The Challenge of the 'Local' in the Peacebuilding Process in Timor-Leste[1]

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Abstract

The role of the 'local' in the peacebuilding process has garnered greater understanding and has been at the centre of analyses acknowledging the crucial role that the 'local' plays in the success of peace building mechanisms. This has led to focused research concerning the relationship between international and local actors, and hybrid peace and local ownership. This essay looks at the concept and challenges of the 'local', further expanding on how local actors can be effectively promoted in international peacebuilding activities, using Timor-Leste as a case-study. The article concludes that local ownership should not be placed as a goal but as a means to peacebuilding, which then benefits the process by identifying gaps between international perceptions and expectations versus local knowledge systems and capacities.

Introduction

The former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali has been credited with introducing the concept of peacebuilding, defined in the 1992 document 'An Agenda for Peace', as

> "*an action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict, rebuilding the institutions and infrastructures of nations torn by civil war and strife, and tackling the deepest causes of conflict: economic despair, social injustice and political oppression*" (Boutros-Ghali, 1992).

There was a need for a more comprehensive approach to peace building, which formed the premise of this definition (Nascimento, Jacobs and Keeler, 2004). Since the inception of this definition, the landscape of the peacebuilding process has evolved further from a 'one size fits all' interventionist process to one that is inclusive and participatory, giving way to the inclusion of the 'local[3]' in roles of participation and ownership, creating a multifaceted peacebuilding mechanism.

Scholars and practitioners from the global south have been critical agents credited in this shift termed the 'local turn', changing traditional practices of how peace agreements are made, inevitably bursting the orthodox 'Western bubbles' (Maschietto, 2016) which are now seen as an unstable form of negotiating peace.

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[3] I am uncomfortable using the term 'local'. However, for the purposes of this essay and for a shared understanding, the term local will be loosely used to discuss the population of the country and people-centred peacebuilding efforts.

The role of the 'local' in the peacebuilding process has garnered greater understanding and has been at the centre of analyses acknowledging the crucial role that the 'local' plays in the success of peace building mechanisms. This led to focused research concerning the relationship between international and local actors and hybrid peace and local ownership. In that vein, this essay will unpack the concept of the 'local' and the challenges of the 'local', as defined in two main works, 'Everyday peace: Bottom-up and local agency in conflict-affected societies' by Roger Mac Ginty and 'The Local Turn in Peace Building: A critical agenda for peace' by Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver P. Richmond. The essay will also expand on how local actors can be effectively promoted in international peacebuilding activities using Timor-Leste[4] as the sole case study.

Understanding the 'local'

The challenge of defining the 'local' rests on its nature of being an extremely elastic and multi-dimensional concept to illustrate. Essentially, a definition of the 'local' asks the impossible, which is how do you define every aspect of a person and/or a group in relation to their country and succinctly encapsulate their essence and influence accurately.

Mac Ginty (2014) attempts to do so acknowledging the wide scope of the term 'local' (as vast are the definitions of 'international' and 'state' in this context). Both articles make clear distinctions about the 'local' as a concept, referring that the description of the local is separated from the national and international, while the boundaries are murky because the local is not exclusively national or international, and is constantly evolving due to social negotiation between localised and non-localised ideas, norms and practices. The 'local' tends to be seen as part of a geographical, conceptual or identity group that may share a theme. It also includes local based agencies present within a conflict or post conflict environment. The local, as defined in both articles, aims at identifying and creating the necessary process for peace with or without international assistance. In peacebuilding literature, the term 'local' is framed in a way that gives legitimacy to the 'local' – in other words, a local agency of sorts. Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013) identify local agency in two distinctive ways: (i) practice and (ii) philosophical and theoretical. The first captures the practical 'context of everyday life and of the state' that includes what is unseen – the expressive, informal, underlying behaviour that is tactical and quiet compared to what the authors term head-on public agency. Interpretation of such behaviour can be significant. The second, being a form of agency, encapsulates the legitimate institutions that have been formed, based on social and historical pasts which intertwine with a mix of local and international identities, values, norms, political, economic and cultural practices. What then becomes clear is that, for these authors, power relations are the undercurrent of these interactions where power, resistance and knowledge are circulatory and not a fixed hierarchy in which peace is equated to a victors' peace.

> 'The local turn poses a fundamental challenge to the dominant ways of thinking and acting about peace. Rather than peace being framed by a historical discourse of Western/Northern power and epistemological advancement, more democratic understandings of peace, politics and the state, as well as of the postcolonial international order, are emerging.' (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013)

This then provides a different dimension of explaining everyday peace, which Mac Ginty (2014) expounds on. Everyday peace is a bottom up peace that is part of survival strategies. It is an important building block for peace formation; however, though it can be useful it is also deficient as a formal approach to peacebuilding and statebuilding. Everyday peace, as Mac Ginty (2014) explains, is a routine practice used by individuals or collectives as they navigate their way through

[4] For an overview of the United Nation's peace operations in Timor-Leste see Blanco, Ramon. "The UN Peacebuilding Process: An Analysis of Its Shortcomings in Timor-Leste." Revista Brasileira De Política Internacional. 58.1 (2015): 42-62.

life in a deeply divided society that may suffer from ethnic and religious tensions or be prone to episodic direct violence or chronic or structural violence. It can be viewed as coping mechanisms that help individuals or communities conceal their identity, true thoughts and opinions to avoid drawing attention to themselves especially in situations of potential conflict.

Viewed from a lens of power, legitimacy and responsibility of this everyday peace is a form of agency, as it protects the local from other locals and is a way of 'keeping the peace' to avoid further or escalating conflict. It shows resilience and is a form of community coping mechanisms or perhaps a form of 'choosing your battles' and is used in various ways between individuals and groups. Such peace is prominent between interaction across sectarian, ethnic and nationalistic boundaries and is malleable. It is fluid between how individuals and collectives act towards each other but also goes beyond influencing and affecting ideas and practices. Everyday peace acknowledges the heterogeneity of groups and intra-communal experience, as opposed to the collective grouping of all locals being considered as one whole homogenous unit.

Mac Ginty (2014) identifies five types of socially practiced everyday peace and categorises them accordingly to, namely: (i) avoidance (ii) ambiguity (iii) ritualised politeness (iv) telling (v) blame differing. He elaborates that these are not mutually exclusive and there are overlaps depending on the context. On the surface Mac Ginty (2014) suggests this form of peace serves as a facade to enable normalcy, while upon closer inspection maintaining such decorum involves layers of improvisation, creativity and innovation.

One example found in Geoffrey Gunn's (1997) book titled 'East Timor and the United Nations: The Case for Intervention', tells the story of how when in Maubara in East Timor, Gunn stopped a farmer and asked in Bahasa Indonesian how he felt about Indonesia's presence in Maubara, and the farmer replied in Bahasa Indonesia saying "The Indonesian presence is still being weighed up in this village". Gunn then tells the reader that he took the farmer's response as a 'diplomatic answer' further stating that in that part of the country, Indonesia was still on trial. Perhaps on the surface following Mac Ginty's five types of everyday peace, such an answer from the farmer could be interpreted as keeping the peace. However, if we are to study the history of East Timor, what was very clear when reading Gunn's book was that this story, which sets the scene of the book, failed to understand the context of the local and their history with Indonesia. Here was Gunn, a man of western origin possibly seen to be of Dutch origin for his ability to speak Bahasa Indonesian – the language of those who not only had a track record of torturing and enslaving East Timorese for over twenty years, but a mere six years before the book was published perpetrated the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre of Timorese[5]. Had Gunn spoken Tetum or the Maubara dialect, the farmer might have been a little more candid with the author, going beyond a diplomatic answer to a passing foreign stranger. Perhaps what was happening was more than a conciliatory rhetoric, but a mixture of Mac Ginty's five types of everyday peace namely avoidance, ambiguity and ritualised politeness. This story of the farmer is also a telling example of how the 'international' can misinterpret everyday peace of the local and how the context of the local is very subjective and never the same. Had the question been posed to someone in Díli, the capital of the country, the response might have been very different depending on their affiliations.

This ties in with Mac Ginty's (2014) caveat, pointing out that there are multiple flaws within his observation if used in totality without further investigation. What is evident is that everyday peace only skims the surface of being a form of conflict management rather than being an expansive conflict transformation model. In the example taken from Gunn's book, the farmer's response could

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[5] For an overview of Indonesia's presences in East Timor see Robinson, Geoffrey. "East Timor 1999: Crimes Against Humanity A Report Commissioned by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)." East Timor 1999 : Crimes against Humanity : A Report Commissioned by the United Nations Office of Th... | National Library of Australia. N.p., July 2003. Web. 10 Apr. 2016.

be that of toleration and coexistence, rather than real peace, which is risk perpetuating and reinforces conflict. Such forms of toleration then lead to guaranteeing of intergenerational conflict and insincere propagating of structural violence. This is also context dependent, as seen in the example provided by Gunn. If used in the policy field, it would be deemed shallow, as research on everyday peace has been focused on the rural and not urban; however, the local can be rural, urban and anything within and beyond that spectrum.

The Local's Turn

While the conflict in East Timor was ongoing and spanned for many years, the UN's peace efforts began in 1999 after the international community recognised the Timorese tragedy which spurred multiple consecutive peace operations. These were The UN Mission to East Timor - UNAMET in 1999, International Force in East Timor (INTERFET), UN Transitional Administration in East Timor - UNTAET from 1999 to 2002, UN Mission of Support in East Timor - UNMISET from 2002 to 2005, UN Office in East Timor - UNOTIL from 2005 to 2006, UN integrated Mission in Timor-Leste UNMIT from 2006 to 2012[6].

On the surface, the UN's capability to respond to the crisis in East Timor was boundless and comprehensive. However, studying the different UN missions in Timor-Leste, its prescriptions turned out to be a clear case of 'everyone else knows what's best for you, except you'. Authors like Traub (2000) saw the UN's role as building a totally new country, while for Goldstone (2004), the extent and depth of the various UN missions lent a 'success story' of the UN's conflict resolution and peacebuilding mechanisms. For authors like Freire (2014) the UN's contribution to peace in Timor-Leste was mostly institutional, while McAuliffe (2011) needled the UN's ongoing failure in securing autonomy of East Timor's judicial institutions.

East Timor has a history of multilevel violence and the complexities of the conflict form an intricate labyrinth difficult to navigate through. While the country was supported by the then new United Nations peacebuilding architecture of 2006, through The Peacebuilding Commission, Peacebuilding Support Office, and Peacebuilding Fund, multidimensional peacekeeping proved to be more contentious compared to traditional peacekeeping (Dorussen, 2008). However in the case of East Timor, the efforts by the UN did not produce the desired results, mainly due to the lack of comprehensive conflict analysis and a deep understanding of local knowledge systems.

The UN is heavily reliant on a steady commitment by member states to supply the required resources and the success of its missions lies in the ability to assess conflicts and respond proportionately within the confines of its peacekeeping mandate (Pushkina and Maier, 2012). Moreover, UN peacekeeping has been seen as an important mechanism of disseminating liberal peace. However, this liberal Western-styled peacebuilding mandate was unsuited to the East Timorese context for its liberal norms rather that taking into account the strong hold of local norms, history and culture. Had there been the inclusion of the 'local' from the beginning the outcome might have been positive. As there was no structure to include the Timorese in their own country's business, meaning there was no space for them to participate in the decision making process, the multidimensional and breath of missions played limited roles. The exclusion of locals in the peacebuilding process led to foreign peacebuilding agents, who did not understand the lay of the land and led to the recruitment of former combatants into the police and army, which caused further tensions on the ground. Even the placement of army barracks closer to the Indonesian border ended up causing greater suspicion from the locals as to the loyalties of the army, which could have been avoided had the Timorese been at the negotiating table. Other examples include a Prime Minister

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[6] For and overview of the United Nations (UN) peace and statebuilding operations in East Timor from 1999 to 2006 see Ofstad, Olaf. "Reconciliation and Conflict Resolution in East Timor: Lessons for Future Peace Operations" Oxford Institute for Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict, Apr. 2012. Web. 10 Apr. 2016.

and President with very different mandates, histories and views, which was detrimental building the necessary political structures needed to maintain stability. Add to that a disconnect between the local-local, who saw these elites coming back from spending years overseas to rule over them, which meant a lack of allegiance or trust between the everyday local and that of the ruling elites.

The exclusion of the local was noticeable at the informal tripartite talks, which were initiated between the UN Secretary-General, the Government of Indonesia and Portugal with the aim of improving the humanitarian situation in East Timor. The local was not considered or consulted, not even those ruling the country were spared such consideration. The point of the talks was to find a comprehensive solution to 'the problem' as stated in the documents of the United Nations Missions East Timor (UNMET)[7] which itself is telling of the mind-set of those involved. East Timor was a 'problem' to be solved by these outside powers. Only later did the General Assembly request the Secretary General to initiate consultations with all parties for a comprehensive solution.

Each UN mission then lacked an overall plan or strategy to guide peace. State building was only later added to the agenda with few explicit efforts being made for longer-term reconciliation or conflict resolution. Reconciliation was included in the UN operations mandate after the major crisis and resumption of conflict in 2006, prior to which the UN not only failed to include the local but misread the situation on the ground. However because the mindset was such, certain conflict resolution mechanisms that were recommended by the Timorese Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in 2005 were also not implemented.

While the local turn was later acknowledged in certain ways, what was seen is a trend towards standardisation of peacebuilding interventions. When the local turn is considered it clashes with the liberal norms that are the foundation of the peacebuilding mandate and contradicts its universalism. To consider the local may also trim back on liberal peace, which treads on dangerous waters from the liberal peace perspective.

Conclusion

The East Timor example shows us that there is a tendency or default mechanism towards standardisation of peacebuilding interventions that is difficult to break because it is difficult to 'see' or understand the local in an accurate manner. In that vein what is clear is that even if the language used to denote local participation, ownership, partnership and engagement has been adopted, the spirit of the local turn has rarely truly been integrated (Nordquist, 2013). In conclusion, what is evident is that while this hybrid version of peacebuilding is ideal, the local has not been seen as an equal or been given equal worth. When there is a balance between the local and international, then peacebuilding efforts are meaningful and sustainable. However, in saying that the international is still very relevant it should be noted and questioned how and what their role is, since it needs to be redefined in order to balance the invaluable perspective of the local with the international.

It is also crucial that local ownership is not seen as a goal, but a means which then benefits the process by identifying gaps between international perceptions and expectations versus local knowledge systems and capacities. When the local is fully involved, it allows for peacebuilding efforts to determine who is legitimate and local, as seen in the case of East Timor, where interlocutors were not accepted by the locals. Finally, the understanding of resistance is vital and

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[7] 1. In 1982, by its resolution 37/30 of 23 November 1982, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General "to initiate consultations with all parties directly concerned, with a view to exploring avenues for achieving a comprehensive settlement of the problem" with regard to East Timor. On the basis of that resolution, my two predecessors and I, over the past 17 years, have provided the good offices of the Secretary-General to find a just, comprehensive and internationally acceptable solution to the question of East Timor. (A/54/654, 13 December 1999, General Assembly, Fifty-fourth session Agenda item 96: Question of East Timor)

should not be seen as leading to conflict but that the local is not actually the insular, passive, willingly subservient recipients that is assumed but rather they are agents of change and that resistance is not always a bad thing but very much part of the process.

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