

Bridging the Disconnect: Integrating Local Perspectives in Peace Processes

Sara A. Hellmüller¹

¹Swisspeace, Mediation, Bern, Switzerland

sara.hellmueller@swisspeace.ch

In the context of civil wars, violence becomes highly localized, undermining the fundamental security of the population in conflict areas. In order to adapt to these new realities, the concept of human security was introduced in the early 1990s. Thus, the security of the individual, rather than the state has moved to the centre of attention in peace research. However, while the protection focus has shifted from the state to the individual, the focus of who has agency in a conflict context has not. In devising strategies for peacebuilding, the international community still works primarily with national state actors. Local actors, on the contrary, often lack the power to put their perspectives and priorities forward.

This paper explores how the success of internationally-led peace processes is influenced by the integration of local perspectives. By means of case studies of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Guinea, it will first shed light on the international actors' underlying assumptions and principles that inform their analysis of armed conflicts and hence also their intervention strategies. In both countries, a peace agreement was signed that defined the holding of elections as priority. This shows how internationals, along with national political elites, decided where to set the priorities in the peace processes and devised corresponding strategies based on western standards of liberal peace. Thereof, conclusions can be drawn on how local approaches to peacebuilding are conceptualized in the liberal peace theory. In a second step, the paper will elucidate on the tensions that arose between the setting of elections as a priority and local approaches to peacebuilding. In both countries, local civil society actors, while for a large part doubtful of the possibility to organize free and fair elections in such a short time frame, substantially contributed to preventing a re-escalation of widespread violence in the subsequent election period. This underlines their importance. However, the article will also put a cautionary note to not consider them as a panacea to all past international peacebuilding failures. Rather than romanticizing local approaches, it will depict their comparative advantages as well as their risks. From the above mentioned, conclusions will be drawn of how a shift of the international community's focus of who has agency in a peace process could render the concept of human security more effective.