Contemporary Voices

Book review: Reclaiming everyday peace: local voices in measurement and evaluation after war

by Sarah Edgcumbe

The problematic nature and outcomes of liberal peacebuilding have received significant attention over recent years. Nevertheless, the liberal peacebuilding machinery continues to be persistently deployed as the conflict intervention paradigm of choice by dominant international actors. Oliver Richmond and Roger Mac Ginty point to how the contemporary critique of liberal peace has existed for two decades, arguing that 'the persistence of liberal peace "solutions" closes the door on political progress and on difficult discussions about sustainable forms of peace, legitimacy, responsibility and inequality' (2015, p. 171).

Many scholars of peace and conflict have consistently criticised the top-down, elitist, exclusionary and extractive nature of liberal peacebuilding, decrying its focus on state building, democratisation and international security as wilfully blind to the welfare and social needs, perspectives and priorities of "ordinary" citizens (Autesserre, 2019; Iñiguez de Heredia, 2017, pp. 25–36; Kappler and Richmond, 2011; Newman, 2009; Pugh, 2009; Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2009). Scholars such as David Lewis, Stephanie Kappler and Oliver Richmond have illuminated the approach employed by the liberal peace machinery toward local knowledge. According to these authors, local knowledge and agency which can be comfortably accommodated by liberal peacebuilding mechanisms is immediately co-opted, while knowledge which is deemed to be "backwards", undesirable or in opposition to the liberal peace agenda is dismissed, manipulated or wilfully excluded (Lewis, 2017; Kappler and Richmond, 2011).

Pamina Firchow's potentially seminal book, *Reclaiming everyday peace: local voices in measurement and evaluation after war*, appears in the context of this continued international reliance on liberal peacebuilding and its inherent exclusion of local knowledge. Until this point, very little attention had been paid to the systematic exploration of the measurement and evaluation of "peace" after conflict from the perspective of the locals: the residents of conflict-affected areas who must often navigate complex social, political and economic post-conflict dynamics via avenues imposed upon them by exogenous actors. Rather, internationally normative standards of what constitutes peace had been somewhat taken for granted as unproblematic, despite their decontextualised, universal application.

Firchow's book represents a literary breath of fresh air, as it deconstructs the prevailing elitist, top-down approach to peacebuilding and asks two core questions: 'how do we know what interventions work best for sustainable peace at a local level?' and 'how can we measure effectively in a way that reflects the priorities and needs of the population we strive to serve?' Firchow develops a methodology to answer these questions: the Everyday Peace Indicator (EPI) framework. This framework measures the impact of peacebuilding programming, 'but it also articulate[s] detailed context and meaning regarding communities' perceptions and experiences of peace and conflict' (p. 108). It is at once pragmatic, progressive and confounding: pragmatic in that it is simple and therefore replicable; progressive in that the framework (as well as the entire book) is built upon the foundations of critical power analysis and is subsequently entirely shaped by the local perspective (albeit within the boundaries of the framework); and, finally, confounding in that it is hard to believe that a systematic everyday approach to measuring peace at the local level had not been developed sooner.

This book is very much a bridge between the purely theoretical and the practical, making it an engaging, relevant and practicable read. As such, it is extremely useful to policy-makers, peacebuilders and academics alike. In relation to the popular, contemporary process of evaluating peacebuilding interventions and programmes, Firchow claims that 'responses to peacebuilding initiatives at the local level are often "contradictory and confusing" to programme evaluators'. She contends that this problem is exacerbated by the orthodox approach to programme evaluation, which is developed by outsiders with insufficient input from local communities (p. 1). In contrast, the EPI framework works directly with the people affected by conflict in order to facilitate community-constructed indicators of peace, which are contextually and personally relevant, such as: people being able to dig in their gardens, routine celebration of traditional festivals, land ownership and a united community (pp. 112–114). Contrary to standardised universal indicators of peace, which are externally composed, such as those utilised by the Institute for Economics and Peace in order to create the annual Global Peace Index, Firchow describes everyday peace indicators as 'the signs we look to in our daily lives to determine whether we are more or less at peace' (p. 3).

Firchow demonstrates the utility of the EPI framework through a matched case research design across four communities in Uganda and Colombia. The two communities selected in each country were chosen due to their shared demographic and geographical characteristics, alongside the similarities in their histories of violence. Firchow, however, explains that these communities experienced very different levels of post-war intervention. The case study selection, therefore, enabled Firchow and her research team to examine conceptions and experiences of peace, measurable through the indicators communities formulated (secondary categorisation of these indicators was implemented where necessary to ensure their comparability), with the degree of external intervention as the variable element. This study was, thereby, able to produce generalisable results, which directly evaluated the effectiveness of contemporary post-conflict intervention, in such a way as to be useful for international bodies, policy-makers, peacebuilding practitioners and academics in the future.

The results of Firchow's study have important implications for peacebuilding practices – particularly liberal peacebuilding and its universal "one-size-fits-all" approach, which is a consequence of its ideological and epistemological entanglement with neoliberalism (Richmond, 2018, p. 221). By way of presenting and contextualising her findings, Firchow distinguishes between 'big-P' and 'small-p' peacebuilding. 'Big-P' peacebuilding incorporates all intervention elements administered at a national or regional level, including humanitarian assistance, government reform, education, conflict resolution, transitional justice, security and development. In contrast to these macro-level interventions, 'small-p' peacebuilding focuses on local-level dynamics including the transformation or development of social relationships. Importantly, Firchow finds that community-generated everyday peace indicators are highly localised, fluid and dependent on context. Moreover, she identifies a pattern according to which communities closer to violence geographically or temporally tend to choose negative peace indicators, such as physical security and economic development, whereas those who are at a greater geographical or temporal distance from violence emphasise positive peace indicators, such as development, social cohesion, freedom, presence (or lack) of gendered violence, education, fulfilment of human rights and social activities. Overall, however, all communities looked towards indicators of positive peace to ascertain whether they were more, rather than less, at peace.

Although negative peace and the corresponding cessation of manifest physical violence (along with democratisation and market liberalisation) are the objectives for 'big -P', liberal peacebuilding mechanisms, the often consequential enduring presence of structural violence and lack of social cohesion render post-conflict states fragile or prone to local-level conflict. This may be the case even when there is "peace" at the macro, national level. Johan Galtung describes how in seeking to achieve positive peace, 'the goal is to build a structure based on reciprocity, equal rights, benefits

and dignity […] and a culture of peace, confirming and stimulating an equitable economy and an equal polity' (2011, p. 1). Galtung's conception of positive peace is of great relevance to this book, as Firchow recognises consistent failure to transcend 'big-P', negative approaches to peacebuilding as a key factor in failures of peacebuilding at the local level. For example, with regard to social dynamics, she notes that results in communities who had received external assistance were on average only slightly higher than in those that had received very little intervention. This data suggests that 'communities with large amounts of external interventions lack an appropriate amount of "small-p" peacebuilding interventions in post-conflict communities' (p. 129). Furthermore, those communities which received higher levels of intervention experienced higher levels of development, but this increased development came hand-in-hand with higher perceived insecurity in the absence of sufficient 'small-p', locally focused peacebuilding programming. In short, Firchow's research has provided evidence that 'big-P', universal approaches to peacebuilding do not result in sustainable peace.

The argument presented throughout this book is produced through a clear methodological research framework 'that allows researchers and others to measure impact according to the ways individuals themselves measure peace in their communities' (p. 10). The replicability of the EPI framework is demonstrated through its effective use across communities in South Africa, South Sudan, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Colombia. This book, therefore, offers an evaluation of the dominant macro-level-intervention blueprint, in conjunction with guidance on how to transcend liberal peacebuilding by incorporating local voices and agency. This results in a shift in the prevailing power imbalance away from the international and national elite, towards conflict-affected communities at the local level. Concurrently, the book's contents contribute towards filling an existing gap in peacebuilding literature. In 2017, Severine Autesserre wrote that 'existing research lacks analysis of what allows peacebuilding to succeed at a local level'. This, she argued, is due to the macro approach predominantly employed by researchers who fail to recognise that peacebuilding success at a macro level does not necessarily equate to peace at a local level (2017, p. 114). By deconstructing a pre-existing, internationally normative idea of "peace" (held by international elites) and empowering conflict-affected communities to reassemble it according to their own priorities through the EPI framework, Firchow provides the tools with which to analyse those factors that contribute towards sustainable peace, alongside how that peace is measured.

Although this book is fundamentally groundbreaking and offers significant insight into how to achieve sustainable peace, there are two particular omissions in the otherwise explicitly defined methodology, which potentially disguise entrenchment of marginalisation, and edge towards a homogenisation of the local as having shared priorities and ideas. Chapter three clearly and concisely walks the reader through the process of using focus groups in each community to create and validate everyday peace indicators, before they are distributed as part of a broader, community-wide survey. It also explains how research samples for each focus group are stratified in order to ensure a diverse sample within each community. This stratification was undertaken 'using consistent criteria based on community demographics such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, leadership roles and relationship to the partner organisation', namely the local organisation that facilitated entry to each community and assisted with research (p. 69). Firchow acknowledges the need to ensure inclusivity and, as such, explains that 'vulnerable groups such as ethnic and religious minorities and migrants were included' (p. 70). Firchow, however, does not define what she conceived as 'vulnerable', nor what the implications of this vulnerability were for the physical implementation of her research. This poses the question of whether minority groups in these communities were deemed 'vulnerable' through sheer minority status alone, or whether other factors contributed to their perceived vulnerability.

The basis upon which vulnerability is accorded to certain groups potentially has repercussions for focus group implementation. The everyday peace indicators chosen to be included in community-wide surveys were voted for by focus group participants after an initial communally created (within the focus group) list had been presented, discussed and verified. The reader must assume that those groups identified as vulnerable were indeed vulnerable in terms of minority status alone, as opposed to their experiencing actual or potential targeted harm at the hands of the wider community. The latter could potentially result in their coercion or reluctance to participate freely during focus groups, but no discussion of how to navigate this scenario is present within the book.

Furthering this critique of Firchow's approach to vulnerability within the EPI framework, she also fails to explain the process through which the partner organisation introduced her research team to potential focus group participants in each community. This methodological component is critical, as the reader does not know whether an element of selection bias was present. For example, the reader is made aware that social groups defined by the researchers as vulnerable due to their minority status were included. A question arises, however, regarding the inclusion of stigmatised or socially ostracised groups or individuals whom the partner organisation might have deliberately overlooked. Perhaps this is not the case, but without an explanation of how Firchow and her team were introduced to prospective focus group participants, there is no way to be certain. Thus, there remains the risk that this research continued to exclude historically marginalised groups, raising questions regarding the effect their inclusion may have had on the results or the management of focus groups as they were taking place. For example, if a representative of a marginalised group had a different list of everyday peace indicators than the majority, their indicators would be outvoted by the majority under the EPI framework methodology, therefore rendering them silenced and further cementing their marginalisation. Clarity on this methodological aspect of the research would be welcome.

Overall, the contribution this book makes to the field of peace and conflict studies cannot be overstated. Likewise, it has the potential to have a significant impact on peacebuilding practice if the political will to relinquish more power to the local level exists at the international level. Firchow makes a strong and well-supported case for a transformation in how peacebuilding programmes are formulated, delivered and evaluated, arguing effectively that 'community level measures of peace that are cognizant of local level dynamics and meanings are needed to guide efforts to achieve a sustainable peace' (p. 18). This book provides the tools through which to transform peacebuilding programmes, but it also has the capacity to influence a wider field of research, as it seeks to address the long-standing, structural power imbalance inherent within conflict intervention.

Bibliography

Autesserre, S. (2017) 'International peacebuilding and local success: assumptions and effectiveness', *International Studies Review,* 19 (1), pp. 114–132.

Autesserre, S. (2019) 'The crisis of peacekeeping: why the U.N can't end wars', *Foreign Affairs,* 98 (1), pp. 101–118.

Bojicic-Dzelilovic, V. (2009) 'Peacebuilding in Bosnia-Herzegovina: reflections on the development–democracy link', in Newman, E., Paris, R. and Richmond, O. (eds), *New perspectives on liberal peacebuilding*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press, pp. 201–217.

Firchow, P. (2018) Reclaiming everyday peace: local voices in measurement and evaluation after war. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Galtung, J. (2011) 'Peace, positive and negative', in Christie, D.J., *The encyclopaedia of peace psychology*. Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 1–5.

Iñiguez de Heredia, M. (2017) Everyday resistance, peacebuilding and state-making: insights from 'Africa's World War'. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Kappler, S. and Richmond, O. (2011) 'Peacebuilding and culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina: resistance or emancipation?', *Security Dialogue,* 42 (3), pp. 261–278.

Lewis, D. (2017) 'The myopic Foucauldian gaze: discourse, knowledge and the authoritarian peace', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 11 (1), pp. 21–41.

Newman, E. (2009) '"Liberal" peacebuilding debates', in Newman, E., Paris, R. and Richmond, O. (eds), *New perspectives on liberal peacebuilding*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press, pp. 26–53.

Pugh, M. (2009) 'Towards life welfare', in Newman, E., Paris, R. and Richmond, O. (eds), *New perspectives on liberal peacebuilding*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press, pp. 78–96.

Richmond, O. (2018) 'Rescuing peacebuilding? Anthropology and peace formation', *Global Society*, 32 (2), pp. 221–239.

Richmond, O. and Mac Ginty, R. (2015) 'Where now for the critique of the liberal peace?', *Cooperation and Conflict,* 50 (2), pp. 171–189.