

IN DEPTH

Disrupting conflict

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While there are extensive peacebuilding operations in many parts of the world, it is curiously absent – as a practice and technical language – in many contexts that are severely affected by violence. In particular, a number of countries – especially in Latin and Central America, and the Caribbean – suffer from very high rates of violence, and yet tend not to be considered candidates for peacebuilding activities. This is despite the high levels of violence having very disruptive impacts across society and government, and the violence often having a military-style in its scale and type. In the absence of peacebuilding initiatives, and often in the face of a lack of national government capability or concern, it is often left to individuals and communities to take steps to protect themselves. At times, individuals and communities have been able to take a stand to try to disrupt the conflict. This short article considers opportunities for conflict disruption.

The ascent of peacebuilding

Over the past fifty years, but particularly over the past thirty years, an extensive international and transnational peacebuilding infrastructure has been established. This is comprised of an often interlocking system of institutions – national, multilateral and transnational – aimed at preventing conflict, lessening its impact, facilitating its ‘resolution’, and rehabilitating societies and institutions after conflict has lessened. This infrastructure is complemented by a ‘software’ or an increasingly professionalised system of protocols and operating procedures. Decades of ‘best practice’ have been internalised, and there is widespread agreement on the most suitable mechanisms and approaches to the range of problems impacting conflict-affected societies. A

vernacular, or a technical language of peacebuilding terms, has developed allowing easier comparison across cases.

In addition to the development of a peacebuilding infrastructure and the standardisation of operating procedures, we have also seen the growth of a professional class of peacebuilders. Now numbering in the tens of thousands and often educated with specialist degrees in peacebuilding, this transnational cohort of peacebuilders are employed by the United Nations, international organisations, national governments, and (international) non-governmental organisations. This is in addition to a substantial sector of private consultants, and for-profit peacebuilding organisations.

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The picture that emerges is of a thriving sector operating in multiple conflict-affected contexts. In a sense there has been a peacebuilding ‘caravan’, with international attention and resources moving from context to context as conflict ebbs and flows; Cambodia to Bosnia to Sierra Leone to the Democratic Republic of Congo to Colombia, and many stops in between. Along the way, more lessons are learned and best practice is honed.

Selective Peacebuilding

Despite the extensive infrastructure of peacebuilding, and the resources devoted to it in multiple contexts, peacebuilding – as a practice and language – is applied selectively. In some cases, the conflict actors emphasise security approaches and see little value in peacebuilding. Israel-Palestine provides a good example of this, with Israel – as the most powerful actor – prioritising a security-led approach.^[1] International interventions that might be labelled as ‘peacebuilding’ are often actually security approaches. In the case of some conflict in the global north, states might not want to admit that peacebuilding is needed. In a sense, peacebuilding might be seen as

something that is only required ‘over there’ in far-away conflict-affected areas. Thus, for example, the United States suffers significant levels of violence – much of it with a racial dimension – and on-going (if not rising) tension between black communities and police forces.^[2] Yet, for the United States to admit that it required peacebuilding or some form of nationwide conflict resolution would be a humiliating admission of the depth of the problem. It helps too that the United States is a strong state and would be able to rebuff any international attempts to initiate peacebuilding interventions.

There are also cases in which there are high levels of violence, often with military characteristics, and yet the violence is regarded as criminal rather than political. In the view of national governments – and international actors – peacebuilding is not regarded as an option. A number of states in Latin and Central America and the Caribbean suffer from extremely high levels of violence. In 2020, El Salvador suffered 1,322 homicides – down from over 6,000 in 2015, but still at a high level.^[3] Brazil experienced 50,033 homicides in 2020 (with 6,416 people being killed by the police).^[4] In Mexico, the 2020 figure was 34,515.^[5] In all of these cases, the homicide number exceeded (in some cases far exceeded) the widely accepted technical definition of war. According to the respected Uppsala Conflict Data Programme, war is ‘a state-based conflict or dyad which reaches at least 1,000 battle-related deaths in a specific calendar year.’^[6] It is also quite possible that the official figures are an under-estimate given the number of abduction-murders in some of these contexts.

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Indeed, if we ignore the aggregate number of homicides and concentrate on the homicide rate (that is the number of homicides per 100,000 in the population) then the situations in Honduras, Guatemala and Jamaica are particularly noteworthy. The aggregate annual homicide numbers do not exceed the 1,000 mark as they have

relatively small populations, but at respective homicide rates of 44, 37 and 32 homicides per 100,000 it is clear that these societies are undergoing significant disruption. It should be noted that these statistics include nuance. Homicide rates are not uniform across countries, and they affect different age groups and genders in different ways.

The violence in many of these contexts is usually designated as “criminal”. To some extent it is difficult to disagree with this designation. Much of the violence is motivated by profit and is often linked to narcotics. Yet, if we scratch the surface of this top-level explanation, we can see that the violence mostly occurs within complex political economies. So in addition to simplistic explanations linked to profits and the drugs trade, we also have to think about the partial legitimacy of states, corruption and limited capabilities among police forces, and the colonial legacies that still pattern economies.

The chief point is that all of these societies suffer from *political* violence. Even in a case like Honduras, which cannot point to the legacy of a recent civil war, it is difficult not to politically contextualise the current level of homicides.^[7] Race, the land tenure system, and decades of US support for governments all collide to produce the current complex political economy.

Despite the high levels of (political) violence, the language and practice of peacebuilding tend not to be used in relation to these contexts. Peacebuilding frameworks and language are largely dominated by the Anglophone world and do not automatically transfer to Latin American contexts. The absence of many of the large international peacebuilding organisations is striking. Moreover, peace theory and practice is largely shaped around explicitly politically motivated violence and invest much energy into dealing with identity. As a result, many standard peacebuilding activities might be ill-equipped to deal with the high-intensity violence found in parts of Brazil or Mexico.

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There is no disputing the scale of the disruption caused by this violence and its often structural and systemic nature. It is embedded in how societies operate and the micro-actions of individuals, families and communities. The extent of the violence impacts everyday thought processes as people anticipate violence and take steps to avoid it as best they can, or persist in the midst of it. There are multiple reasons why peacebuilding may not be regarded as an acceptable response in these contexts. For example, to allow some peacebuilding practices to operate there may have to be a recognition of the legitimacy of certain groups and causes – something that is difficult to imagine if the group has been designated as criminal. Moreover, formal peacebuilding programmes and projects are often (although not always) initiated and sponsored by external actors. Chief among them, the United Nations, is primarily mandated to intervene in the case of international conflicts, and requires explicit approval from host states before operating.

The primary formal response to the high levels of violence has been security-led. This has had varying levels of success, not least because militarised policing has led to militarised responses from gangs. Each seems caught in a security dilemma in which the next step is to re-arm, and civilians are often caught in the middle of two violent actors. There have also been negotiations on violence reduction between governments and gangs, with informal deals struck between them.^[8] Often these talks and deals are deniable. Yet despite the securitised responses, and occasional violence reduction talks, high rates of violence, and the complex political economies that underpin them are not going to go away. This leaves so-called ‘ordinary’ people in the position where they have to rely on their own ingenuity and resources to get by.

Citizen responses

Violence in some contexts is so prevalent that it impinges on multiple aspects of life. The mundane and everyday are patterned by the need to avoid as much violence as possible and persist with some semblance of family life. Whether it is the route the kids take to school or the confidence that citizens have in reporting the crime to the police, life is a series of calculations about what is safe or unsafe. It is often down to the individual or family to make these decisions. In many cases, the state is not only incapable or disinterested – it is also the origin of much violence. Whether violent police raids in Rio de Janeiro’s favelas or police brutality in Kenya, citizens devise strategies to avoid gangs and the police.[9]

In some cases, citizens have sought to disrupt the violence that has impinged on their lives. Often this conflict disruption takes very subtle forms. It might occur behind the closed doors of the family apartment, and take the form of a big sister cautioning a younger brother against gang membership. This may not sound significant, but the quiet counselling might be transgressive to the prevailing logic in the community in which joining a gang is an accepted (and possibly expected) route for young men. By not joining a gang, the young man disrupts a social narrative and shows that alternative pathways are possible (and quite possibly lead a safer life and cause less social harm). Micro-sociological interventions like that of the big sister are understudied and under-appreciated. They have value in illustrating that gangs, paramilitary actors, authoritarian states, or political leaders who claim to speak for an entire identity group are not monolithic or hegemonic actors. Instead, these minor acts of conflict disruption puncture the logic, stance and narrative of conflict actors who seek to dominate a social space.

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It is understandable that many acts of conflict disruption occur ‘below the radar’. To take a stand against the prevailing logic or narrative in a community, or to openly reject the ‘protection’ of a gang or a police force may incur wrath. In some cases, however, individuals, families and communities have engaged in overt conflict disruption activities by openly rejecting the widely-accepted narratives, stances, actions and memberships associated with the conflict. Much like market disruption, whereby a market is disrupted by a new product or company, a ‘conflict market’ can be disrupted by new actors, initiatives, narratives and stances. These actions require bravery, but also an ability to read the social temperature and make a judgement on what is possible and not possible. There are certain times when pro-social or pro-peace initiatives are simply inadvisable.

Despite the risks, there are multiple examples of individuals and communities engaging in conflict disruption. Former gang members in many contexts have been involved in disengagement or dissuasion activities.^[10] Informal community leaders have established ‘No Shoot Zones’ in US cities – both as a way of chiding the authorities for their ineffectiveness and as a challenge to gangs to respect the rights of citizens.^[11] In a number of conflict-affected contexts, communities have established “Zones of Peace” as statements that they want to step outside of the conflict and forge alternative and more peaceful ways of getting on with life.^[12] These transgressive activities, that go against the prevailing societal norm, are not without their risks. The appalling death toll among community leaders and activists in post-accord Colombia is testament – among other things – to the intolerance of many actors in conflict areas towards alternative narratives, stances, actions and types of leaders.

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In the best-case scenario, conflict disruption can factor up and out. Highly localised actions may inspire others to follow suit. The imaginary that violent political leaders have complete community support might be punctured by the actions or stances of a few brave individuals. In a number of cases, it has become clear that communities have ‘moved on’, yet political or militant leaders have not. Tensions may develop between the political or militant leaders, and a number of community members who question their legitimacy or strategy may grow. In an optimum scenario, political and militant leaders would follow community sentiment and adjust their behaviour.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it is worth asking what – if anything – external actors can do to support conflict disruption. It is understandable that peacebuilding actors might want to support local actions that seem to be working or give some sort of hope. Yet, many conflict disruption actions are very localised and occur behind closed doors. They take the form of micro-sociological actions and stances that occur in the workplace, in the immediate vicinity of the home, or in the neighbourhood. Moreover, many of those involved in conflict disruption want to keep their actions ‘under the radar’ lest they incur criticism, or worse, from their in-group. These forms of conflict disruption take shape through quiet, patient actions and stances. They are not the types of actions that can somehow be ‘projectised’ by international peace-support organisations. A more feasible supportive approach would be to invest in education – a route that can individuals and communities find alternatives to violence and militancy.

Some conflict disruption activities do lend themselves to international support, and we have seen many examples of INGOs supporting local violence reduction measures. But it is worth noting that much conflict disruption relies on individuals who use initiative, decide to extend tolerance, and rely on their personal judgment rather than what a gang, militant group or government mandates. Often these are charismatic individuals who are social entrepreneurs and have the energy to take initiative and the strength to withstand criticisms and setbacks. They might, for example, set up a sports club that is open to all members of the community regardless of identity. Or they might choose not to show loyalty to a local strongman. Or they might simply get on with life – as best they can – and ignore the hubbub and divisive nature of an election campaign. It is difficult

for international peace-support actors to support such change-making individuals. Indeed, it is often difficult for outsiders to even see these highly localised actions – despite the very large peacebuilding infrastructure that has been established.

[1] Turner, M. *Peacebuilding as counterinsurgency in the occupied Palestinian territory*, *Review of International Studies*, 41(1), 2015, 73-98.

[2] See, for example, [The Sentencing Project](#).

[3] Brigida, Anna-Catherine. *'El Salvador's homicide rate a historic low in 2020'*, *Foreign Policy*, 3 March, 2021.

[4] Reuters. *'Murders, killings by police in Brazil rose last year, report shows'*, Reuters, 15 July, 2021.

[5] Associated Press. *'Mexico's homicide stayed high in 2020 despite pandemic'*, AP, 20 January, 2021.

[6] See [this link](#).

[7] I am grateful to Amanda Blewitt for this point.

[8] Brigada, op. cit.

[9] See, for example, Raphael Tsavkko Garcia. *'Is there no end to Rio de Janeiro's cycle of violence?'*, Al Jazeera, 27 May, 2021. See also, Human Rights Watch. *'Kenya: Police brutality during curfew'*, Human Rights Watch, 22 April, 2020.

[10] See, for example, Jonathan Blitzer. *'Former gang members offer advice on how to combat MS-13'*, *New Yorker*, 30 January, 2018.

[11] Dean Adams. *'How a rapper set up no shoot zones to stop Baltimore's bloodshed'*, Al Jazeera, 11 October, 2018.

[12] Landon Hancock and Christopher Mitchell eds. *Zones of Peace*, Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner, 2007.

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Photography

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