"Peace constituency" or "peace infrastructure": yeast or cobweb?

Conference Paper · April 2013

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"Peace constituency" or "peace infrastructure": yeast or cobweb?

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Paper presented at the conference of the International Studies Association in San Francisco, USA

3 April 2013

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the concepts of "peace constituency" and "peace infrastructure" and discusses the differences between both in the light of concrete cases.[1] It argues that the first concept focuses on agency and the second one on structure. Additionally, the first one raises our attention to the importance for a strategic group of people to uphold a peacebuilding process (a point raised by Lederach through the metaphor of critical yeast), whereas the second one stresses the connections between people, institutions and/or mechanisms to sustain such a process (a point raised by Lederach through the metaphor of a cobweb). In practice we can observe peace constituencies that cannot be termed as peace infrastructures, peace infrastructures that cannot be referred to as peace constituencies, and cases that could be described by both concepts; the latter likely have the best chance to sustain peacebuilding processes.

Keywords: peace constituency, infrastructure for peace, peacebuilding

Introduction

Scholars and practitioners have shown a growing interest in the use of local resources to foster local ownership of peacebuilding processes, thereby enhancing their sustainability. The term "hybrid peace" has been used by authors, such as Oliver Richmond (e.g. Richmond and Mitchell (2011)) and Roger MacGinty (e.g. 2010), to refer to the kind of "peace" currently built in many situations of armed conflict throughout the world: a combination of the henceforth dominant model of "liberal peace", in which international actors play a key role in peacebuilding and seek to foster liberal democratic institutions and a market economy, with a more homegrown peace, shaped by local actors, that tends to be more legitimate and sustainable. In this context the concepts of "peace constituency" and "infrastructure for peace" are appealing insofar as they draw our attention to the importance of local capacities for peace and the characteristics that make such capacities more or less suitable to contribute to peacebuilding.

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1   The author has first-hand knowledge of several cases of peace constituencies and/or infrastructures for peace, including the Guatemalan *mesas de concertación*, the Nicaraguan peace commissions, the Nicaraguan *Centro de Estudios Internacionales* (CEI) and its network of peace promoters, and the Nepalese local peace committees.

Nevertheless, both concepts are undertheorized, and there is a lack of conceptual clarity regarding both. This paper therefore tries to shed light on each of them and the differences between both. It is divided into two parts. The first one discusses both concepts in the light of the agency-structure debate, arguing that the strength of peace constituencies lies in the capacity for a critical group of people to spur and uphold a peacebuilding process (a point raised by Lederach through the metaphor of critical yeast), whereas the strength of infrastructures for peace lies in the strategic linkages between people, institutions and/or mechanisms to sustain such a process (a point raised by Lederach through the metaphor of a cobweb). The second part of the paper then reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of flexibility, which is a common attribute of informal peace initiatives and many peace constituencies in their initial stages, and institutionalization, which is a process through which many infrastructures for peace are established. The paper finally concludes that, while the two concepts seemingly reflect different approaches, they are better seen as two sides of a same coin. Peace constituencies and infrastructures for peace have indeed much in common and can simultaneously refer to the same phenomenon. When this is the case and they involve a critical group of people with strategic connections across sectors and levels of society, they are deemed to have the best chance to sustain peacebuilding processes.

Structure versus agency

One of the scholars who first emphasized the need to use local resources in order to sustain peacebuilding processes is John Paul Lederach (e.g. 1997, 2005). In his seminal book *Building Peace* he hence introduced the concepts of "peace constituency" and "infrastructure for peace" (Lederach, 1997). Yet he did not define any of them precisely, leaving room for scholars and practitioners to employ them with different meanings. As this paper seeks to clarify both terms, we will begin by introducing a working definition for each that draws on original and subsequent uses of the term, as well as on the definitions of, respectively, "constituency" and "infrastructure for peace" found in common English dictionaries. But, before that, it is important to specify that there is no such dichotomy between the "local" and the "international". So neither peace constituencies nor infrastructures for peace are entirely "local". Even if they draw on local resources, they are not isolated from the "international". As will be seen in the concrete examples described below, they frequently receive support from, and engage

with, international actors. Additionally, since there is no such thing as a true "internal" armed conflict and peacebuilding is never a fully domestic process, the contributions of peace constituencies and infrastructures for peace to peacebuilding may transcend the national sphere, and, at the same time, the international setting can influence such initiatives.

Here the term of "peace constituency" will thus refer to a "group of people from different social sectors who act in concert to build peace". This definition is based on that of "constituency" (e.g. "a group of people with shared interests or political opinions" according to the Oxford dictionaries[2]) and on a review of the definitions and uses of the term by scholars, such as Kumar Rupesinghe (1995:77), Giovanni Scotto (2001:1; 2002:8), Thania Paffenholz (2002) or Véronique Dudouet (2007), and peace organizations, including International Alert and the Berghof Conflict Research. It is also the product of my own research on the subject through the analysis of empirical cases (e.g. Mouly, 2004).[3] Meanwhile, the term "infrastructure for peace" will refer here to a "network of interdependent peacebuilding structures or mechanisms that span across divisions and levels of society" (Mouly, 2013:49-50). Such a definition is based on that of "infrastructure" (e.g. "the basic structure of an organization, system, etc." according to the Collins dictionary[4]), as well as on the works of various scholars and practitioners, including John Paul Lederach (1997), Paul van Tongeren (2011:401) and Chetan Kumar (2011:385).

The two definitions are not set in stone, but are helpful in an initial attempt to clarify both concepts and distinguish between them. In particular, they enable us to notice a first difference: the focus of the concept of "peace constituency" on agency and that of "infrastructure for peace" on structure. The concept of "peace constituency" indeed raises our attention to the importance for a strategic group of people to stir up and uphold a peacebuilding process – a point raised by Lederach through the metaphor of critical yeast in his book *The Moral Imaginat*ion (Lederach, 2005:87-100). Accordingly, the strength of a peace constituency lies in the capacity of its members to bridge conflict

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2   Oxford dictionaries (http://oxforddictionarie.com, consulted on 15 March 2013).

3   In an earlier research based on three empirical case studies, I defined "peace constituency" as a "network of people from different social sectors, who act in concert in order to build sustainable peace" (Mouly, 2004:305). Yet, with hindsight I realized that this definition was a little too prescriptive and inadvertently included a key attribute of infrastructures for peace, that of a network – something not surprising since the cases studied could generally be described both as peace constituencies and infrastructures for peace.

4   Definitions from the Collins dictionary (http://www.collinsdictionary.com/, consulted on 15 March 2013) and the Oxford dictionaries (http://oxforddictionaries.com/, consulted on 15 March 2013).

divides and engage broad social bases (Mouly, 2004). Thus an initial small group of key people with strategic capacities and connections can act as a catalyst and foster the inclusion of a much larger one into a peacebuilding process (Lederach, 2005). In so doing, peace constituencies differ from peace movements, defined as phenomena of mass-based mobilization for peace. Peace movements took place in Europe and the United States during the Cold War, but are more difficult to observe in societies that are experiencing, or have recently experienced, an armed conflict. In such cases broad mobilizations for peace are usually not sustained, but oftentimes it is possible to encounter small groups of people who join efforts to build peace, forming what can be termed a "peace constituency" (Mouly, 2004).

Despite these differences, peace movements and peace constituencies are both the product of collective action, so we can gain insights into the study of peace constituencies from social movement theory. Hence, new social movement theory and resource mobilization theory can respectively provide explanations of the causes of, and conditions for, people's mobilization for peace, thus shedding light into the formation of peace constituencies in particular sociopolitical contexts. Resource mobilization theory, for instance, can help us to understand the role of particular actors in peace constituencies and that of external actors who support them.

Meanwhile, the concept of "infrastructure for peace" places emphasis on structure, understood as the organisation of, and the connection and interaction between, people, institutions and mechanisms involved in a peacebuilding process (Hopp-Nishanka, 2012:2). Lederach highlights the importance of such a structure through the metaphor of a cobweb, arguing that the sustainability of peacebuilding processes require the location of "strategic anchor points that link different but necessarily interdependent constituencies, processes, and geographic localities" (Lederach, 2005:84). The term "infrastructure for peace" usually refers to a structure that neither encompasses a whole society affected by armed conflict, nor is restricted to a small community. Additionally, while focusing on structure, the concept does not seek to uncover power relations and discourses underlying such a structure (which might be considered to be a weakness by critical conflict researchers). Rather, it points to the way in which local capacities for peace are articulated and to how this articulation can facilitate or hinder peacebuilding.

The strength of an infrastructure for peace therefore depends on the connections between its components, in particular on the relationships between those who are part of

an infrastructure for peace, and between the latter and other actors at local, national and international levels. The (re)building of social relationships is an essential aspect of peacebuilding, all the more when the social fabric of a society has been undermined by armed conflict. Social connections that cut across the conflict divide are therefore a key resource in which to tap in order to build peace. The process of involving divided social sectors in peacebuilding and bridging differences between them is what Lederach has termed "horizontal integration" and is key to the success of peacebuilding. Likewise, narrowing the gap between grassroots peacebuilding and top-level peacebuilding efforts has been referred to as "vertical integration" and is also crucial (Lederach, 1999). By involving different sectors and levels of society, infrastructures for peace facilitate horizontal and vertical integration (Hopp-Nishanka, 2012:5). In the same vein an infrastructure for peace should ideally encompass mutually reinforcing processes and link geographic localities. As such, it does not need to include a large number of people, processes and geographic localities, but to rest on key ones that are strategically connected and have the potential to generate broader peacebuilding dynamics (Lederach, 2005; Richmond, 2013). In Nicaragua, for example, local peace commissions appeared in war-affected areas in the 1980s and 1990s, and gradually turned into a peace infrastructure, bridging across divided sectors, including Sandinistas and their opponents, and levels of society from the grassroots up to the central government and international organizations. These strategic connections proved to be one of the greatest assets of the commissions, enabling them to play a key role in peacebuilding despite limited human and material resources.

Fluidity versus institutionalization

A second dilemma worth exploring in this paper is that of fluidity versus institutionalization, or formality versus informality, as the two concepts seem to suggest contrasting approaches. Indeed, the concept of "peace constituency" places emphasis on movement and flexibility, while that of "infrastructure for peace" connotes some level of institutionalization and permanency.

In the same vein as members of peace movements, members of peace constituencies can vary over time, as well as their relations with their social bases. Likewise, the formation of peace constituencies in countries which have just been – or are currently –

affected by armed conflict can be seen as a process in which social actors construct a collective identity to articulate their demands in accordance with their sociopolitical context. While demands may cover a wide range of issues (e.g. agrarian reform, human rights, an end to gender-based violence), all temporarily come under the umbrella of "peace". Peace constituencies therefore fluctuate, as their members adopt different objectives and play diverse roles in peacebuilding, depending on their evolving sociopolitical context (Mouly, 2004). They frequently emerge as informal, small and localized initiatives that later expand.

As for the concept of "infrastructure for peace", it draws our attention to the importance of a solid architecture on which to build peace. Lederach (1997) used the metaphor of the construction of a house in his book *Building Peace* to underline the need for solid local capacities for peace, such as peace organizations and institutions – the building blocks of a house – and strong connections between them – the cement – to ensure the sustainability of peacebuilding processes. While he later reproached this metaphor for being too static, the concept of "infrastructure for peace" was likely developed with this view in mind. This may explain why infrastructures for peace are often conceived of as formal, top-down structures linked to the state (Richmond, 2012). Yet, as will be seen below, this need not be the case.

These two contrasting approaches raise various questions. First of all, what has the greatest potential for ensuring the sustainability of peacebuilding processes: enough flexibility to adapt to evolving contexts and fluctuating peacebuilding needs, as the concept of "peace constituency" seems to contend, or the institutionalization of local peace initiatives that can prevail over changing contexts, as the concept of "infrastructure for peace" seems to imply? Situations of armed conflict, and their wake or aftermath tend to be volatile. A change in government or in the international setting can have significant repercussions on the prospects for peace. In such situations informal initiatives that require few resources and possess strong social bases can sometimes better endure than more institutionalized ones. Yet, it is not always true. Informal initiatives are more dependent on context; as such, they can collapse when circumstances are adverse and reemerge under other forms when the latter are more propitious.

Secondly, the two approaches invite us to reflect on what offers the best prospects for achieving social change: informal peace initiatives that are more attuned to their

environment but lack critical links with state and international institutions, or formal ones that are more estranged from communities but have access to, and work with, state and international institutions? As van Tongeren (2013) argues, informality and formality have both strengths and weaknesses. Informal peace initiatives are usually embedded in what Oliver Richmond (2012) has termed "peace formation"[5] processes; that is, they are more homegrown and therefore tend to contribute to a more legitimate peace. But, they also often fail to generate a broad impact on the state and society. Formal peace initiatives benefit from their connections with the state and other key stakeholders, giving them the potential to have a more significant impact on peacebuilding processes. Yet, they also tend to be more dependent on the state and international actors, and less attuned to the needs of the local population.

All in all, while seemingly reflecting contrasting approaches, the two concepts are neither exclusive, nor opposed. Indeed, like the composition of peace constituencies, connections between the different parts of an infrastructure for peace are often dynamic. They may vary over time depending on how much institutionalized the infrastructure is and on changes in the surrounding context. This is why Lederach introduced the metaphor of the cobweb, arguing that the earlier metaphors of the house and the pyramid were too static and failed to adequately reflect the evolving nature of social relationships. By contrast, the building of a cobweb requires enough flexibility to adapt to its surroundings. Thus, for Lederach (2005:86) "[p]ermanency is found in adaptative platforms capable of continuous response". Further, as Richmond argues, local initiatives often move from the "hidden" to the "informal" and "formal" (Richmond, 2013): peace constituencies can thus turn into infrastructures for peace over time. Hence peace constituencies can turn into infrastructures for peace over time. This is the case, for instance, of the *mesas de concertación* in Guatemala, which began to emerge locally after the signing of peace as informal forums in which key sectors of society came together to have a say in the implementation of the peace agreements. The UN Mission in Guatemala, with its presence all over the territory, and its Guatemalan counterpart, the commission of follow-up and accompaniment of the peace accords, soon came to see the *mesas de concertación* as a model to emulate in order to decentralize peacebuilding, thereby contributing to a more inclusive process that better reflect the country's diversity. As a result, they fostered the institutionalization of the *mesas de*

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5   The term "peace formation" refers to "local social, political, and cultur[al] peace movements and
    processes" (Richmond, 2012:3).

concertación, promoting their creation in all departments[6] of the country, except that of the capital city, and linking them to the peace institutions established in compliance with the peace agreements. Similar examples can be found in other countries, such as Kenya (van Tongeren, 2013) or Nicaragua (Mouly, 2013), where peace constituencies gradually became more institutionalized and developed into infrastructures for peace.

However, infrastructures for peace do not necessarily go through such a process. In Nepal, for instance, local peace committees were formed in each district[7] at the instigation of the central government, with the advice of the UN Mission in Nepal. This came as an important shortcoming in the light of ongoing political instability characterized by frequent changes in central governments and institutional paralysis. Local peace committees indeed became more dependent on the political situation at the central level than on the local context. Further, their members were generally appointed as a result of political compromises and often lacked social bases, while committed members of civil society organizations working for peace might have little to no voice. This meant that, with a few exceptions, many local peace committees hardly fulfilled the role that had been envisioned for them and collapsed in times of political instability and/or shortage of resources. As this example demonstrates, infrastructures for peace are not a panacea and, when they are imposed on society instead of emanating from it, their legitimacy is hampered and prospects for sustainability are more limited.

On the other end of the spectrum, some peace constituencies remain informal and do not transform into peace infrastructures or only transform into incipient ones. This is the case of the CEI and its network of peace promoters in Nicaragua, which can be more adequately described as a peace constituency, though one could say that the network of peace promoters and the attempt to institutionalize it in the form of an NGO, should it have succeeded, could have set the stage for the development of an infrastructure for peace. In the same vein, the various local peace committees established in Colombia to resist against violence perpetrated by all armed actors involved in the armed conflict provide an example of peace constituency that has not developed into an infrastructure for peace.[8] Although many committees have had the opportunity to interact with their peers with the support of external actors, such as the Colombian NGO REDEPAZ, connections between them are still limited.

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6   A department is an administrative division of Guatemala. There are 22 departments in the country.
7   A district is an administrative division of Nepal. There are 75 districts in the country.
8   Such peace committees have adopted different names, including "zone of peace", "peace community" and even "constituent assembly".

Both cases of peace constituencies have proved highly dependent on their surrounding contexts. The CEI and its network of peace promoters relied on donor funding to conduct their peacebuilding endeavours. When a significant project supported by the European Union ended, the CEI ceased many of its peacebuilding activities and reduced its staff, while many peace promoters distanced themselves from the network. Having said that, a few peace promoters continued to be involved in peacebuilding and, in particular, mediate in local conflict either as part of other organizations/institutions or individually. Meanwhile, several peace committees in Colombia waned as a result of changes in the local administration, the death of key leaders by armed groups, or a shift in national government policies. In a similar vein, Marisa Fernando (2011) found that the level of tension between conflicting groups impinged on the work of local peace committees in Sri Lanka. More generally, in a recent article surveying ten cases of informal local peace committees, all of which can be considered as cases of peace constituencies that have not transformed into infrastructures for peace, van Tongeren (2013) remarked that such initiatives are significantly affected by changes in the national context and can even collapse as a result.

As these empirical examples indicate, peace constituencies that have turned into peace infrastructures might offer better promises for sustainability by allowing to strike a balance between fluidity and institutionalization. Yet, as argued elsewhere, what matters most is not so much the endurance of local peace initiatives, but that of their peacebuilding endeavours through the establishment of lasting capacities for peace (Mouly, 2013). In that regard informal peace initiatives that work in partnership with the state and manage to generate changes in state and society can be considered successful, even though this means that they will eventually disappear when state and society assume their peacebuilding responsibility. This happened with several peace commissions in Nicaragua, which progressively dissolved, as state and society took over their functions.

Thus, while the durability of a peace initiative is important and requires a balance between fluidity and institutionalization, it is not enough, let alone necessary. More important is the process of change engendered by such an initiative and how sustained such a process is. The combined attributes of critical yeast and cobwebs – strategic membership and critical connections with different levels and sectors of society – are

key to fomenting such a process and establishing capacities for peace in state and society. Peace initiatives that can be considered both as "peace constituencies" and "infrastructures for peace" might therefore hold the best promise to this end.

Conclusion

As this paper illustrates, the concepts of "peace constituency" and "infrastructure for peace" have much in common and, while each has its own focus, they are complementary. The two concepts, in particular, have caught the increasing attention of scholars and practitioners, who realize that a peacebuilding process that is externally driven cannot be sustainable. Thus they both underline the importance of local capacities for peace. Yet, each does it in its own way. The concept of "peace constituency" focuses on agency; that is, who can be agents of change who can induce and sustain a peacebuilding process? By contrast, that of "infrastructure for peace" emphasizes structure, understood as the critical linkages between people, processes and localities, and, in particular, between different sectors and levels of society. Likewise, while peace constituencies often begin as informal peace initiatives and are fluid, which enables them to adapt to context, infrastructures for peace tend to imply a greater level of institutionalization and officialdom. As this paper discussed, both approaches have strengths and weaknesses, and a balance between informality/flexibility and formality/institutionalization can enhance the sustainability of such initiatives. However, while this is valuable, it is not sufficient. In order to be successful, local peace initiatives need to foment social change and, for this, they simultaneously require a critical group of people who can act as catalysts, and strategic connections which allow them to bridge conflict divides and link the grassroots with the national and international levels.

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