

# Three flawed ideas are hurting international peacebuilding

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By Séverine Autesserre March 15 at 6:00 AM

Violence disrupts the lives of some 1.5 billion people worldwide.

International interventions such as peacekeeping missions or negotiations aim to bring peace to people affected by violence, but they rarely do so. The inability of United Nations peacekeepers to contain the fighting in the Congo, Mali and South Sudan, or mediators who are unable to broker an end to the Syrian war, are among many examples in the news these past few months.

Journalists and academics writing about peacebuilding tend to focus on these kinds of failures. But the obstacles to peacebuilding are so substantial that the more puzzling question is why international efforts sometimes succeed, rather than why they fail.

## **International peacebuilding is often ineffective — but what works?**

It's not just a scholarly question. Since I began researching war and peace in the late 1990s, I've heard a constant refrain: Host populations lament that foreign peace efforts rarely reach their full potential.

And policymakers and practitioners often admit that many standard peacebuilding techniques are ineffective. In the absence of compelling alternatives, these faulty templates continue to be used all over the world by default.

The first step to solving this problem is understanding why some peace-building interventions succeed. In a recent scholarly article, I argue that peacebuilding effectiveness can be improved significantly if foreign peacebuilders avoid three widespread assumptions:

**Assumption No. 1) Good things promote peace and bad things undermine peace.** For instance, peacebuilders generally view education and democracy as forces for good — many peace projects use education programs and democracy promotion projects to achieve peace. This seems an obvious way to build both knowledge and earning potential, as well as goodwill, among conflict-affected populations.

However, education can also increase discrimination and antagonism. Researching the situation in Afghanistan and Rwanda, for instance, some scholars argue that education may in fact feed those conflicts. Likewise, the push toward political liberalization can instead fuel violence — like the scenarios in Angola and Congo.

Conversely, most international interveners believe that undesirable practices, such as drug trafficking, corruption and illicit businesses, run counter to peacebuilding goals. As a result, numerous peacebuilding programs focus on fighting these illegal activities.

But sometimes, even illicit activity can create stability — which can then make durable peace possible. In some parts of Afghanistan, drugs and corruption have in fact contributed to political order. Corruption has also contributed to short-term stability in other postwar environments, as in Liberia. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the arms trade and illicit businesses helped break a military stalemate — and create the conditions for peace.

**Assumption No. 2) It takes formal peace efforts to control violence.** In fact, these peacemaking efforts aren't always what lead to peace. This is, in part, because in any conflict zone ordinary people can engage in everyday actions to reduce tensions, such as avoiding topics that might be contentious. Or they focus on being polite to members of other groups — or they reach out to local civil-society organizations, rather than state law enforcement, when there is a problem.

Many researchers tend to view these simple activities as unimportant and lacking connections to formal peace initiatives. However, such everyday practices contribute to preventing local outbreaks of violence, and they can even directly alleviate tensions.

In these cases, formal, externally led peace initiatives may not be necessary because local people are already coping on their own. In fact, external support may actually jeopardize local efforts rather than support them. For instance, foreign interveners who disregard local expertise and everyday actions cause local people to abandon — or, even, at times, actively resist — ongoing peace efforts.

**Assumption No. 3) Inhabitants of conflict zones aren't capable of resolving their own predicament.** During my research on conflicts from Afghanistan to Israel to East Timor, I heard statements that outsiders, not those living in conflict, have the expertise, qualities and capacities to fix the situation. Other scholars also discuss the assumption that foreign interveners have what local people lack and need.

Here's the problem: International peacebuilders commonly assume that local leaders are corrupt, incompetent and/or uninterested in building peace without outside assistance and motivation. In my interviews in Congo, these negative perceptions reached such a point that foreign peacebuilders emphasized how “surprised” they were to meet hard-working citizens and authorities who were not corrupt or did not try to abuse their positions of power.

But of course outsiders don't necessarily have the knowledge to build peace in host countries. They may not speak local languages, understand local customs or have the in-depth knowledge of local history necessary to comprehend and resolve the deep sources of tensions. And all societies — even those at war — tend to have local systems and skills to resolve conflicts.

## **Foreign and local peacebuilders are most successful when they work together**

My research suggests that to be effective, peace efforts must draw on the knowledge, competencies, perspectives, networks, assets and leverage of both insiders and outsiders.

Communities that “opted out of war” — such as in Colombia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka — developed strategies to remain peaceful while surrounded by extensive violence. Foreign interveners came up with the concept of “peace zones,” but let local people decide how to implement this idea. Both insiders and outsiders then used international public opinion to prevent surrounding armed groups from attacking the peace zones.

At times, international peace programs rely on these three unsupported and flawed assumptions. And these foreign efforts may end up being ineffective, or even counterproductive.

In contrast, when international peacebuilders recognize that undesirable practices may actually dampen violence, formal peace efforts are not always needed or insiders have the ability to resolve conflicts, they are much more successful at supporting local efforts to build long-term, sustainable peace.

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