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Routine Learning? How Peacebuilding Organisations Prevent Liberal Peace

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Introduction

What determines how international peacebuilding institutions and organisations interact with the national and local institutions and organisations that they aim to transform?[1] Certainly the money, skill and knowledge possessed by international peacebuilders play a role. The receptivity of national and local institutions to what the international peacebuilders are trying to sell matters a great deal as well. But these international–national transactions are also determined by the organisational routines, systems and cultures of the international organisations (IOs), international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and government aid agencies engaged in liberal peacebuilding. More specifically, the routines and systems that govern how these international actors learn from and adapt to national and local contexts help to determine their impact on this context (Howard 2008). After all, peacebuilding actors today do not aim to sustain peace themselves, but rather to increase the capacity of national and local institutions to sustain peace (DfID 2009). As Sending (this volume) writes: 'The outcome of peacebuilding efforts is determined by the dynamic interaction between external and internal actors, where the former seeks to build capacity (transferring skills and resources) and the latter receives, selects, uses and also disregards elements of the donors' programmes.'

If international liberal peacebuilders were to achieve their transformative goals, they would need to develop a high degree of understanding of national and local institutions, adjust their understanding and approach as the dynamics governing these institutions change, and build cooperative relationships that enable national actors to sustain the desired results (Call and Wyeth 2008; International Alert 2004; Pouligny 2005). This chapter asks if this degree of organisational learning, adaptation and engagement is feasible.[2]

Constructive Critiques and the Importance of Organisational Adaptation and Learning

Peacebuilding problem-solving literature levels several important critiques at international peacebuilding efforts, all of which suggest that these efforts have a weak capacity to adapt to and learn from the national and local institutions that they aim to influence. It criticises liberal peacebuilding for applying a standard template of strategies, programmes and activities in each post-conflict country without consideration for each country's unique institutions and history (Ottaway 2003; Pouligny 2005; Woodward 2007). It finds that international peacebuilding stifles national peacebuilding capacity and local democratic processes, thus reducing each country's endogenous capacity to sustain peace (Barnett and Zürcher 2009; Fortna 2008; Suhrke 2007). It argues that international peacebuilding lacks the necessary knowledge of how to support state–society relations or catalyse the types of institutions that may, one day, embody liberal democratic norms (Barnett and Zürcher 2009). It points to numerous contradictions between the various programmes and strategies that comprise liberal peacebuilding, which can lead international peacebuilders to work at cross-purposes and wreak harm on the host state and society (Carothers 2006; Jarstad and Sisk 2008; Paris and Sisk 2007; Uvin 2001). Finally, it argues that the entire peacebuilding effort is doomed to fail because it aims to transplant a model of state–society relations and democracy that will never align with the institutions of state and society in countries emerging from years of civil war or violent conflict (Barnett 2006; de Waal 2009).

To address these challenges, the literature puts forward several prescriptions, all of which point to the importance of greater flexibility, adaptability and learning by peacebuilding organisations.

Peacebuilding organisations should question their theories of change and definitions of success. A minimum criterion for peacebuilding success is the absence of significant direct violence (Call 2008; de Waal 2009; Doyle and Sambanis 2006). Success is therefore defined as a 'non-event': the absence of something rather than its presence. While this definition makes the measurement of failure relatively easy, it provides no clear indication of how to achieve success. To compensate for this gap in knowledge, organisations develop their own visions of success and express them as *theories of change* (Church and Rogers 2006; OECD-DAC 2007). Peacebuilding scholarship argues that identification and evaluation of theories of change are necessary for the organisation to adjust outdated theories; to question theories of change derived from organisational mandates rather than empirical analysis; and to address the potential disconnect between the international norms expressed in these theories and the national norms and institutions that they aim to transform (Barnett et al. 2007; Woodward 2007). Questioning theories of change and adapting in response requires that an organisation investigate its underlying principles and whether or not they are appropriate to the context, or engage in the most challenging type of organisational learning, double-loop learning (Argyris 1992: 68).

Peacebuilding organisations should focus on incremental aims and a country's particular war-to-peace trajectory. Problem-solving peacebuilding scholarship recommends that peacebuilding organisations reduce their liberal peacebuilding ambitions and focus on incremental goals that correspond to each country's possible war-to-peace trajectories. Incrementalism requires that 'peacebuilders confess to a high degree of uncertainty' in what they are doing and how they will achieve the desired ends (Barnett and Zürcher 2009: 48). Admitting to this uncertainty, actively gathering information about the needs, capacities and perceptions of the post-conflict state and society, and developing corresponding strategies and activities requires a high degree of organisational learning and adaptation.

Peacebuilding organisations should increase local feedback and accountability. Several scholars recommend that peacebuilding organisations deal with the uncertainty about the war-to-peace trajectory in the countries in which they intervene by increasing the feedback that they receive from the local population (Barnett 2006: 110; Pouligny 2005). Accurate feedback from citizens on the contribution of an intervention is necessary for the organisation to improve its impact, and, yet again, requires an important investment in organisational learning capacities (Levitt and March 1988).

Peacebuilding organisations should increase linkages and coordination with other peacebuilding actors. Problem-solving literature also emphasises the interdependence of all international and national actors in a post-conflict context. According to Dan Smith, the trick is to combine the different peacebuilding activities (or the *peacebuilding palette*) together 'in ways that are specific to the country, region and conflict in question, for greater effect – like mixing paint' (Smith 2004: 27). With the right mixture, the aggregate whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts. According to advocates of greater coherence, peacebuilding outcomes not only depend on how these organisations interact with the state and society in which they intervene, but also on how they learn from and adapt to actions by other peacebuilding actors.

Peacebuilding organisations should catalyse and facilitate local and national social and institutional change. The problem-solving literature is largely in agreement that buy-in and ownership by the host state and society are essential for even a modicum of liberal peace (Call and Cousens 2008; Doyle and Sambanis 2006: 56). To achieve buy-in from the state and society, international actors have to understand the dynamics of the state and society well enough to develop approaches that will resonate and become 'owned'. Engaging with the various national actors in a way that encourages their buy-in and ownership requires a high degree of sensitivity and adaptation to the context, as well as a willingness to adapt peacebuilding aims.

Peacebuilding practitioners have drawn many of these same lessons. Foremost, they have learned that all peacebuilding must be context-specific, or 'conflict-sensitive'. The literature on peacebuilding practice argues that while all organisations should be sensitive to their positive or negative impact on violent conflict (Anderson and Olson 2003), peacebuilding organisations should to be conflict-sensitive in relation to their peacebuilding aims (OECD-DAC 2007: 8). Conflict sensitivity is the ability of an organisation to understand the context in which it operates, understand the interaction between its intervention and the context, and act upon the understanding of this interaction, in order to avoid negative impacts and maximise positive impacts (International Alert 2004: 1.1).

Interestingly, the *critics* of the liberal peace have a similar focus: the local and national actors, and the everyday reality that they live, should be the focus of any peacebuilding effort. For these authors, the main purpose of international peacebuilders is to negotiate with, empower and emancipate these actors. 'A post-liberal peace requires that international actors use a range of methods that enable local actors and the most marginalised to engage with a discussion of their own requirements for needs provision and their own understandings of rights and institutions' (Richmond, this volume). This bargain between the local and international actors (see Zürcher, this volume) may result in a very different institutional form than that envisioned by the most ardent liberal peacebuilders.

Most academics in the problem-solving camp share Richmond's hopes of a post-liberal peace that supports representative institutions, greater economic equality, and both formal and informal institutions that resolve conflict peacefully (Richmond, this volume). They argue that addressing the root causes of inequality and destitution is paramount, even if extremely difficult (Stewart 2010). Even policymakers argue that peacebuilding must be an endogenous process, and that peacebuilders' role is to support, rather than impose (DfID 2009; Ki-moon 2011; OECD-DAC 2007). In sum, within most of the problem-solving literature, much of the policy literature, and even some of the critical literature, there is a clear and consistent point of agreement: *for peacebuilding to be successful, it must help to support an endogenous change process that enables the existence of formal and informal institutions of state and society that can sustain a just peace.*

This vision of peacebuilding has significant implications for the IOs, INGOs and donor aid agencies trying to support it. It means that these organisations must be prepared to alter their specific organisational targets and their organisation's knowledge-base, or knowledge-laden routines, so that they can design and implement interventions that are appropriate to each context. They also have to be prepared to adapt both their intervention design and their goals in response to changes in the context. To achieve all of this, peacebuilding organisations would have to be highly adaptive learning organisations.

Lise Morje Howard's (2008) work supports this claim. She found that field-level learning is necessary for the UN because success 'is not based on learning discrete, concrete "rules of the game," because the game is constantly changing. When the UN learns on the ground, it acquires the ability to adapt to the changing contexts of civil wars – the organisation engages with its environment and invents mechanisms to understand it' (Howard 2008: 19).

Mark Duffield (Duffield 2001: 265) agrees, arguing that one of the primary barriers to the liberal peace agenda is the structure of the peacebuilding organisations themselves:

> Not only are many organisations culturally maladjusted to complexity, as the recent failure to significantly reform the UN would suggest, but this maladjustment is actively maintained by powerful groups and networks. Indeed, successful careers are often built out of the innovative reworking of failure. Rather than searching for better policy or commissioning more detailed forms of analysis, the real task is reforming the institutions and networks of global governance to address complexity. Without reform, policy failure and the associated pressure to turn liberal peace into liberal war will continue to shape the international scene. Reform would require turning rule-based bureaucracies into adaptive, learning and networked organizations.

If organisational adaptation and learning is so important for improved liberal peacebuilding practice, then why does much of the anecdotal evidence available indicate that so many peacebuilding organisations fail to learn?

The Complexity of Adaptation and Learning

What does the theoretical literature on organisational learning say about how peacebuilding organisations can be expected to learn?

Defining learning

Organisational learning is about identifying, and acting to correct, misalignment between an organisation's aims and the outcomes of its activities in relation to those aims.[3] It does not just refer to the intake and processing of information; action based on that information is also necessary. 'This distinction is important because it implies that discovering problems and inventing solutions are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for organisational learning' (Argyris 1992: 62).

The literature on organisational learning distinguishes between two levels and two degrees (or loops) of learning. Double-loop learning occurs when individuals within an organisation openly and honestly examine the underlying assumptions and behaviours that may have caused gaps between the intended and actual outcome of the organisation's actions (Argyris 1992: 68). It is distinguished from single-loop learning in which no significant questioning of underlying assumptions or behaviours is necessary. As mentioned above, questioning the underlying assumptions and theories of change in liberal peacebuilding requires double-loop learning, which in turn requires that organisations process information about the relationship between intentions and outcomes in a non-defensive and transparent fashion (Argyris 1992).

Lise Morje Howard (2008: 19) describes 'first-level learning' as field-based learning and adaptation. Second-level learning, on the other hand, 'entails learning not within, but between missions' (Howard 2008: 19–20).

Challenges of organisational learning

Organisational learning and adaptation are challenging for all organisations. Entrenched routines, cultures and patterns of behaviour make quick change and adaptation difficult. Individuals have different interpretations of what should be learned, and in which direction change and adaptation should take place.

Organisations learn what they define and measure as successful

Organisations learn in relation to targets. Organisational behaviour depends on the relationship between the outcomes they observe and the aspirations, or targets, they have for those outcomes (Levitt and March 1988: 320). An organisation therefore learns what it defines and measures as successful. Measuring success in peacebuilding is particularly challenging because of the large number of factors that contribute to success and failure, the unique circumstances of each conflict environment, and the high degree of conflict sensitivity and organisational learning required to measure incremental success. When peacebuilding impact is measured, it usually takes place in the form of detailed evaluations carried out by academics after a project or programme is finished, leaving few opportunities to adapt and change an ongoing intervention. A catch 22 emerges. While organisational learning capacity helps to determine a peacebuilding organisation's capacity to measure success, improved capacity to measure success is essential for organisational learning. Consequently, better assessment of incremental impact on the causes of peace is likely to be critical in improving peacebuilding practice.

Organisations learn through historical frames and knowledge-laden routines

Organisational routines guide learning. Organisations learn 'by encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behaviour' (Levitt and March 1988: 319). Routines are the rules, 'procedures, technologies, beliefs, and cultures [that] are conserved through systems of socialisation and control' (ibid.: 326).

Action in organisations therefore 'involves matching procedures to situations more than it does calculating choices' (ibid.: 320). Because learning is based on 'interpretations of the past more than anticipations of the future,' peacebuilding organisations are likely to apply old solutions to new problems, whether they fit or not (ibid.). Because routines shape behaviour in organisations, organisational learning is limited to aspects of experience that are translatable into routines.

The routines – and the individuals who observe success and translate it into routines – largely determine, and limit, what an organisation can learn. Individuals make numerous mistakes in their attempts to interpret and draw lessons from history, leading to 'systematic biases in interpretation' (Levitt and March 1988: 323). As a result, an organisation's best practices may be difficult to capture fully, translate into routines and replicate. Because of the complexity of conflict environments, and the unique nature of each conflict, it is even more likely that interpretations of peacebuilding success that are integrated into routines will be flawed. Furthermore, because organisations learn from history, even when a lesson is learned it may not be the right lesson. Organisations are often taught the same lessons repeatedly and learn only the lessons they can easily translate into the language of pre-existing routines.

Organisational routines are representative of larger organisational frames (Eden 2004). Organisational frames are 'approaches to problem solving used by organisational personnel' (Eden 2006: 198), determining 'what counts as a problem, how problems are represented, the strategies to be used to solve those problems, and the constraints and requirements placed on possible solutions' (Eden 2004: 49–50) These criteria are developed during 'the creation of organisations, and during periods of organisational upheaval' when 'actors articulate organisational goals and draw on and modify existing understandings, or knowledge, of the social and physical environment in which they must operate' (ibid.: 49–50). These organisational frames are critical to organisational learning because they determine how organisations interpret and understand their experiences (i.e. histories) and thus encode them into knowledge-laden artifacts and routines. It is organisational frames, rather than historical facts, that determine how organisations act (Eden 2006: 199).

The role of routines and frames in organisational learning poses particular challenges for peacebuilding organisations because these organisations were largely designed to implement other types of activities (i.e. development, humanitarian, human rights or conflict resolution). These organisations will have difficulty encoding lessons learned about the impact of peacebuilding on routines that were designed to support and reward other types of programming. In addition, while routines can adapt incrementally, adaptation requires some proof of necessity, which calls for assessment of success or failure. Because of the difficulty of assessing the impact of peacebuilding efforts, there is weak evidence within many peacebuilding organisations of the need to change or adapt routines in order to improve peacebuilding practice, and thus few incentives to do so.

Because organisational learning is dependent on historical routines, it is largely path-dependent. According to Powell, 'Path-dependent models suggest that institutional arrangements are not likely to be flexible; they cannot change rapidly in response to perturbations in the environment' (Powell 1991: 193). In other words, organisational action and learning reinforce historical frames, which in turn influences what is learned and which actions are taken. An organisation's original institutional environment is particularly important, as it imprints the organisation with its routines, resources, knowledge, structure and culture, which new organisational forms must draw upon (Scott and Davis 2007: 252). The path-dependent nature of organisational learning is likely to have real significance for many peacebuilding organisations that were founded to achieve different aims, particularly in a less complex and dynamic environment.

Particular challenges of organisational learning in peacebuilding organisations

While learning is difficult for any organisation, it may be particularly challenging for peacebuilding organisations because of particular historical, normative, and structural barriers.

The challenge of unaltered routines

Each peacebuilding organisation chooses tasks that correspond to its original mandate and corresponding routines (Barnett et al. 2007). They are therefore likely to use the same organisational routines and implement peacebuilding activities in the same way as they approach their standard development, humanitarian, human rights, or conflict resolution programmes. How could they achieve different outcomes, if they do things in the same way?

The increasing professionalisation of peacebuilding would ideally have led to changes in organisational routines and culture that corresponded with these organisations' new peacebuilding aims. Unfortunately, research into seven prominent peacebuilding organisations has found that this is not often the case (Campbell 2009). Instead, the old routines have become mixed up with some new routines and packaged in peacebuilding jargon, creating increasingly complex organisational behaviours that often work at cross-purposes. As a result, even though these organisations may have clear peacebuilding aims, their routines often prevent them from obtaining the necessary knowledge or altering their incentive structures to enable action and adaptation that corresponds to these aims.

Bureaucracies reproduce themselves

There are also distinct barriers to learning in bureaucracies, which is the organisational form of many peacebuilding organisations. Barnett and Finnemore explain that international organisations (IOs), which are bureaucracies, tend to reproduce themselves. 'Solutions that involve regulation, arbitration, and intervention by rational-legal authorities (themselves or other organisations) appear sensible, rational, and good to IOs and so disproportionately emerge from IO activity' (Barnett and Finnemore 2004: 34). Instead of responding to the needs of the post-conflict state and society, international bureaucracies are likely to recreate institutions and programmes in their own image. 'The result is that what began as a relatively narrow technical intervention (training police) expands into a package of reforms aimed at transforming non-Western societies (where most peacebuilding takes place) into Western societies' (ibid.). Rather than catalysing a change process, bureaucracies are likely to try and do much of the work themselves in a manner that fits with their standards and approach (ibid.). These factors are likely to significantly inhibit the degree to which bureaucracies can be expected to learn from the particular post-conflict country in which they intervene, and design programmes that meet the needs and capacities of the post-conflict state and society.

External accountability and the broken feedback loop of international aid

Peacebuilding organisations are primarily accountable to actors that are external to the state in which they intervene, rather than to the beneficiaries that they claim to serve. A donor agency is accountable to its home government and its political constituency. An international organisation is accountable to its Member States. A non-governmental organisation is accountable to its donors. Peacebuilding organisations' incentive structures are aligned with the policies and systems of these external constituencies, not those of the host state and society.

This tendency toward external accountability is described by some as the broken feedback loop of international aid.

> [A] unique and most striking characteristic of foreign aid is that the people for whose benefit aid agencies work are not the same as those from whom their revenues are obtained; they actually live in different countries and different political constituencies. This geographical and political separation between beneficiaries and taxpayers blocks the normal performance feedback process. (Martens et al. 2002: 14)

While some monitoring and evaluation systems attempt to gather information about the beneficiaries' perception of the goods delivered, they often rely on easily measurable deliverables rather than impact or outcome (Ebrahim

2005: 64). They also have difficulty gathering accurate information from beneficiaries, who may be reluctant to voice displeasure with the services provided (Martens et al. 2002: 15). The cultural gulf between the taxpayer or donor and the beneficiary is enormously wide, and a great deal is lost in translation, when attempted (ibid.).

The problem of broken feedback loops applies to international organisations, donor governments and NGOs alike. Alnoor Ebrahim (2005: 61) argues that because NGOs' dominant emphasis is on upward accountability to donors, rather than accountability to the communities that they profess to serve. NGOs have a short-term focus on outputs and efficiency criteria causing them to 'lose sight of long-range goals concerning social development and change' (ibid.: 61). He concludes that too much upward accountability greatly compromises 'field-level learning and downwards accountability' (ibid.: 149).

The constraints of a normative agenda

Finally, the norms contained in the liberal peace agenda may actually prevent peacebuilding organisations from identifying and supporting the needs and capacities of the host country. Barnett and Finnemore point out that international organisations derive their authority from their normative mandate. Member States established international organisations to protect values that they could not protect on their own, and IOs therefore derive their authority from this delegation: 'IOs are thus authoritative because they represent the collective will of their members,' which is embodied in international law and human rights conventions (Barnett and Finnemore 2004: 22). If they were to pursue less ambitious normative aims than those contained in the liberal peace agenda, they could risk compromising their basis of authority.

Western donor agencies and NGOs also have normative missions and constraints. Western donor agencies are accountable to their governments and may find it difficult to compromise their own liberal democratic ideals for solutions that may be less palatable to their populations and legislative bodies (i.e. corruption, inequality, etc.). Or, if they do aim for stabilisation rather than liberalisation, they may be unwilling to collect valid information about their outcomes, which is a prerequisite for learning. Most NGOs also possess highly normative mandates (i.e. humanitarian, human rights, sustainable development, religious focus), although the degree to which they can compromise them is dependent on their organisational culture and their relationship with their donors.

The impossibility of enforcing or coercing a liberal peace

Staunch proponents of liberal peacebuilding often argue that their aims are achievable through the right combination of capacities, strategy and coordinated action (Covey et al. 2005; DPKO 2008). Staunch critics of liberal peacebuilding argue that it imposes a Western agenda on transitional and post-conflict countries. Between these poles, academics describe the complexity of liberal peacebuilding, catalogue its successes and failures, critique its faulty assumptions and lament its dysfunction. This chapter approaches these debates from a different perspective. Instead of asking whether the liberal peacebuilding endeavour is valid or not, it has asked whether it is feasible. Can the IOs, INGOs and donor aid agencies implement their own peacebuilding best practices and support an endogenously driven (i.e. by national and local actors) process that aligns with norms that are also exogenously acceptable (i.e. to the international community)? Do these actors actually have the capacity to ensure that transitional and war-torn countries develop liberal democratic institutions, grounded in the rule of law and a market economy, as both staunch critics and supporters of liberal peacebuilding claim?

The theory presented in the previous section points to the extreme difficulties that peacebuilding organisations are likely to face in carrying out the liberal peace agenda, at least in part because of their weak organisational capacity to learn from and adapt to complex conflict dynamics. Empirical research conducted with multiple types of peacebuilding organisations in Burundi confirms these theoretical propositions.[4] Through in-depth case study research, I have found that organisational and institutional barriers to the implementation of successful liberal peacebuilding projects are so great that when the determinants of liberal peace appear in transitional or post-conflict countries they should not be attributed solely, if at all, to liberal peacebuilding interventions. Peacebuilding organisations' 'path dependency' and upwardly accountable routines often make many liberal peacebuilders the guarantors of the status quo rather than the liberators of the oppressed. Even those liberal peacebuilders who do develop innovative locally driven and owned approaches often lose their relevance to the context as the actors and issues quickly change. The rules, routines and organisational culture of peacebuilding organisations are powerful predictors of how they are likely to engage with and influence transitional and post-conflict countries.

My findings show that the agency of the host government is much greater than imagined by both critics and proponents of the liberal peace, in part because of how peacebuilding organisations are structured to relate to it. An important organisational routine is created in peacebuilding organisations by the sovereignty of the host government. All international actors that implement activities in a transitional or post-conflict country have been granted permission to be there by the host government.[5] This permission can be quickly taken away if the international actor acts in ways that the government disapproves of. The governments of Sudan, Burundi and many others have repeatedly demonstrated their willingness to declare international staff *personae non gratae* or revoke an organisation's registration, forcing them to leave the country within a matter of days. This forced evacuation not only prevents the international peacebuilder or peacebuilding organisation from achieving its liberal aims, but can do significant harm to careers. It is a coercive tool that the government can use to ensure that international actors do not push the boundaries too far.

National agency and local agency are also present in the very notion of liberal peacebuilding. National and local actors determine the outcomes of all liberal peacebuilding activities because they must decide whether or not to engage in them or sustain them. If they do not support peacebuilding activities and attempt to sustain their outcomes, then these activities will not achieve liberal results (Campbell et al. 2010). National and local ownership are therefore integral to peacebuilding outcomes. That said, the focus of most bilateral and multilateral donors on direct engagement with the state privileges national ownership (i.e. by members of the state) over local ownership (i.e. by members of communities, local governments or civil society). The organisational routines that require agreement by the state therefore detract from ownership by other members of society, often leading to the empowerment of an illiberal state.

The bureaucratic routines of most peacebuilding organisations also tend to create a technocratic approach to liberal peacebuilding, removing norms, ideals and ideas from peacebuilding projects and programmes. While the aim to create the determinants of liberal institutions may be behind many peacebuilding programmes and projects, the professionalisation and bureaucratisation of peacebuilding has led to the creation of a standard menu of projects and programmes that are often devoid of the original concept or ideal. As a result, staff implementing these projects and programmes are often more concerned with implementing the project as designed rather than achieving the behavioural or institutional change necessary for the existence of liberal institutions (Campbell et al. 2010).

Upward accountability routines in the United Nations and many other peacebuilding organisations discourage accountability for liberal peacebuilding outcomes. Accountability mechanisms hold staff accountable for project delivery and spending budgets, not achieving liberal peacebuilding outcomes or impact (Campbell et al. 2010). When peacebuilding organisations do focus on accountability for outcomes, their desire to show an aggregate impact across all countries in which they intervene may lead them to condense all possible outcomes into a few general indicators, creating the incentive on the ground to fulfil these generic indicators (e.g. the Millennium Development Goals), rather than to achieve a specific conflict-sensitive outcome or impact.

There is also an apparent disconnect between ‘liberal’ and ‘peacebuilding’ that is perpetuated by the creation of standard peacebuilding routines and programmes. The increasing focus of peacebuilding organisations’ routines on pursuing the same policies and outcomes from one country to the next makes the development of conflict-sensitive programmes more difficult. To be conflict-sensitive, a peacebuilding project must ask how it reinforces or mitigates the particular causes and manifestations of conflict in a particular country at a particular time in that country's history. While many peacebuilding organisations conduct conflict analyses, they often fail to analyse the particular institutions that they aim to influence, and adapt their projects and programmes to the information in this analysis. As a result, they may exacerbate the causes of conflict that they purport to be addressing. Furthermore, the focus on standardisation and professionalisation of liberal peacebuilding may lead to the prioritisation of 'liberal' above 'peacebuilding', resulting in a failure to achieve either.

In spite of the enormous organisational, institutional and contextual challenges facing peacebuilding organisations, they do, in fact, manage to achieve some outcomes that support behaviours and institutions that resolve conflict peacefully and improve the protection of rights of all citizens. These successes can largely be explained by the readiness of national and local actors to commit to and lead these efforts, and the willingness of staff of international peacebuilding organisations to manipulate organisational routines to help achieve their peacebuilding aims and outcomes, often with huge transaction costs in terms of time, resources and personal risk.

Even in the cases of successful incremental liberal peacebuilding, national actors may be more likely to decry the lack of effort by international actors to push for real institutional change, than criticise them for attempting to change too much, as many critics of liberal peace argue. This was certainly the case in Burundi, where the international community fully endorsed recent democratic elections in which only one party ran. Many Burundians were greatly disappointed that years of war and over a decade of peacebuilding had resulted in a one-party state that again used oppressive tactics to maintain power, and that the international community was neither willing nor able to do anything to change this.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the liberal peace debate fails to ask whether or not it is feasible for international actors to impose liberal institutions on post-conflict and transitional countries. Based on a review of organisational theory and preliminary findings from research into peacebuilding organisations in Burundi, I have argued that liberal peacebuilding cannot be imposed. Like Zürcher and Sending (this volume) I have argued that the determinants of liberal peace can only be created if national actors are both willing and able to create them. The organisational and institutional routines in peacebuilding organisations prevent liberal peacebuilders from applying the type of pressure or wielding the type of authority necessary to impose liberal peacebuilding. These same routines also often prevent these organisations from engaging effectively with national actors and institutions, which would require them to learn and adapt, thus altering their peacebuilding aims and/or their corresponding projects and programmes to fit each country context. While perfect learning organisations are rare in any field, they are likely to be particularly rare in peacebuilding. As a result, not only do the organisational and institutional barriers to learning and adaptation have important implications for the academic debate around the critique of the liberal peace, but they have significant implications for peacebuilding practice in general and those who study it, presenting an important area of future research, debate, and potential reform.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this chapter, a peacebuilding organisation is an external organisation – whether initially founded to implement humanitarian, development, political, security, conflict resolution, human rights or even peacebuilding programming – that 'adopts goals and objectives' intended to impact the drivers and causes of peace (OECD-DAC 2007: 8).

2. Earlier versions of this chapter were presented at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting in 2009 and the International Studies Association (ISA) Annual Convention in 2010, and related arguments were published in Campbell 2008b.

3. Adapted from the definition by Argyris (1992: 67): 'Learning is defined as occurring under two conditions. First, learning occurs when an organisation achieves what it intended; that is, there is a match between its design for action and the actuality or outcome. Second, learning occurs when a mismatch between intentions and outcomes is identified and corrected; that is, a mismatch is turned into a match.'

4. These findings are based on research into the interaction between IOs, INGOs and donor aid agencies and the evolving conflict context in Burundi from 1999 to 2010.

5. The exceptions to this rule are the recent cases of international trusteeship: the former Yugoslavia, Timor-Leste and Kosovo.

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