

Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention

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Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention by Séverine Autesserre, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, ISBN: 9781107632042, 360 pages.

Professor Séverine Autesserre's new book offers an original and insightful critique of the subculture of the expatriate community involved in peacebuilding efforts on behalf of international and nongovernmental organizations throughout the globe (the author defines peacebuilding as "actions aimed at creating, strengthening, and solidifying peace," p. 21).

The book's central claim is that many of the practices, habits, and narratives that shape peacebuilding efforts on the ground—everyday elements that interveners come to take for granted—are inefficient and even counterproductive. In particular, the peacebuilding community's tendency to value technical and thematic expertise at the expense of country-specific knowledge for hiring and promotion leads to the deployment of personnel who knows next to nothing about the country of operation. This in turn fosters reliance on simplistic narratives about causes of violence and the use of universal policy templates (like the "fads" the author characterizes as power-sharing agreements and early post-conflict elections) without adaptation to local contexts. As a consequence, international interveners often clumsily promote initiatives that are at odds with socio-political conditions on the ground and thus are likely to yield only limited benefits or even backfire. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the international community's single-minded focus on enhancing state-capacity as a solution to the problem of persistent violence in 2010–11 may have made it worse by empowering an exploitative and repressive state security apparatus.

Moreover, peacebuilders' daily routines, such as following strict security protocols and socializing only in the narrow circle of international interveners, create and maintain boundaries separating them from the communities they are meant to help and from the local actors they are supposed to work with. These modes of operation tend to "prevent local authorship and decrease local ownership" and to provoke "widespread feelings of humiliation and resentment among host populations, encouraging local stakeholders to evade, adapt, or resist international programs" (p. 250).

Autesserre presents a rich and persuasive ethnography of the peacebuilding community and its modus operandi, marshaling an impressive amount of information from her extensive fieldwork (in particular in the DRC) and direct experience as an intervener in several countries. The book, however, falls short when it moves from description of "Peaceland" to causal arguments about peacebuilding effectiveness (i.e., about the negative consequences of international interveners' dominant practices, habits and narratives, summarized on pp. 36–37). As the author herself carefully and repeatedly notes, many of the practices that have undesirable effects are adopted to address real obstacles to peacebuilding initiatives. Arrangements that constrain local actors' influence on peacebuilding programs are meant to reduce the risk of "policy capture" by government officials, elites and civil society organizations whose interests are not necessarily aligned with those of ordinary citizens (p. 66). Moreover, as several of Autesserre's interviewees point out, interveners often find themselves in a catch-22

when deciding about the degree of local stakeholders' involvement in program implementation: "Either they did capacity building, which took enormous amount of time and resulted in poorly executed programs—while intended beneficiaries continued to suffer from the continuation of violence—or they implemented the program themselves, which was more effective in the short term but unsustainable in the long term and created dependency" (p. 90). Analogously, socialization in the peacebuilding "bubble" is, at least in part, a functional response to the need of preserving psychological and emotional balance for individuals working under challenging security and social circumstances. Sharp economic, cultural, and social differences act as powerful obstacles to integration (for example, interveners often complain about being seen by the local population as "walking money-bags whom one could always ask for donations or handouts," p. 178). Full acceptance in the local social fabric remains elusive even for peacebuilders that "go native" (i.e., move permanently to the country, study local languages and cultures, and marry locals), as these exceptional individuals often feel that very few people fully accept them and deserve their confidence (pp. 179–80).

Autesserre's claim that peacebuilding effectiveness would increase if the practices leading to the undesired effects were abandoned holds only under the assumption that the negative effects those practices mitigate are not as serious. However, the author does not attempt a systematic assessment of these competing negative effects and thus leaves the reader wondering whether some of the "medicines" she prescribes are indeed better than the "disease" they are meant to cure. This is not to say that in its current approach to peacebuilding the international community has hit the sweet spot between competing risks and benefits. To be sure, there are practices for which the case for reform is straightforward (for example, the trend toward the "bunkerization" of peacebuilders' offices even in contexts of low security threats). But broader reform initiatives need to rest on a hardnosed investigation of the risks of unintended effects and inevitable tradeoffs. Autesserre's book is likely to remain for a long time a must-read for those willing to engage in this difficult and important analytical task.