

LOCAL PEACE CAPACITIES: WHAT QUESTIONS TO ASK?

K. Van Brabant, 23 August 2018

In recent years, I have had the opportunity to evaluate programmes that promoted and supported local peace capacities in different countries. Some of these operated in post-violence situations, others in still very unstable and violent ones. Often they came in the form of ‘committees’, made up of people living in a certain socio-geographical area (a village or grouping of villages, a small town, a city neighbourhood); on occasion as a network of influential individuals. Their particular shape was invariably the result of ideas brought by international NGOs, who saw it as building on local traditions of conflict-resolution by socially respected figures, but now enhanced with other, introduced, techniques, for greater effectiveness.

None of the ones I looked at were part of a national ‘peace infrastructure’, a set-up developed organically years ago in Ghana and since promoted by some as a useful import to address peace challenges in other societies.

There is no overarching conclusion about the effectiveness of such local peace capacities. Much will depend on the particular situational conditions, key individuals, and the process to encourage and support them. But here are key questions that will help you critically reflect on them:

- **How did the local structure (committee, network or whatever) come into its current shape?** Ideas and practices can take root irrespective of who introduced them. But we want to check whether that has happened, or is it still experienced as something from ‘outside’.
- **Who are the members of a local peace committee/network? How did they come into that role?** Members appear with their particular social profile or status, but also bring their individual histories, competencies and personality. What motivates them to take up a role that is typically not remunerated or at least not directly (they will build up social and political capital). Where they nominated, co-opted, elected – by whom? Self-selected?
- **Do they represent the locally relevant social diversity? What is the involvement of women and of youth?** What social identities exist within this environment as recognised and used by local residents in their interactions? Are there social groups who have no member in the local peace entity? Why? How is that perceived? Are there women and young members? Why, whose initiative was that? Why these specific individuals? What roles do they play in practice in the functioning of the peace capacity? Does broader inclusion enhance their internal and external effectiveness? Why – and according to whom?
- **How do they function internally?** Do they only come together when there is a conflict to be dealt with, or also in between? Are the gatherings formal or informal? Is there a formalised

internal leadership, or only a dynamic of particular personalities? How do they allocate roles among each other? How do they make decisions internally?

- **How is their functioning financed?** These peace makers invest time but also money. They have transport costs, need to eat during their peace work, probably stay overnight, communicate. They may have a small office or meeting place which at least needs to be maintained. Peace making may incur other expenses such as tea and snacks offered during meetings, a sheep or other animal offered during a ceremony, ritual paraphernalia that need to be bought. Some of these costs may be born by the conflicting parties or other members of the 'community' – some of them will come to the members. Is their functioning largely financed from internal resources, or external ones? Is the continued peace work at risk if external funding reduces or dries up?
- **What approaches to conflict resolution do they use in practice? What role(s) do they play?** Do they rely on what local people recognise as 'traditional' approaches or techniques of conflict resolution, do they add others they may have learned from outsiders? How do they decide which approaches to choose or to combine? Which ones are they most comfortable with, most competent in? What 'arguments' do they use to convince conflicting parties to change behaviour: e.g. religious precepts, specific cultural norms and values, general respect for other human beings, the threat of negative consequences, the rewards of positive behaviours? How do they learn from experience? What roles do they play: convenor, facilitator, mediator, arbitrator?
- **What disputes and conflicts do they take on, which ones not? Which ones do they feel beyond their influence?** Local level conflict can derive from interactions between locally resident individuals, families or social groups. But can also involve individuals or social groups that are locally connected but live far away, in the capital city, even abroad in the diaspora. Local conflicts can relate to broader sub-national or national dynamics, between identity groups, rivaling 'big men' or political parties. It can involve competition between locally resident traders who have a broader network, or even involve national or international corporate firms. Local people may be involved in illicit economic networks or wider national gangs. Many possible sources of tension and confrontation: what does the local peace capacity deal with, what does it not touch, and why? Examine case histories, in detail.
- **How do they deal with conflict with neighbouring 'communities'?** Tensions and confrontations may arise over land ownership, access to water resources, grazing pastures, or fishing and hunting zones. Village boundaries will become contested when the soil in between contains gold dust or another precious metal, accessible to artisanal mining. Rivalries can arise between neighbouring towns over control over check posts and toll points on trading or smuggling routes. Inasmuch as a peace capacity is 'local', it has no standing or influence beyond the 'local'. So how does it deal with such conflicts with neighbouring groups? If there are comparable peace committees in neighbouring communities, what relationship exists between them? Are the cross-cutting relationships between individuals, or between the respective committees? Examine case histories, in detail.
- **What triggers their intervention?** Are they pro-active or do they only mobilise when called upon? Do they come into play when a situation is already escalating, or do they try to prevent

that from happening through early intervention? Case history examination again can tell us more.

- **What is the basis of their acceptance or legitimacy among the local population(s)?** Why do people come to them with their conflict, or accept their intervention? Is it related to the social standing of the individual members (e.g. a religious figure; a wealthy or formally educated or politically well-connected person; a (former) senior civil service member; a hereditary status)? Or to their individual competencies and dedication (e.g. a woman who has been the driving force behind various local women's organisations)? Or the fact that in their composition, the peace network or committee includes all locally relevant social groups? Or the effectiveness of their performance in resolving conflicts? Perhaps a combination of various factors?
- **How 'durable' are the conflict-resolution results from their action?** Unless they have an 'enforcement' authority, continued respect of the 'resolution' achieved will depend on sustained acceptance by the conflicting parties and on social pressure. That may not be enough to prevent one or the other conflicting party to restart the confrontation, or to seek a more advantageous outcome elsewhere, e.g. from the formal judicial system. Do they (try to) address factors that often contribute to escalation, such as fire arms among the population, drug abuse, deliberate rumour mongering, one-sided historical narratives etc.? Are local peace capacities able to 'transform' conflicts, especially if they have deeper structural roots (e.g. increasing pressure on land and water due to demographic growth and climate change) or are they ultimately mostly calming down tensions – temporarily?
- **What do they see as enabling and constraining factors to their effectiveness?** An interesting question to explore, especially if the answers are compared with insights derived from the in-depth analysis of a diverse enough set of cases they treated. Including cases of unsuccessful intervention. What factors are under their influence, which ones can, or must others address?
- **How do they connect to the state structures?** State action may be necessary. Land disputes for example may require involvement of official surveyors and the land and property registry service. Conflict-inducing factors may lie in the political history of the state, so too then must their resolution. For example, different families may have formal ownership titles to the same assets, given by different political patrons over several regime changes. In many contexts, a state structure remains or is trying to re-establish itself as the primary source of authority and arbitration of disputes and conflicts. Customary law may not fully coincide with state laws. The local peace structures, and the outcomes of their intervention, may not be recognised by the state authorities, or even seen as competitors of municipal or district authorities seeking to re-assert themselves. Alternatively, they may get formal recognition as a valued complement to the limited capacities of the state. And possibly get some public budget allocation?
- **How does 'local' peace interact with wider conflict and peace dynamics?** In the contemporary world, there is little 'local' that can remain insulated from the sub-national, the national, regional and international dynamics. It lives within a much wider landscape. International organised crime, armed groups with external sponsors, multinational corporations, religious preachers and sects, human rights and liberal democracy activists, arms dealers and peace makers may all land in or transit through the 'local'. So how does this interact with our local capacities for peace? Does it undermine their ability to maintain

internal cohesion and peaceful relations with neighbours? Or can the successful refusal of local actors to get drawn into wider destructive tendencies be turned into a contributing factor, to halt their spread and eventually roll them back?

Hopefully these questions provide guidance and inspiration for the design, review and evaluation of local capacities for peace, within their own remit and within a broader strategic perspective. Good luck.

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