

Monkey Cage

The everyday politics of international intervention

By Séverine Autesserre

June 27, 2014

The following is a guest post by [Séverine Autesserre](#). *Autesserre is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Barnard College, Columbia University. Her new book, “Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention,” is the first feature in our African Politics Summer Reading Spectacular. Read about [the rest of the series here](#).*

Earlier this month, the United Nations started a new peacebuilding initiative in [Libya](#). The previous months had seen renewed peace efforts in [Syria](#), [South Sudan](#), and [Cyprus](#). Peace processes also continue in dozens of other conflict zones, including [Afghanistan](#), the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#), the [Palestinian Territories](#), and [Colombia](#). If successful, these peace initiatives will help stabilize entire regions and save millions of lives.

In many of these cases, interveners – including donors, diplomats, peacekeepers, and the foreign staff of international and non-governmental organizations – have either led or tried to support the ongoing peace initiatives. What is striking when we look at these efforts and at other international peacebuilding programs around the world is that a puzzling pattern recurs: Interveners keep using, reproducing, and perpetuating ways of working that they themselves widely view as ineffective or even counterproductive.

For instance, scholars and practitioners regularly emphasize that [one-size-fits-all peacebuilding templates](#) are ineffective and that adapting peacebuilding programs to each individual context is crucial. Yet interveners often replicate programs from previous deployments on different continents as if they should have the same effect in their new posting. Local people and interveners themselves deplore the expatriates’ tendency to [live in a bubble](#), where they interact mostly with other expatriates and lack contact with host populations. Still, from Juba to Kabul many international interveners travel in white air-conditioned SUVs with locked doors and frequent only the “expat bars.” And it is now [conventional wisdom that local ownership](#) is essential for successful peacebuilding, but local stakeholders are rarely included in the design of international programs.

The persistence of these inefficient modes of operation is all the more puzzling because interveners are not indifferent or callous. Most of them do care about the effectiveness of their actions. Nor are they stupid. Most of them are intelligent and well-educated people. And they are certainly not oblivious to the consequences of their standard practices. Some of them are actually [very uncomfortable with the way international peacebuilding operates on the ground](#). So, if we want to have a chance of properly helping people affected by violence in places like Central African Republic, Libya, Syria, or South Sudan, we need first to understand why interveners often

use and perpetuate modes of operation that are ineffective and even counterproductive.

What is also striking is that a number of individuals and organizations ignore – or even **actively challenge**– the international peacebuilders’ dominant practices: They consult with local counterparts in designing new programs; they socialize with their Afghani, Palestinian, or Congolese neighbors; and they invest time in learning the local language and history. The existence of these exceptional cases raises two important questions: First, what can we learn from them in terms of increasing the effectiveness of international peacebuilding? And second, why have they not yet managed to convince their colleagues to adopt these alternative approaches even when they have proven more effective?

In *Peaceland*, I show that rather than just the usual gamut of explanations for peacebuilding failure – like **lack of funds**, **vested political interests**, or the imposition of Western **liberal** values – the everyday dimensions of international peacebuilding initiatives on the ground also strongly impact the effectiveness of intervention efforts. Everyday dimensions refer to mundane elements, such as the expatriates’ social habits, standard security procedures, and habitual approaches to collecting information on violence. For instance, it matters whom interveners have a drink with after work, whether it is with other expatriates or with local counterparts. It matters how they talk to, look at, refer to, and interact with ordinary people. It matters where they go to collect data, whom they speak with, how, when, and for which purpose. It matters what kind of houses they live in (**a compound that looks like a bunker** or a normal house). And it matters whether they constantly advertise their actions or keep a low profile. All of this should go without saying, but most of the time on-the-ground interveners and their higher-ups dismiss these kinds of everyday elements as too prosaic to be important.

In fact, everyday practices, habits, and narratives shape the overall intervention from the bottom up. They enable, constitute, and help reproduce macro-level strategies, policies, institutions, and discourses. They also explain the existence and perpetuation of ways of working that interveners view as inefficient, ineffective, or counterproductive. And of course, this approach and existing explanations are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are complementary.

So if we want to understand what influences the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of international peacebuilding, and how outsiders can best accompany to ongoing peace processes, we need to look at the everyday dimensions of peace interventions on the ground. Macro-level diplomatic engagement, national peace agreements, and improved government institutions are not the only determinants of peacebuilding effectiveness. It is by looking at daily practices, habits, and narratives that we can understand why interveners keep reproducing modes of operation that they know are **ineffective and at times counterproductive**.

The everyday practices of peacebuilders – the secured compounds, the decision to spend downtime with those who share their experiences in a tiresome and often frightening environment – are perfectly understandable responses to the daily difficulties of intervening on the ground in conflict zones. They enable interveners to function in the difficult environments that they face. But they also have many unintended consequences that decrease the effectiveness of international efforts. Being aware of these unintended and at times

The everyday politics of international intervention - The Washingt... <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/06/...>
counterproductive consequences, and [adopting alternative strategies to avoid them](#), is a first step to better
helping populations in conflict zones build a better future for themselves.

 **6 Comments**

The Washington Post

Others cover stories. We uncover them.

Limited time offer: Get unlimited digital access for less than \$1/week.

Get this offer

Send me this offer

Already a subscriber? **Sign in**