THE PARADOXES OF PEACEBUILDING POST-9/11

STEPHEN BARANYI (ED.)
VANCOUVER: UBC PRESS, 2008

Review by Timothy Donais*

The peacebuilding enterprise, as it has evolved in the two decades since the end of the Cold War, has come to be dominated by a powerful outside-in logic that views external actors and ideas as the key agents of change in post-war contexts. This dynamic is nicely captured by Roland Paris' characterization of peacebuilding as a modern-day *mission civilisatrice*, informed by liberal democratic norms and driven by Western-dominated actors. Despite growing attention to the principle of local ownership, it continues to be the case that non-Western voices, and especially voices from within war-torn states, struggle to be heard in debates about either the theory or the practice of peacebuilding.

Inspired partly by a desire to help correct this imbalance, and partly by a growing disquiet with the directions peacebuilding has taken in the aftermath of 9/11, *The Paradoxes of Peacebuilding* presents a set of inside-out perspectives on contemporary peacebuilding processes. The volume is the product of the multi-year *What Kind of Peace is Possible?* project initiated by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in 2002, designed to create space "for Southern researchers and practitioners to put their stamp on mostly Northern debates." The result is a rich, textured set of case studies demonstrating both the complexity and the potential of local actors, who tend to be uniformly portrayed as "problems" in many contemporary accounts, and of local peacebuilding dynamics, which often operate in isolation from formal peace processes. Indeed, one of the key lessons to be taken from the volume is that there remains, in most cases, a fundamental disconnect between top-down and bottom-up dynamics in peacebuilding contexts, and bridging this gap in ways that still contribute to sustainable peace remains one of the key challenges of contemporary peacebuilding.

This issue of agency represents the volume's primary paradox, with the broader question of "who can promote transformative peacebuilding?" providing the volume's basic conceptual framework. On this fundamental question, the contributors often pull in different directions. On the one hand, across the contributions there is an undercurrent of optimism that the diverse and often conflictual interests at play in any peacebuilding context can ultimately be reconciled. Baranyi, for example, draws on John Paul Lederach's notion of "peace infrastructures" to emphasise the need to forge transnational coalitions linking agents of change at local, national, and international levels. On the other hand, however, there is also a clear sense that the realities of the post-9/11 world seriously compromise the normative common ground upon which such coalitions must necessarily be constructed. While pre-9/11 analyses of peacebuilding tended to take for granted both the benevolence of international interveners and the existence of a commonality of interest among both providers and recipients of intervention, such assumptions have become much harder to sustain in the context of the ongoing war on terror. The manifestations of the shift from negotiated

---

* Timothy Donais is assistant professor in the department of global studies at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario.

peacebuilding to military-driven stability operations are myriad, from the mixed motives of the international presence in Afghanistan to the blanket rejection of Hamas as a negotiating partner in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Yet despite recent trends, the contributions to *The Paradoxes of Peacebuilding* remain fundamentally committed to peacebuilding as a transformative project, the normative foundations of which necessarily remain liberal-democratic in nature. A key premise of the volume, in other words, is that the liberal peacebuilding project remains fundamentally sound, and can be advanced through patient, flexible strategies aimed at deepening democratic participation and advancing pro-peace economic development. While such a conclusion may be appropriate in some of the cases under review—including the relative success stories of Mozambique and Guatemala—it is somewhat more problematic in more difficult cases such as Afghanistan and the Palestinian Territories, where both the obstacles and resistance to liberal peacebuilding are especially profound. In this sense, the volume's emphasis on the agency question comes at the expense of a deeper exploration of the very viability of the liberal peacebuilding project in non-Western contexts. In particular, the volume's treatment of the broader economic dimensions of peacebuilding is somewhat uneven, and its contributors perhaps overly sanguine about the possibilities of sustainable peacebuilding in a global economic context that remains profoundly unfavourable for the weakest and most fragile members of the international community.

The volume's key strength, conversely, lies in its treatment of local-level peacebuilding dynamics, particularly with regard to democratic de-centralization and the local dynamics of DDR (disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration) processes. By focusing on the micro-politics of peacebuilding, and on the impacts of specific policies on individuals and communities within post-conflict settings, the case studies shed important light on the manner in which peacebuilding policy is translated into practice, and on the often determinative impact of specific local conditions on peacebuilding outcomes. The chapter by Eduardo Sitoe and Carolina Hunguana on Mozambique, for example, details how a policy of state building from below—based on the assumption that local participatory democracy holds the key to reducing poverty and inequality—has been sidetracked by national-level elites who would rather delegate authority than transfer it. Similarly, Omar Zakhilwal and Jane Murphy Thomas' examination of Afghanistan's National Solidarity Program—one of the most ambitious efforts to date in participatory rural development—offers fascinating insights into the very particular local dynamics that determine the success or failure of such programming, while also underlining the tendency of existing local elites to monopolize ostensibly "transformative processes" for their own purposes. These case studies, as well as those on Guatemala and Haiti, demonstrate that while progress is possible, peacebuilding remains a fundamentally conflictual process, not easily micro-managed at either national or international levels. They also illustrate quite clearly that participation is no guarantee of longer-term political transformation; alas, the basic dilemmas of peacebuilding are no less pronounced when viewed from the inside out as they appear from the outside in.

The volume's three thematic chapters on DDR (focusing on Guatemala, Afghanistan, and Palestine) yield similar insights by reversing the familiar outside-in perspective. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is that coercive approaches to disarmament in peacebuilding

contexts are doomed to failure, and are more likely to exacerbate than overcome violence. Secondly, successful DDR processes—and reintegration processes in particular—must necessarily take into account the *embeddedness* of armed actors in specific socio-political contexts and communities; in other words, a better understanding of the social nexus within which armed actors exist can lead to more sustainable outcomes. Third, the emphasis on former combatants as potential "spoilers" has produced a preoccupation with disempowering ex-fighters at the expense of seeing them as potential agents of change; in Guatemala, for example, the emphasis on individual rather than collective reintegration of former Guatemala Revolutionary National Union (URNG) rebels not only had adverse consequences in terms of transforming individuals into productive members of society, but also "served to diminish the ex-URNG combatants' ability to become an active social and political force." While DDR practitioners would no doubt emphasize the dangers inherent in any process aimed at simultaneously disempowering (in a military sense) and re-empowering (in a political sense) former armed factions, taken as a whole the DDR discussion usefully outlines the complex social, political, and economic dynamics that underpin any effort to restore the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force after war.

The contemporary debate on peacebuilding has long been marked by a tension between minimalist and maximalist perspectives, between those who see peacebuilding as a multi-year endeavour aimed at preventing the recurrence of armed conflict, and those who consider peacebuilding in terms of the much broader and longer-term challenge of engineering just, prosperous, and stable post-war societies. What emerges clearly from *The Paradoxes of Peacebuilding* is that this is less a choice than a continuum; while preventing the re-emergence of conflict may be a defensible priority in the short and even medium term, sustaining and deepening peace in the longer run is no less critical. In this context, especially given the limits of international will and commitment, sustainable peacebuilding depends fundamentally on local ownership, and on finding creative ways to productively connect bottom-up and top-down processes. *The Paradoxes of Peacebuilding* represents a useful and important contribution to this larger project.

■