of their political and economic institutions to the distinctly ‘uncivil’ terrain of post-conflict states. Locals are typically relegated to the role of grateful recipient in this process, and deviation from this script simply reinforces outsider perceptions that the locals lack the maturity to exercise real political authority.

Dismissive and distrustful outsider perceptions towards local actors become more comprehensible, if not necessarily more defensible, when examining actual or potential ‘agents’ of local ownership. Local political elites – whether democratically elected or otherwise – represent the most obvious, and usually the most problematic, set of local owners. Particularly in the context of armed conflict, many elites will have risen to positions of authority through sheer ruthlessness, and this reality raises troubling

questions of both legitimacy and representativeness once a semblance of post-war ‘normalcy’ returns. Similarly, since wartime and post-war elites are almost inevitably one and the same, only the sunniest of optimists would expect that those who bear primary responsibility for the conflict in the first place would rush to embrace a peace process requiring compromise and conciliation with former enemies. Equally troubling is the light that the emerging literature on the political economy of conflict has cast on the economic motivations behind contemporary conflict. This literature suggests that the criminalization of local political elites is a common feature of modern conflict, with such elites at least as likely to see the post-conflict period as an opportunity to consolidate war-time economic gains as an opportunity to work towards reconciliation and sustainable peace.¹² Ultimately, then, conflict situations rarely produce enlightened, progressive political leadership. The war-induced collapse of the rule of law is, in fact, much more likely to vault the corrupt, the extreme, and the ruthless to power, thereby justifying at least some outsider caution when contemplating the value of post-war domestic elites as peace partners.

Ultimately, therefore, while local political elites are in the best position to stake an ownership claim in any emerging peace process, they can rarely be counted on to unproblematically commit themselves to the goal of building an inclusive, democratic, and prosperous post-war society. Elections represent the standard solution to this post-war dilemma of political representation, with the goal being to generate legitimate, representative, democratically-elected, and *moderate* political elites who can subsequently take on a greater ownership role over the peacebuilding process. Elections have also been utilized by the international community as a filtering mechanism to

exclude those – such as the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic – deemed unsuitable for participation in post-war electoral politics. The evidence, however, suggests that post-war elections rarely produce the conciliatory, pro-reform governments hoped for by those who organize them.¹³ More commonly, elections reproduce the very socio-political cleavages that peacebuilding hopes to overcome, and accord democratic legitimacy to the very same wartime elites whose commitment to peacebuilding may be dubious at best.

A third and final impediment to giving local ownership a more central role in peacebuilding is a more practical one, relating to different aspects of the peacebuilding timeframe. First, peace processes, because of their often fragile nature, tend to be heavily path-dependent, with key elements of the post-war settlement locked in at the time of the signing of a peace accord. While this is perhaps the most crucial stage of any peace process, during which the broad outlines of post-conflict political and economic arrangements are set, this is also the stage least conducive to effective local input. Participation of local elites in peace negotiations is by definition highly factionalized and militarized, civil society – if it retains any coherence as a result of the wartime experience – is invariably shut out of formal peace negotiations, and the institutional vacuum typical of most societies beginning the transition from war to peace places severe constraints on the capacity of a domestic bureaucracy to contribute to the establishment of post-war ground rules or to the harmonization of international norms with domestic political realities. In most cases, then, by the time local political forces and institutions have a chance to re-organize themselves, the basic parameters of the post-war settlement have already been established, and may prove extremely difficult to re-orient.

Timeframe considerations also impinge on the opposite end of the peacebuilding continuum, particularly vis-à-vis the ongoing preoccupation with international ‘exit strategies’. To be fair, the international community has long acknowledged that successful post-war elections rarely represent the appropriate moment for international withdrawal. Yet while it is increasingly accepted that peacebuilding necessarily involves a longer-term commitment on the part of international interveners, this commitment is rarely open-ended. This reality, combined with the relatively short-term, project-based cultures of most donor organizations, generates considerable pressure for the rapid achievement of concrete and measurable results, which is why success is often measured in terms of rehabilitated infrastructure or returned refugees, regardless of broader questions of sustainability or of the political dynamics underlying these developments. One difficulty of engaging seriously with questions of local ownership as an integral part of the peacebuilding endeavour is that such strategies rarely produce immediately measurable results, are by definition less easily controlled by outsiders, and – like any democratic process – tend to be messy, time-consuming, and inherently unpredictable.

Outsider concerns in this area emerge most clearly with regard to engagement with domestic civil society, usually seen as an alternate, and ideally more progressive, set of candidates capable of wearing the ‘local ownership’ mantle. Because of the typically turbulent and conflictual relationship between the international community and local political elites in peacebuilding contexts, considerable attention has been devoted in recent years to the idea of supporting post-conflict civil society as a counterbalance to those holding formal political power. More consistent with the notion of peacebuilding from below, the idea is to empower local non-governmental actors who are generally

viewed as being more unproblematically committed to post-conflict peacebuilding. As Beatrice Pouligny has put it, civil society is “often seen to carry the best hopes for a genuine democratic counterweight to the power-brokers, economic exploiters, and warlords who tend to predominate in conflict-ridden, weak, or failed states, and may even capture the electoral processes.”¹⁴ By and large, however, the record of post-conflict civil society building has been disappointing. External donors have generally underestimated the challenges of reconstructing civil societies in war-shattered states, while over-estimating the influence of civil society organizations as peace constituencies. Donor dependency has emerged as a major issue, with local NGOs less a manifestation of local ownership than an additional channel through which international influence can be exercised. At the same time, the standard view of civil society as a universal force for good is often dashed by the politicized realities of post-conflict situations, in which civil society organizations might be subject to the same sets of political dynamics, constraints, and incentives that affect local political elites. In other words, empowered and activist civil society organizations may not necessarily be pro-peace, but might just as easily engage in the type of factionalized politics that stand in the way of sustainable peacebuilding. As John Prendergast and Emily Plumb have suggested, while civil society organizations can make a positive contribution to peacebuilding, they can also “reinforce negative, conflict-producing elements of the economic and social structure of a given state, particularly one consumed by a war economy.”¹⁵

Given the inherent risks and inevitable complexity involved in operationalizing the concept of local ownership in a more meaningful and participatory manner, why bother even trying? The short answer is that local ownership can be deferred, but cannot

ultimately be avoided. In the absence of perpetual international trusteeship, the logical end point of any peace process is the handover of sovereign responsibility back to local authorities;¹⁶ the more these authorities can claim both authorship and ownership over the peace process, the smoother and more successful the transition is likely to be.

At the same time, the argument that in order to be sustainable, post-conflict settlements must be firmly rooted in domestic social realities remains compelling. Insiders have to live with the outcomes of peace processes in ways that outsiders do not, and externally-imposed arrangements – particularly if they are seen as reflecting the vested interests of foreigners – are unlikely to thrive once the influence of external pressure and resources begin to recede. Indeed, the questionable durability of the externally-driven policy reform is a key lesson learned from a half-century of international development assistance. As the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has noted, “experience shows that reform processes will not succeed in the absence of commitment and ownership on the part of those undertaking reforms.”¹⁷ In the area of post-conflict peacebuilding, this sentiment is echoed by Charles Call and William Stanley, who contend that “no amount of training or institutional development will produce positive results where domestic actors are not really interested in changing the status quo.”¹⁸

Ultimately, then, the case for substantive local ownership rests on the argument that the challenge of re-constituting state institutions, re-establishing social contracts between state and society, and re-building social relations in the aftermath of war is simply too immense to achieve in the face of either inertia or outright opposition on the part of those being reformed. In fact, one of the important lessons of the past decade of

peacebuilding practice relates not to the excesses of international power and authority in Bosnia and elsewhere, but rather to the *limits* of international influence or, as Mark Baskin has phrased it, “the gap between unlimited formal international authority and limited international operational capacity.”¹⁹ In other words, while locals may be viewed by outsiders as junior partners in the peacebuilding enterprise, domestic power structures retain considerable capacity to block, circumvent, and/or undermine the most carefully-designed policy reforms. Equally importantly, in much the same way that genuine reconciliation cannot be imposed by outsiders, no amount of externally-generated policy prescriptions can shift post-conflict societies from a culture of violence to a culture of peace. There is no avoiding the reality, therefore, that for all the pretensions of the international community, if peacebuilding is to succeed much of the heavy lifting must be done by war-affected communities themselves.

More positively, there is also an argument to be made that locals remain, to a large extent, an underexploited peacebuilding resource. The conflict resolution community has long argued that local wisdom and local resources are essential elements of peacebuilding; insiders possess the historical, cultural, and linguistic resources that outsiders lack, and that are essential not only to understanding the root causes of any conflict but also to the search for sustainable solutions. Drawing more heavily on local expertise and knowledge need not necessarily entail abandoning the conventional liberal democratic peacebuilding paradigm, but rather implies a more serious commitment to reconciling international standards with local conditions than has been demonstrated to date. As Simon Chesterman *et al* have argued, “the international policy community has been singularly hesitant to explore the connection between differences in institutional

arrangements and local variables with a view to maximizing the prospects of liberal democracy and market economy taking root and flourishing.”²⁰

If local ownership is to mean more in the context of post-conflict peacebuilding than local authorities following international dictates, the current international preoccupation with peacebuilding *outcomes* must be tempered by greater attention to peacebuilding *processes*. In other words, the goal of peacebuilding should not be simply to erect the central institutional pillars of a liberal democratic state as rapidly as possible in the aftermath of conflict, but rather to ensure that these pillars rest upon solid foundations, are adjusted to local conditions, and develop not only through a genuine and collaborative partnership with war-affected communities, but also in ways that are supportive of the broader goals of sustainable peace.

Operationalizing Local Ownership

Assuming that indigenous actors seek to build a post-war society in conformity with international norms of domestic governance, there need be no inherent contradiction between communitarian and cosmopolitan understandings of peacebuilding. The role of outsiders, in this sense, is simply to support local actors – whether through security provision, technical expertise, or material resources – in their efforts to re-orient their societies and their institutions along a standard liberal-democratic trajectory. The political contexts of post-conflict societies, however, are rarely so simple. In the same way that the phrase ‘post-conflict’ more often than not obscures an ongoing reality of profound political divisions within societies emerging from war, the notion of ‘local ownership’ also tends to assume a coherence and commonality of purpose among domestic political forces that is rarely present in post-conflict contexts, and to gloss over

the social complexity inherent in *any* social order. In reality, then, not only do the interests of local political actors rarely align with those of international actors, they almost never align internally around a coherent roadmap to peace.

Ultimately, then, peacebuilding is inevitably a highly politicized process of not only mediating between outside and inside visions of ‘governance’, but of forging domestic consensus around fundamental political issues. While abstract notions of local ownership enjoy near-universal acceptance in principle, such notions offer little concrete guidance in terms of determining whose voices should be prioritized among the cacophony of real and potential ‘local owners’ or in terms of how to address situations in which the priorities of significant local actors run counter to either the interests of the broader post-conflict society or to fundamental international norms. In post-war Afghanistan, for example, where the range of local owners runs the gamut from President Karzai to emerging women’s groups in civil society to the warlords linked to the country’s thriving drug trade (many of whom now hold elected office), both the complexities of operationalizing local ownership and the risks of taking the concept too far are obvious. As Dan Smith has suggested, “a failure to recognize the reality of the conflict context might make a simple commitment to local ownership almost fatal to the hopes of successful peacebuilding.”²¹ If the operationalization of local ownership principles was entirely unproblematic, in other words, there would be no need for external intervention in the first place.

Examining local ownership questions through the lens of post-conflict ‘capacity building’ offers one pathway into the complex issues involved in attempting to operationalize local ownership in ways that simultaneously place greater decision-making

authority in the hands of domestic actors while advancing the broader goals of sustainable peace. In important ways, capacity building – whether it involves the reconstitution of state-level institutions (peacebuilding as state-building) or enabling the work of domestic civil society organizations – is *the* core activity of contemporary peacebuilding. Clearly, the notion of peacebuilding as capacity-building is closely linked to the cosmopolitan conception of peacebuilding outlined above, and suggests a process of outsider-led social engineering aimed at generating the institutional framework of liberal democracy. In this context, local ownership is viewed more as an end than a means, with decision-making authority gradually transferred by back to local actors as the appropriate institutional infrastructure becomes operational.

As many observers of peacebuilding practice have pointed out, this vision of peacebuilding involves a serious power imbalance between outsiders and insiders.²² Outsiders control all the resources, they frame the decision-making structure concerning what types of capacity are to be constructed, where, and how, and they enjoy considerable flexibility in choosing among local implementing partners. As David Moore has noted, the depth of the power imbalance between outsiders and insiders in post-conflict situations, combined with the reality that post-war societies are inevitably in flux between ‘old’ and ‘new’ systems, has led some international actors to view post-conflict environments as blank slates upon which a new social, economic, and political order can be written.²³ Yet while the temptation of international actors to press their advantage in post-conflict situations without properly considering domestic socio-political factors or properly consulting domestic counterparts may be strong, it is also fraught with danger. Most obviously, peacebuilding processes which unfold without a

minimum level of domestic ‘buy-in’ risk alienating local populations and local power-holders, who may turn against capacity-building projects which are seen to be insufficiently tailored to local needs or to challenge existing domestic power structures.

Yet capacity-building initiatives also reveal deeper dilemmas which lie at the heart of what Jane Chanaa has termed ‘the imposition-ownership divide’,²⁴ dilemmas which are perhaps most evident in the area of security sector reform. From Iraq to Afghanistan to Haiti, one of the most critical peacebuilding challenges involves reconstituting and re-orienting domestic security forces (the police and the military most prominently) in order to re-establish domestic capacity for security provision. While the technical tasks of recruiting, vetting, and training new security forces are onerous enough, more difficult still has been the twin challenge of ‘socializing’ new recruits (or re-socializing old ones) to adopt Western (or ‘foreign’) conceptions of what it means to be a soldier or a police officer and of generating loyalty to newly-minted state institutions. Thus, the as-yet-unmet challenges of ensuring that newly-trained Iraqi soldiers don’t cut and run at the first sign of confrontation and of weeding out corruption within the Haitian National Police reveals a serious gap between the ability of outside peacebuilders to establish new institutions and their ability to make these institutions both effective *and* legitimate. This dynamic points to the dangers of creating ‘rootless’ institutions that are not embedded in the political culture of the post-war state, and to the somewhat naïve assumptions of outsiders that the socialization process required to embed external norms on issues such as community policing can be accomplished with a few weeks of basic training coupled with ongoing ‘mentoring’ by outside professionals. The reality is that the capacity-building rhetoric of peacebuilding, and its assumptions about

the creation of new institutional structures that are either indifferent to, or deliberately distinct from, domestic political culture, obscures the necessity of a broader process of norms-transmission that has proven exceedingly difficult to achieve within conventional peacebuilding timeframes.

Faced with such challenges, external actors are often faced with the unpalatable choice between retreating back to the more technical, achievable tasks of capacity building (focusing on numbers of individuals trained, vetted, etc.) or moving to a deeper level of engagement that combines capacity-building with what might be termed 'capacity disabling'. In other words, in many cases the nature of post-conflict peacebuilding is such that effective capacity building requires, as a prerequisite, parallel efforts to disable, marginalize, or co-opt those domestic political power structures which stand in the way of the effective establishment of new institutions (since new institutions threaten the power bases of those who enjoy privileged positions in 'old' institutions) and which may command considerable loyalty among significant sectors of the population. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this problem can be seen in Afghanistan, where the creation of the new Afghan National Army has been complicated by the significant influence of warlord militias and the unwillingness of international security forces to confront them.²⁵ Similarly, the 12-year-old effort to establish an effective Haitian National Police has been continually compromised by the politicizing and corrupting influences of domestic political forces, from Jean-Bertrand Aristide's Lavalas movement to the increasingly influential networks controlling Haiti's drug trade.

Such issues, more generally, pose hard questions about the role of domestic authority structures (whether traditional or conflict-generated) in peacebuilding

processes, and effective peacebuilding requires equally difficult decisions about whether such structures should be empowered or dismantled. Those engaging in capacity building initiatives must decide, for example, whether authority structures based on clientelism represent a vital source of social capital or an obstacle to the establishment of modern political institutions. As Prendergast and Plumb have suggested in the context of outsider support to civil society organizations, “in the efforts of international agencies to build local capacity and enhance participation, questions need to be constantly asked about whether traditional authority structures are being undermined and – given their repressive nature in some places and their role in preserving the social fabric on other places – whether they should be.”²⁶

Yet if outside peacebuilders must, in some form and at some level, confront pre-existing power structures in order to create the political space in which new power structures can emerge, there are also real risks involved in attempting to sideline existing power structures seen as standing in the way of effective peacebuilding. As alluded to above, one of the major influences of outsiders in peacebuilding processes lies in their ability to ‘pick winners’ in the process of selecting appropriate local peacebuilding partners. Rather than simply fading away, however, the ‘losers’ in such processes may in fact re-emerge as dangerous spoilers. As Jens Narten has suggested, “one standard operating procedure of sidelined elites is to generate their income and general power basis from illegal sources by engaging in the black market or organized crime and by seeking political influence through corruption or means of intimidation.”²⁷ This conclusion reinforces the earlier point about the limits of international influence, as even the most aggressive forms of outside intervention may fail to fundamentally alter the

underlying dynamics of post-conflict societies. At the same time, however, the failure to address these underlying dynamics may compromise the broader peacebuilding process, and it is precisely this concern that pulls international actors further into the domestic politics of post-conflict societies, and further away from communitarian notions of peacebuilding.

Given the simultaneous imperatives of post-conflict capacity-building and capacity-disabling, then, it is hardly surprising that the search for more substantive forms of local ownership is, more often than not, deferred. For even a conception of peacebuilding based on ‘creating space’ for local actors to find their own ways towards sustainable peace may require intrusive and lengthy efforts to address (or push aside) post-war political structures that effectively deny the social, political and economic ‘space’ required for bottom-up peacebuilding. Rather than abandoning the prioritization of local ownership until such issues are resolved, however, there remains a pressing need to think through how local ownership considerations can be integrated as a resource in the crucial struggle for post-conflict political space.

Writing in a recent issue of *Security Dialogue*, Rolf Schwarz proposes the formula of ‘local ownership coupled with international standards’ as one way of trying to reconcile local ownership questions with broader imperatives of sustainable peacebuilding.²⁸ While Schwarz’s discussion of this issue is underspecified, it does suggest that the debate between communitarianism and cosmopolitanism need not be framed in either/or terms. In other words, it should be possible to maintain a normative commitment to the principle tenets of liberal internationalism while still holding that a meaningful degree of local ownership is essential to the success of any peace process.²⁹

The ‘local ownership coupled with international standards’ formula implies, in fact, that reconciling international norms with domestic political culture and domestic political realities should be a basic priority for external peacebuilders. The experience of the *loya jirga* in Afghanistan represents but one example of the creative merging of international principles with local structures, with considerable positive consequences in terms of both legitimacy and effectiveness.

At the same time, however, the Schwarz formula may exaggerate the extent to which a middle ground can be found between international norms and domestic realities. While the middle ground that does exist should clearly be exploited, there are also cases, as noted above, where domestic cultural and political practices – from deeply-rooted clientelism and corruption to cultural norms around the treatment of women – run directly counter to the norms being promoted by external peacebuilders. In such cases, there is no avoiding the culture clash between outsider and insider, or the reality that in some cases trade-offs must be made between making peace and promoting good governance (does, for example, the prospect of negotiating with the Taliban represent a sell-out of Afghans – especially Afghan women – or simply a pragmatic necessity in order to avoid an open-ended insurgency?). That such dilemmas must be negotiated on an almost daily basis within peacebuilding contexts underscores that for outsiders, peacebuilding always involves strategic processes of side-taking and ally-making in order to minimize the dissonance between external norms and internal political realities. It also underscores the need to make hard choices about which domestic practices cannot be allowed to remain in place if sustainable peace is to take hold, and which may simply be

impossible to alter given the scope, mandate, or timeframe of any peacebuilding operation.

Ultimately, while there can be no how-to manual for managing the tensions between external imposition and local ownership in peacebuilding contexts, the preceding discussion does point to the importance of paying greater attention to the imposition-ownership divide, and of moving beyond empty rhetorical commitments to local ownership. The post-cold war record of peacebuilding, and the oft-cited statistic that upwards of half of all peace processes collapse within the first five years, suggests not only that outsiders still have much to learn about effective peacebuilding, but also that there are serious weaknesses within the standard liberal internationalist approach to post-war transitions. There is, as Elizabeth Cousens has suggested, considerable justification for outsiders to be ‘ruthlessly modest’ about what they can and cannot accomplish within the inevitably complex and politically-volatile contexts of any peacebuilding operation, and for re-considering the merits of applying technical/institutional solutions to what are deeply-rooted political problems.³⁰

The plea for humility also implies a recognition of the limits of externally-led social engineering; not only can sustainable peace not be achieved without the buy-in of a critical mass of the war-affected society, but there are also real limits to the speed and the extent to which local actors can be ‘socialized’ to accept international norms surrounding good governance. Even assuming that such a socialization process is desirable, it usually cannot be achieved within the timeframe of the average peacebuilding mission. Ultimately, therefore, outsiders can neither ignore insiders nor re-create them in their own image. Rather than a viewing peacebuilding as ‘accelerated modernization’, in which the

old, dysfunctional, conflict-prone order is replaced by a superior Western order underpinned by shiny new liberal democratic institutions, peacebuilding is perhaps better understood in terms of cultural exchange, with the over-arching goal being to merge elements of old and new, inside and outside, in order to create a more just, stable political order.

Re-visioning peacebuilding in terms of cultural exchange would require adjustments to the current technocratic model of post-conflict peacebuilding. As Beatrice Pouligny has suggested, such a shift would require outside interveners to re-define themselves as facilitators rather than directors, but also a more concerted effort on the part of outsiders to understand the cultural context of the societies in which they operate. An acceptance that local actors are indeed central to the success of any peace process, Pouligny suggests, “implies [the need for] fundamental changes in the intelligence and communication capacity of outsiders, in order that they might better understand local contexts and, more particularly, identify the local actors likely to be the major motors for change.”³¹ While the suggestion that outsiders pay more attention to the social and cultural dynamics of societies they wish to transform isn’t especially radical, it is perhaps an important first step both in recognizing that outsiders don’t have a monopoly on either expertise or solutions, and in placing questions of local ownership closer to the centre of the peacebuilding *problematique*, where they rightfully belong.

Conclusion

Questions of local ownership are both unavoidable and fundamental in post-conflict peacebuilding processes. While it may not necessarily be the case that substantive local ownership is a prerequisite to successful peacebuilding, it may well be

the case that peacebuilding can succeed under ‘foreign ownership’ only in cases, such as in post-Dayton Bosnia, in which the international community is willing to invest enormous resources and considerable time. In most contemporary peacebuilding situations, however, this type of international commitment is unlikely to be forthcoming. Yet if it is true that local ownership *matters* to successful peacebuilding, the debate around local ownership, its manifestations, and its consequences has been surprisingly shallow to date, and has rarely progressed beyond the largely rhetorical acceptance of the basic idea. Conversely, when local ownership questions emerge more prominently in international discourse – as in post-Taliban Afghanistan – there are usually good reasons to suspect that it has more to do with the unwillingness of international actors to engage fully with the peacebuilding challenge than with a serious commitment to local ownership principles.

The Afghan case, in fact, underlines the dangers of viewing local ownership questions in simplistic binary terms. As the foregoing discussion has tried to demonstrate, local ownership should be viewed not as an either/or question, but rather as a delicate, complex, and often shifting balancing act, in which the division of responsibilities between outsider and insider is constantly calibrated and adjusted as a means to advancing the peace process. Too much local ownership, in most peacebuilding contexts, may be as dangerous to the prospects for peace as too little local ownership, and may reflect little more than an abdication of responsibility on the part of external actors.

Indeed, while the motivations underlying the behaviour of internal actors are often (and rightly) questioned in peacebuilding contexts, there are also dangers in accepting external interveners as unerringly benevolent and unfailingly committed to seeing peace

processes through to their just, sustainable conclusion. Especially given the power imbalances between insiders and outsiders inherent in any post-conflict process and the widely-acknowledged absence of accountability among international actors, while one can hope that external actors approach questions of local owners in the context of the ‘best interests’ of the peace process, it should perhaps not always be expected. As Tschirgi has recently noted, for example, there is a real danger that the character of international interventions in the post-9/11 world is not only moving further away from serious consideration of local ownership issues, but also away from the interests of sustainable peacebuilding in favour of protecting the security interests of the intervening actors.³² In exploring questions of local ownership, therefore, and the division of authority between international and domestic actors, serious questions need to be asked, and answered, about the motives and intentions of insiders and outsiders alike.

This paper has argued in support of a new peacebuilding partnership that makes a serious and sustained effort at bridging the international-local divide in the name of sustainable peacebuilding. Such a partnership should self-evidently not be based on naïve assumptions about ‘locals knowing best,’ since such assumptions are surely as dangerous as the currently dominant assumption that internationals know best. Rather, moving towards a new partnership between locals and internationals in peacebuilding situations must be based on the realistic conclusion that peacebuilding can only succeed with the sustained contributions (and buy-in) of both internationals and locals. Finding ways to combine local and international resources in ways that maximize the long-term possibilities for sustainable peace remains one of the great challenges of contemporary peacebuilding.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Necla Tschirgi, "Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Revisited: Achievements, Limitations, Challenges," Paper prepared for the WSP International/IPA Peacebuilding Forum Conference, 7 October 2004, New York; available online at www.ipacademy.org/pdfs/POST_CONFLICT_PEACEBUILDING.pdf
- ² Michael Pugh, "Protectorate Democracy in Southeastern Europe," Working Paper, May 2000; available online at www.ciaonet.org/wps/pum01/index.html.
- ³ Gerald Knaus and Felix Martin, "Travails of the European Raj," *Journal of Democracy*, 14, 3 (July 2003): 61.
- ⁴ Ken Bush, "Beyond Bungee Cord Humanitarianism: Towards a Developmental Agenda for Peacebuilding," *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* Special Issue (1996): 86.
- ⁵ Roland Paris, "International Peacebuilding and the 'Mission Civilisatrice'," *Review of International Studies* 28, 4 (2002): 638.
- ⁶ Caroline Hughes and Vanessa Pupavac, "Framing Post-Conflict Societies: International Pathologisation of Cambodia and the Post-Yugoslav States," *Third World Quarterly* 26, 6 (September 2005): 883.
- ⁷ Roland Paris, "Peacebuilding and the Limits of Liberal Internationalism," *International Security* 22, 2 (Autumn 1997): 56.
- ⁸ Keith Krause and Oliver Jutersonke, "Peace, Security and Development in Post-Conflict Environments," *Security Dialogue* 36, 4 (2005): 459.
- ⁹ Stephen Gill, "Globalisation, Market Civilization and Disciplinary Neoliberalism," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 24, 3 (1995): 399-423.
- ¹⁰ Caroline Hughes and Vanessa Pupavac, "Framing Post-Conflict Societies."
- ¹¹ Roland Paris, "*Mission Civilisatrice*."
- ¹² See, for example, David Keen, "A Rational Kind of Madness", *Oxford Development Studies* 25, 1(1997): 67-75, and Mats Berdal and David Malone (eds.), *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000).
- ¹³ See Charles Call and Susan Cook, "On Democratization and Peacebuilding," *Global Governance* 9, 2 (April-June 2003): 234.

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- ¹⁴ Beatrice Pouligny, "Civil Society and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: Ambiguities of International Programmes Aimed at Building 'New' Societies," *Security Dialogue* 36, 4 (2005): 496.
- ¹⁵ John Prendergast and Emily Plumb, "Building Local Capacity: From Implementation to Peacebuilding," in Stephen Stedman, Donald Rothchild, and Elizabeth Cousens (eds.), *Ending Civil Wars* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002): 328.
- ¹⁶ Michael Steiner, "Seven Principles for Building Peace," *World Policy Journal* 20, 2 (Summer 2003): 93.
- ¹⁷ cited in Laurie Nathan, "Local Ownership of Security Sector Reform: A Guide for Donors," Working Paper prepared for the United Kingdom's Global Conflict Prevention Pool, September 2006, p. 4; available online at www.crisisstates.com/download/others/SSR%20Reform.pdf.
- ¹⁸ Charles Call and William Stanley, "Protecting the People: Public Security Choices After Civil Wars," *Global Governance* 7 (2001): 170.
- ¹⁹ Mark Baskin, "Between Exit and Engagement: On the Division of Authority in Transitional Administrations," *Global Governance* 10 (2004): 129.
- ²⁰ Simon Chesterman, Michael Ignatieff, and Ramesh Thakur, "Making States Work: From State Failure to State-Building," New York: International Peace Academy/United Nations University, July 2004; available online at www.ipacademy.org/pdfs/MAKING_STATES_WORK.pdf.
- ²¹ Dan Smith, *Towards a Strategic Framework for Peacebuilding: Getting Their Act Together*, Overview Report of the Joint *Utstein* Study of Peacebuilding, Oslo: Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2004, p. 26; available online at www.dep.no/filarkiv/210673/rapp104.pdf.
- ²² See for example Beatrice Pouligny, "Civil Society and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding," 504.
- ²³ David Moore, "Levelling the Playing Fields and Embedding Illusions: 'Post-Conflict' Discourse & Neo-liberal 'Development' in War-torn Africa," *Review of African Political Economy* 83 (2000): 14.
- ²⁴ Jane Chanaa, *Security Sector Reform: Issues, Challenges, and Prospects*, Adelphi Paper No. 344 (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2002): 64.
- ²⁵ Indeed, efforts to strengthen the Afghan National Army have arguably been undermined by the US-led coalition's direct support of militias viewed as allies in the fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban; see Richard Ponzio, "Public Security Management in Post-Conflict Afghanistan: Challenges to Building Local Ownership," in Anja Ebnother and Philipp Fluri (eds.), *After Intervention: Public Security Management in*

Post-Conflict Societies – From Intervention to Sustainable Local Ownership (Geneva/Vienna: Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces and the Bureau for Security Policy, Austrian Ministry of Defence, August 2005): 78-79.

²⁶ John Prendergast and Emily Plumb, “Building Local Capacity,” 334.

²⁷ Jens Narten, “Dilemmas of Promoting Local Ownership: Statebuilding in Postwar Kosovo,” Draft Paper for the Research Partnership on Postwar Statebuilding, October 2006, p. 13; available online at statebuilding.org/resources/Narten_RPPS_October2006.pdf.

²⁸ Rolf Schwarz, “Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: The Challenges of Security, Welfare, and Representation,” *Security Dialogue* 36, 4 (2005): 435.

²⁹ Framed as a set of international norms or standards, the ‘liberal peace’ suggests that any effective peace process should adhere to four key principles: 1) conflicts should be resolved non-violently; 2) economic arrangements should be organized along market principles; 3) decision-making processes should be guided by democratic principles and procedures, including but not limited to periodic, free and fair elections; and 4) any post-conflict order should be underpinned by the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights and freedoms.

³⁰ Elizabeth Cousins, “Introduction,” in Elizabeth Cousens and Chetan Kumar (eds.) *Peacebuilding as Politics: Cultivating Peace in Fragile Societies* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2001): 16.

³¹ Beatrice Pouligny, “Civil Society and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding,” 507.

³² Necla Tschirgi, “Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Revisited,” 17-18.