

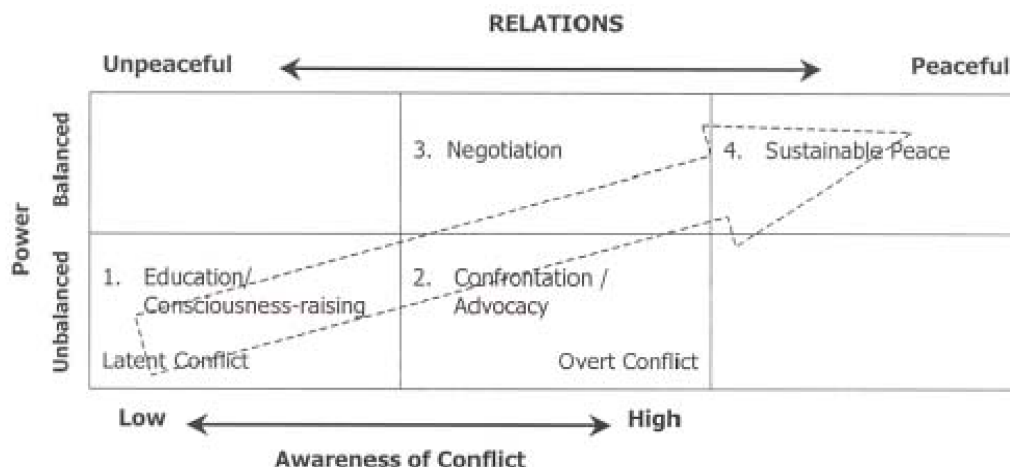
Reimagining Peacebuilding for the transformation of Structural Violence

An essay by Adapt Peacebuilding. April 2023.

When we think of peace as an outcome of peacebuilding work, we typically conceive of places or societies in which people are able to live lives that are free from violence, and the various injustices and disadvantages that it brings them. These are liberating ideals, which speak to various ways in which peacebuilding intends to transform the structural barriers (“root causes”) that prevent some people within societies from living a good life.

Empowering ideals are evident in peacebuilding’s early thinking. In defining structural violence, Johann Galtung was pointing to the societal institutions that marginalise and disempower some members of a society, whether or not they experience violence directly. His conception of positive peace was a recognition of peace not just in the absence of violence, but as the societal conditions in which all people are free to realise the full flourishing of their potential.¹ Another founder of Peace and Conflict Studies, Adam Curle, conceived of peacemaking as a process of societies becoming conscious of the determinants of structural violence and intentional about transforming inequitable distributions of power. Many peace scholars and practitioners in the half century since have advanced this perspective of peacebuilding, as a primarily ‘local’ practice with emancipatory intentions.²

Figure 1: Adam Curle’s emphasis on balancing power in progress towards peace



¹ In his study “What is peace research?” published in 1964, Galtung describes negative peace as the absence of human violence and war, positive peace as the absence of structural violence (Galtung, 1964, pp. 1-4).

² Lederach, Autesserre, Donais, Paris, Richmond, Mac Ginty, et al

But peacebuilding sometimes struggles to live up to empowering ideals when it is enacted through Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), as it primarily has been since the 1990s.³ International peacebuilding agendas for who, what, where, when, how and how much peacebuilding is supported are often set by and skewed towards the interests of donor countries. When these priorities and how they'll be implemented are negotiated with recipient countries, it is typically through conversations with the domestic elites that the state-based international system wants to or is most able to 'do business with'.⁴ This generates hybrid international-national peacebuilding agendas that are geared to serve the interests of existing power-holders rather than those topics and actors who might wish to change the agenda or balance of power.

Top-down coalitions of this nature typically make it hard for the meaningful inclusion of subaltern (non-elite) actors and perspectives in formal peace processes, despite the wealth of evidence that this leads to more sustainable peace outcomes.⁵ In broader peacebuilding programming, this top down logic shows up in partnership approaches that favour international intermediaries, and require strict compliance from local organisations regarding what, where, when, and how they can do peacebuilding work. Though there are many exceptions, the general result of this system is that agency in peacebuilding is often skewed away from many people and organisations within societies that are the closest to it. This is a problem not just because it's unethical or undemocratic, but because our best evidence suggests that peacebuilding approaches that are not sufficiently 'inclusive' or 'locally-owned' do not work well.⁶

The need to redistribute agency is a well recognised and reoccurring conversation in peacebuilding. Peace processes probably have become more inclusive of intra-societal actors and perspectives over time, although the influence of this additional inclusion is questionable.⁷ Contemporary calls to decolonise peacebuilding (and broader development) practice do have some momentum, but are sources of only muted optimism given piecemeal progress in the decade since the 'local turn' in peacebuilding⁸ and 'localisation agenda' in humanitarianism and development more broadly despite the best efforts of many organisations.⁹

³ ODA conceives of peacebuilding as an activity that needs to happen in ODA-receiving Fragile and Conflict Affected States (FCAS). These are typically lower income countries that are recovering from civil wars, or are otherwise affected by ethnic, religious, or sectarian conflicts. Peacebuilding takes an interest in countering violent extremism, but pays little attention to violent criminality, and only relatively recently to structural violence in ODA donor countries.

⁴ Foreign governments, multilateral institutions, and international NGOs for example typically operate within conflict-affected countries according to host government approvals. These may prevent these organisations from associating with non-state armed groups or civil society organisations, that typically though not always are agitating for changes to the status quo, whether violently or non-violently.

⁵ See summaries of findings on inclusive peace, particularly the arguments that participation is not meaningful when it does not alter the content or implementation modalities of peace processes.

⁶ The evidence suggests that peace processes produce the most sustainable, positive outcomes when they are more inclusive or a broader range of societal concerns.

⁷ See debates on consultation versus meaningful participation, a la Paffenholz et al.

⁸ See [The Local Turn: A Critical Agenda for Peace](#) for example (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013)

⁹ See global progress on this topic in [Localization: A Landscape Report](#) for example (Tufts University, 2022). These efforts might face further headwinds in the 2020s, at least via ODA, given the decline that is

Can peacebuilding be a vehicle for ‘systems change’?

Peacebuilding is a collection of practices that seek to make divided societies whole and cohesive. Its primary concepts and tools focus on relationships, and how they can be transformed so that competing interests and inequities can be addressed constructively. The socio-political problems that peacebuilding addresses are typically complex, unpredictable, and dynamic, arguably more so than for other domains in international development. Peacebuilding’s systemic character is evident when we speak of multitrack peace architectures and infrastructures for peace, or when we appeal for HDP nexus coordination,¹⁰ peacebuilding coherence,¹¹ or cumulative impact¹² between peacebuilding organisations and initiatives. In many ways, peacebuilding is a process that is trying to improve connections between a society’s different parts, so that it functions in ways that are less violent and more equitable.

Systems approaches are sometimes described as ‘top down’ or ‘bottom up’. The top down approach was critiqued in the previous section for its tendency to marginalise the concerns of some actors. But while bottom up peacebuilding approaches might be more responsive in this regard, its critics point out that bottom up benefits tend to be limited to certain geographies or less sustainable over time if they are isolated from the coordination, resourcing, and regulating functions that institutions and norms typically provide.¹³ The most interesting question might not be which approach is better, but how best to connect and share agency between them.

The application of (complex adaptive) systems thinking to peacebuilding practice gained pace in the 2010s¹⁴ and has since become a mainstay within philanthropy circles, and a niche interest among more traditional peacebuilding actors. These advances have proven helpful for conflict analysis and strategic planning in particular, as they allow us to recognise complex causality, to better understand the patterns that govern continuity and change, and to hypothesise where our efforts to address complex problems might have the greatest leverage.¹⁵

The application of complexity and systems thinking to peacebuilding sometimes falls short of its potential, however, in ways that point to features of Overseas Development Assistance that are difficult to change. The first feature concerns who is able to participate in setting peacebuilding agendas. When systems mapping processes fail to ‘get the system in the room,’ they risk producing analyses and plans that are inaccurate or not owned by people that can take direct action in those systems.¹⁶

occurring in peacebuilding budgets and the shift that is taking place in foreign policy priorities towards security concerns and bilateral political interests with respect to peacemaking processes.

¹⁰ See [HDP Nexus: Challenges in Implementation](#) for example (KfW Development Research, 2022)

¹¹ See [The Coherence Dilemma in Peacebuilding and Post-Conflict Reconstruction Systems](#) for example (de Coning, 2009).

¹² See [Adding up to Peace](#) for example (CDA, 2018).

¹³ See [Hybrid Peace](#) (Mac Ginty, 2011)

¹⁴ See for example Ropers, de Coning, Brusset, Ricigliano, Burns, Nowak, Vallacher, Coleman et al.

¹⁵ The [Omidyar Group’s Systems Practice Workbook](#) is a good example of how to apply systems thinking.

¹⁶ See [Changing Conversations in Organizations: A Complexity Approach to Change](#) for example (Shaw, 2002).

A second feature concerns the difference between ‘seeing’ causality in systemic ways, versus acting in ways that are complementary with the emergent behaviour of complex adaptive systems over time. The former can and has fitted into traditional programming cycles quite neatly, providing an alternative analytical tool to plan peacebuilding goals, strategies, and activities. The latter requires more fundamental changes in the extent to which peacebuilding initiatives are designed and held accountable to predetermined goals and strategies, versus adapting to changing needs and opportunities as they arise over time, as interpreted by organisations working in the context during the course of implementation. The jury is probably still out on how extensive the adoption of adaptive management and MEAL will be among mainstream ODA actors, but there are reasons to expect that the tradeoffs in international versus local interests that it implies will remain politically challenging for state-based institutions to broadly adopt.¹⁷

A third feature constraining the adoption of more systemic ways of working in peacebuilding concerns how organisations are dis/incentivised to cooperate. Despite many shared goals, values, and methodologies, local as well as international peacebuilding organisations are often pitted against each other in competitions over resources. Organisations without public donations or core funds are not typically resourced for relational work such as consultation, trust-building, or networking, so do this in ways that are voluntary and hard to sustain. Even though it is in some ways obvious that many peacebuilding objectives are not achievable by one organisation alone, funding and partnership approaches that support collaborative networks rather than individual organisations seem relatively rare.¹⁸ The alternative would be that those that set the parameters and provide peacebuilding resources adopt more ‘integrative’ and less ‘coercive’ ways of exercising their power.¹⁹

(How) can we close the gap between rhetoric and practice?

The previous sections suggested that the typical practices of peacebuilding actors with respect to empowerment and systems change sometimes fall short of the ideals and language that many organisations aspire to.²⁰ But to what extent can they, realistically?

Systems change frameworks provide some insight on why the broad adoption of these approaches in peacebuilding remains difficult, despite the best efforts of many. In the tradition of previous systems thinkers, Senge et al (2018) describe how the causal factors that govern how systems behave exist in hierarchies, in which deeper, less visible factors set parameters for how more visible causal factors behave. From the top down in the depiction below, this would imply that the policies, practices and resource flows that we observe in the peacebuilding system are shaped by relationships and power dynamics that are highly influential, but less widely acknowledged.

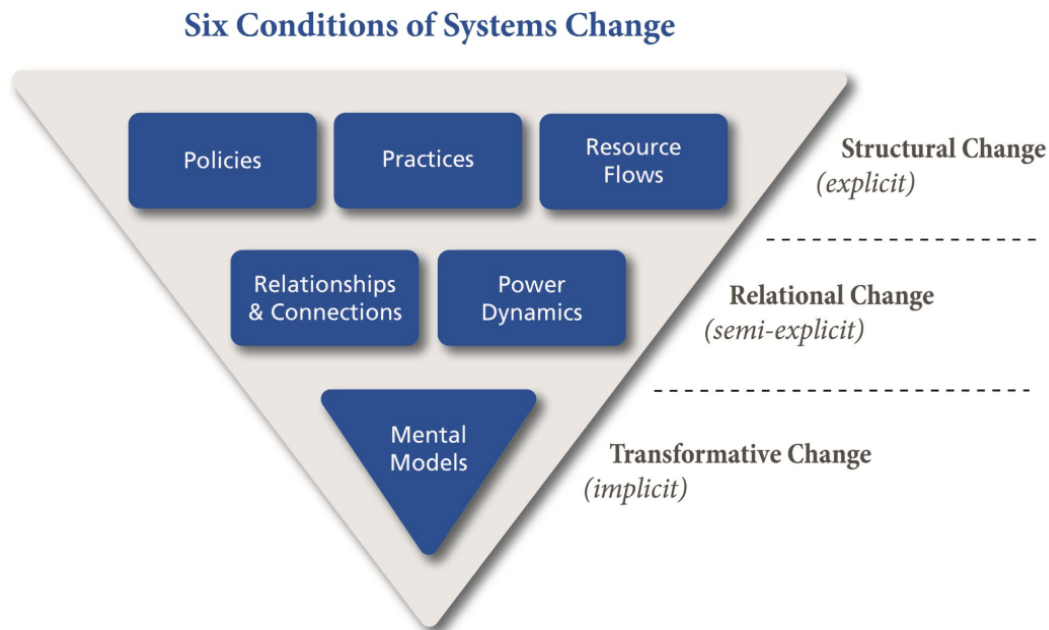
¹⁷ See [The Difference Learning Makes](#) for example (Gray and Carl, 2022)

¹⁸ See [The Dynamics and Challenges of Funding Peace](#) for example (Conciliation Resources, 2020)

¹⁹ See Boulding, Arendt, Dugan and others on the topic of [Integrative Power](#).

²⁰ There is much diversity however. The gap between words and actions might be less for philanthropies, civil society organisations and some international NGOs than for bilateral and multilateral organisations for instance. Particularly those with cyclical policy processes promoting inclusive peacebuilding, who also managed the largest funding instruments that are accessible only to a limited range of mostly international organisations.

These relationships and power dynamics in turn are representative of mental models, assumptions, or 'logics' that influence the relationships that are possible, or how power gets distributed.²¹



From a systems change perspective, efforts to shift policies, practices, or resources flows in will not take hold within and between organisations that operate according to logics that are inconsistent with the desired changes, whether or not these are conscious or publicly acknowledged. As it has been famously remarked, “If a factory is torn down but the rationality which produced it is left standing, then that rationality will simply produce another factory.”²² Though there are many exceptions and variations across organisations, the international state-based system in particular is influenced by several logics that are problematic for broad adoptions of empowering and systemic peacebuilding practices. These include, for example:

1. Reductive logic that separates issues, resource streams, and organisations into categories and makes cooperation across them difficult in policy or in practice,
2. New Public Management that assumes that strategies for achieving desired results can be reliably known in advance in complex settings, and achieved in efficient ways through centralised planning, subcontracting, and compliance of downstream organisations against predetermined metrics, and
3. Self-preservation logic through which organisations are concerned for their own goals and continuity more than they are towards the success of others.

²¹ Senge, Kramer, and Kania (2018) [The Water of Systems Change](#).

²² Persig, R (1974) [Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance](#).

Alternative logics for empowerment and systems change

Making good on peacebuilding's potential to transform the determinants of structural violence - whether across communities or whole societies - will require collaboration among organisations of different types who adopt ways of thinking and working that depart from these orthodoxies, sometimes radically. These might include shifting:

1. From self-interest to solidarity in partnerships among and between international and local organisations, in which upstream organisations are more aware of and responsive to the risks and restrictions on agency that are differentially experienced by locals.
2. From subordination to self organisation in contracting and compliance processes, in ways that enable downstream organisations to make their own decisions, and apply the benefits from learning in real time,
3. From competition to collaboration (or coercive power to integrative power) which asks that resourcing and implementing organisations refocus on incentives and actions that breed collaborative approaches towards shared goals,
4. From 'seeing' to 'working' systemically, with an emphasis on adaptive methods and explicit systems change and sustainable resourcing strategies that can have lasting impacts on norms and institutions at the desired level of scale.

What's needed is that these logics are not only present in peacebuilding methods, but across all domains of an organisation's work, in how they partner, their internal management, culture, and decision-making, their resourcing, and in their ability to learn and adapt in real time. The next step would be the generation of ecosystems of organisations that reinforce these logics in ever larger collaborations.