
Trouble in Peaceland

By operating from a fortified bubble, dismissing local knowledge, and not speaking the language, peace missions are actually hindering the people they're trying to help.

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In May 2010, in an attempt to bring state authority back to war-torn parts of eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) began helping the Congolese police deploy officers to particularly volatile villages. Aided by other international peacebuilding organizations, the U.N. built new police stations and flew in officers from other parts of the country — part of a strategy to avoid corruption by introducing detached and uncompromised ranks. Once the police were established and the area was secured, or so the plan went, other government representatives would soon follow. After the deployment process had finished, U.N. officials in New York claimed that an important step had been accomplished toward fulfilling their mandate to stabilize Congo and return peace.

In reality, however, it only made the situation much, much worse.

To begin with, the new police had to compete with remnants of rebel groups and militias for control. Far from establishing law and order, the introduction of an additional force made the area less stable. And being from far away, the police not only had no support within the community, they had no stake in making it better. When the government refused to pay, feed, and house the officers — it considered them “UNOPS police” and so the U.N.’s responsibility — the police took what they needed from the community. By the end of the disastrous affair, the government, the police, and the community all felt the U.N. was to blame.

But how could this happen? How could an organization not realize that it was so badly missing its mark? The unfortunate truth is that instances like this are all too common in peacebuilding initiatives around the globe. From Timor-Leste to **Afghanistan** and from Congo to Kosovo, disregard for local input derails, confounds, and mires well-meaning projects and squanders millions. In fact, the similarities across these areas of deployment are so striking that, regardless of what country foreign peacebuilders are in or where they are from, they are likely to find themselves inhabiting “**Peaceland**” — a separate world with its own values, customs, stories, habits, and practices; a world that includes donors, diplomats, peacekeepers, and the foreign staff of international or nongovernmental organizations. And if allowed to continue, inhabiting it will mean repeating mistakes like this and sacrificing a golden opportunity to help host populations create a better future for themselves.

The problem developed quite naturally. Peaceland’s everyday modes of operation enable international peacebuilders to live and work on the ground. But they also reinforce the tensions between interveners and local people, and they create numerous obstacles to effective peacebuilding (meaning, attempts to create, strengthen, and solidify peace).

Take the expatriates’ standard security routines. Living in a fortified compound or driving with the doors locked and windows closed are perfectly understandable responses to danger. Similarly, widespread practices such as striving to remain neutral or impartial, advertising actions, perpetually writing reports, and quantifying the results of actions are perfectly reasonable ways to deal with the difficulties inherent in conducting international peacebuilding in conflict zones. But, at the same time, they further divide interveners from local populations. As a Kenyan contact told me, they transform expatriates into “other kinds of human beings.”

But the problem goes deeper than holding onto impractically poor habits. It goes to the core of what knowledge is prized and what is discounted. Foreign experts trained in general peacebuilding techniques, and with extensive experience in a variety of conflict zones, have the most prized expertise. Expatriates with extensive local knowledge, such as anthropologists, country specialists, and historians, are less highly considered. And the knowledge of local people is all but trivialized. As a result, peacebuilders often try to apply concepts and perceived best practices without understanding the local contexts or even the problems they are supposed to be fighting.

The practice of valuing thematic expertise over local knowledge also legitimates the deployment of people who do not speak any of the local languages. For instance, in 2010, **only three** of the 140 diplomats working at the U.K. Embassy in Kabul “spoke an Afghan language.” And in Haiti in 2005, only 100 of the 1,700 U.N. police deployed **spoke French or Creole**.

High turnover among expatriates compounds this problem of lacking local knowledge. Diplomats usually move every two to three years; NGO staff, U.N. employees, and peacekeeping contingents can move on in as little as six months. Even development practitioners, who pride themselves on working for the long term, change countries on average every two years. As a result, foreign peacebuilders rarely understand well enough the local situations that they want to change.

The result of all this is that peacebuilders misdiagnose problems, alienate the local populations they’re trying to help, and, in some of the worst cases, miss the causes and acts of violence that they are tasked to prevent. Take the handling of Congo, for example. International actors usually focus on 1) a primary cause of violence, 2) a main consequence, and 3) a central solution. In **Congo’s case**, this was: 1) the pervasiveness of illegal mining, 2) the sexual abuse of women and girls, and 3) the reconstruction of state authority. In the absence of other reforms, attempts to bankrupt armed groups by imposing temporary bans and more regulation on mining actually **strengthened** their control over mines. Similarly, focusing on sexual violence led groups to use it as a bargaining chip to be invited to negotiations, as they threatened to use it as a weapon if they weren’t. And better empowering the authoritarian central government only allowed it to better oppress its people.

Because peacebuilders were attached to a narrative, and because they didn’t listen to local knowledge, they effectively made the situation worse.

In virtually all aid and peacebuilding organizations, expatriates fill the management positions, and local people make up the lower-level staff — working as drivers, translators, and assistants — and international agencies very rarely solicit local input from these employees when planning their efforts. Across conflict zones, from South Sudan to Kosovo, local stakeholders complained to me over the course of 15 years of research that many international peacebuilders are arrogant and that they provide aid in a humiliating manner. In many cases, resentment over this behavior grows among local partners and eventually causes international initiatives to fail.

UCLA Professor Adam Moore's [analysis](#) of two attempts at integrating schools to promote interethnic reconciliation in Brčko, a town in Bosnia-Herzegovina, offers a useful example. The first occurred in 2000 “with little input from district officials or public discussion with concerned parents.” It was a disaster, provoking “massive protests” that “resulted in the temporary closure of the schools until changes were reversed.” But the second attempt, a year later, consulted extensively with district citizens, teachers, and officials, to air out concerns and gain support for the proposed change. As a result, the reform proceeded smoothly.

Finally, the disconnect between peacebuilders and the communities they're trying to help can simply make them unable to see the violence they're trying to stop, even when it's right in front of them.

In mid-2010 for instance, in the Congolese village of Luvungi, members of a local militia called Mai Mai Sheka reportedly [gang-raped 387 civilians](#) over the course of four days. The victims were assaulted in their homes, in the bush, and around the village. A U.N. peacekeeping base was located nearby, and a patrol of Indian blue helmets actually [passed through the village](#) while the rapes were taking place. The Indian soldiers, however, spoke no French or Swahili, and they had virtually no previous contact with the villagers. Understandably, the local population did not trust the peacekeepers, and Congolese victims were reluctant to approach them — the Indian soldiers did not realize that atrocities were unfolding and moved on to the next village.

To be sure, changing these everyday practices is not the only way to ensure peacebuilding success. Peacebuilders also need more financial, logistical, and human resources. They need powerful states and organizations to stop ignoring or encouraging violence and to, instead, start actively supporting peace.

But even when powerful states commit to build peace abroad and devote massive resources to this goal, most interventions do not create long-term peace. To fix this, peacebuilding agencies should invert the current practice of foreigners running the show while local people merely assist or execute orders. They should also progressively replace most of the expatriates with local staff and pay these individuals an equivalent salary, only retaining foreigners in jobs where local people would face too much pressure and too great a risk of becoming biased or in cases where the agency can find no local person with the requisite skills or expertise. International peacebuilders could also follow the model of exceptional individuals and organizations who challenge the other detrimental everyday routines. For instance, they could make an effort to socialize with local counterparts. And they could use more the acceptance approach to security, whereby protection depends on developing good relationships with local communities, armed groups, and power brokers.

When James Scambary, a media-training specialist working for the United Nations, was deployed to Timor-Leste in 2003, he did not have a car, so instead of going off to the beach during weekends like the other expatriates, he spent his time in neighbors' backyards talking. As the years passed, James became part of the local fabric, and the Timorese friends he made spoke in his presence in a way that they never did in front of other foreign peacebuilders. They mentioned hopes and fears that they usually hid from expatriates, and they talked about underlying local tensions and endemic communal violence in rural areas that otherwise went unreported.

When riots erupted in 2006 in Timor-Leste, almost destroying the peace process, they took most of the international community by surprise — but not Scambary. He was one of the few foreign peacebuilders who had predicted a deterioration and had tried to convince his colleagues to help prevent the looming crisis. This was not because Scambary was smarter or better trained than other expatriates. It was because he had talked to local people and developed strong personal relationships. The backyard discussions had provided him with a different, and much more accurate, perception of the challenges on the ground.

Scambary's story illuminates a striking lesson: The solutions with the greatest potential to fix international peace efforts address what seem like the most trivial aspects of peacebuilding. Everyday routines of most international peacebuilders on the ground involve socializing primarily with other expatriates, gathering information on violence mainly from elites and foreign sources, and living in fortified compounds. These habitual ways of working are below the radar of policymakers. They are so banal, so quotidian, that foreign peacebuilders usually do not think that they have any impact on the outcome of their work. Yet, changing the expatriates' everyday modes of operation can make all the difference for international peace efforts.

Parts of this article have been adapted from passages in the author's book, [Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention](#).

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