Participatory Evaluation and Critical Peace Research: A Precondition for Peacebuilding

A Response by Martina Fischer

1. Introduction

Simon Fisher and Lada Zimina start their overview on the state-of-the-art in peacebuilding with a fairly pessimistic statement. They argue that the capacity and the will of global society to solve conflicts and address injustice peacefully "is desperately inadequate in the face of today's need, let alone tomorrow's", that international peace practitioners remain "weak and implicitly focused on a relatively narrow approach […] without full recognition of the interconnectedness and flux of the system", and that the strategies they offer "tend to be inadequate, in the sense that they merely serve to reinforce the circumstances which gave rise to violence and warfare in the first place" (Fisher/Zimina in this volume, 11).

More than fifty armed conflicts that are currently being waged around the globe might well give reason to draw such a sad picture.[1] But one should keep in mind the full scope of the recent findings of the Canadian Human Security Center (based at the University of British Columbia) and of the Human Security Report Project (based at Fraser University).[2] Researchers have outlined that the past 15 years have witnessed a general and substantial *decline in armed conflicts*, including the number of armed conflicts, battle-related deaths, genocides and democides. The data base shows that both state and non-state (intra-state) wars have decreased in number during the 1990s, and in particular between 2002-2005

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[1] Andrew Mack and his team at Fraser University have identified 32 state-based armed conflicts and 24 non-state armed conflicts in their latest edition of Human Security Brief (Mack et al. 2007, 30; 34).
[2] See Mack et al. 2005, 2006, 2007 and Mack 2008.

(from 66 in 2002 to 56 in 2005).[3] Andrew Mack, director of this project, argues that the most compelling explanation for this decline is found in the upsurge of peacemaking and peacebuilding activities that started in the early 1990s, spearheaded by the UN, but also supported by many other international agencies, donors, governments and NGOs (Mack 2008, 75). The Human Security Brief 2007 even concludes that all forms of political violence – including violence emerging from international terrorism in the Middle East and South Asia – have declined. Moreover, the data reveal that the wars that are still being fought are far less deadly on average than those of the Cold War era. This is why Mack et al. (2007, 7) conclude that there is good reason at least for modest optimism, "not least because the evidence clearly indicates that efforts to stop violent conflicts and to prevent them from starting again can be remarkably effective". At the same time they admit that "few of the root cause drivers for warfare and deadly assaults against civilians – from poverty to group inequality – have improved", which means that there are certainly no grounds for complacency (ibid.).

As Fisher and Zimina have outlined, there is a risk "arising from a nexus of [...] climate change and energy constraints; economic injustice and poverty; denial of rights and participation in society" (in this volume, 11). Definitely, the world is still far from having effective institutions and instruments that guarantee stable peace. Researchers, politicians and practitioners agree that the UN system needs to be reformed in a variety of respects,[4] redefining policy agendas such as the responsibility of states to protect their citizens, and fostering human security. Global governance mechanisms have to be improved, in order to reduce the risk of accumulative global crises emerging from crashes of the international finance system, nutrition crises and climate change. Moreover there is an urgent need for further improvement of international law and increasing peacebuilding capacities on different levels, top down and bottom up, and from the middle out (Lederach 1997).

But the data collected by the Human Security Report Project illustrate that the picture is not as bleak as Fisher and Zimina assume. The progress that has been made should be fully acknowledged. Of course, interpretation of such data depends very much on perspectives and definitions – the question is whether we consider the glass to be half full or half empty. Going for the more optimistic version makes it easier to proceed on the long road and struggle for peace, by constantly improving mechanisms of conflict prevention and transformation on the level of international organisations, state and civil society. There is an urgent need to strengthen civilian approaches as a 'must' and first priority. It is important to oppose the current trend of just 'adding' civilian capacities to existing (extensive and much more expensive) military crisis intervention capacities. There is a challenge to constantly improve process-targeted mechanisms for immediate and coherent action that can effectively address organised violence and social breakdown. There is also an urgent need to carefully design long-term policies that aim to address the structural causes of conflict and violence.

In order to improve, peacebuilding and conflict transformation activities require profound context analysis, realistic definition of purpose and strategies, and long-term commitment. Readiness for critical assessment of strategies and systematic self-reflection are imperative for organisations ploughing through this field.

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3 Sub-Saharan Africa was the only region to experience a substantial decline in armed conflicts, while in four other regions conflicts increased in number.
4 See Mack (2008, 96), who argues that the UN remains critically under-resourced when it comes to preventive diplomacy and peacemaking capacity, while the organisation is also confronting growing risks of overstretch in its peace operations.

2. Developing Tools for Evaluation and Self-Reflection

The past 15 years have seen numerous comprehensive efforts to assess what difference peacebuilding can make. Among these are the War-torn Societies Project that was co-initiated by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development in the 1990s (www.unrisd.org); 'lessons learned workshops' initiated by the European Centre for Conflict Prevention (Galama/van Tongeren 2002), and studies by Church and Shouldice (2002/2003) and Paffenholz and Reychler (2005 and 2007). The Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP) project that was initiated by the US-based organisation Collaborative for Development Action has contributed a set of case studies, context analysis and comparative research on third-party intervention by civil society organisations using participatory approaches and close cooperation with local partners all over the world. The project has contributed to developing criteria for success and failure (see Anderson/Olson 2003, CDA 2008 and Chigas/ Woodrow in this volume).[5] The findings of the RPP process have not only influenced debates at civil society level, but also policies drawn up by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2007). The Joint Utstein Study has investigated peacebuilding activities launched by several state agencies, in order to mainstream and harmonize national peacebuilding strategies (Smith 2003). In addition to this, institutional guidelines have been developed by state administrations and international organisations.[6]

Meanwhile, many peacebuilding organisations have developed a high degree of critical self-reflection. The intention has been to avoid negative side effects, create best practices, and increase transparency towards donor agencies. Civil society organisations in particular have started some comprehensive efforts to delineate and improve the state-of-the-art in peacebuilding by improving evaluation practice. Peace organisations have developed evaluation mechanisms according to the tools set up by development agencies, assessing the relevance of activities, implementation of project goals, appropriateness of strategies, efficiency of resources, transparency and management capacities of the organisation, output and outcome, impact for the target groups and impact on the political context, coordination and coherence of planning and sustainability (a category that Fisher and Zimina also mention repeatedly).

The need for evaluation has also been emphasised by donor organisations. Many of these fixed guidelines for the evaluation of peacebuilding activities. American donors were particularly interested in this. One of the leading agencies, the Hewlett Foundation, pushed academic institutes and NGOs to systematically assess the results of conflict transformation and peacebuilding projects (Kovick 2005). Hewlett had started a Conflict Resolution Program in the US and expanded its funding strategy to different international crisis areas in the 1990s. In 2004 the Foundation decided to stop this kind of funding; among other reasons cited, it was argued that organisations lacked the will and capacity for proper evaluation (ibid., 17).

Next to evaluation, the term 'peace and conflict impact assessment' (PCIA) emerged and became very fashionable among practitioners, researchers and donors. It was used to emphasize the need to reflect the likely peace and conflict impacts of policies or interventions, including aid programmes. Some interesting discussions were generated around this concept,[7] which was a positive consequence. However, at the same time this debate produced negative side effects, contributing to a situation in which both practitioners and donor organisations tended to develop

5 For CDA's follow-on projects see CDA 2008 and Collaborative Learning Projects at www.cdainc.com.
6 See OECD/DAC 2008; Friedrich Ebert Foundation 2007; GTZ 2007; Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen/zivik 2007.
7 Several articles and dialogues on peace and conflict impact assessment have been published by the Berghof Research Center (for example Austin et al. 2003; Bloomfield et al. 2005), also available online at www.berghof-handbook.net.

Martina Fischer

higher and higher (and often exaggerated) expectations towards evaluation. There is a clear danger now that evaluations are mainly targeted at 'measuring' short-term results of peace activities and thus tend to ignore longer-term processes, changes in the political context and consequently the need for the change of strategies. It is obvious that evaluation practice and assessment tools have been designed more and more along the lines of what Fisher and Zimina call 'technical peacebuilding', which turns out to be highly problematic.

It seems that two coinciding trends make life difficult for peacebuilders: first there is a strong demand for more performance-based grant management, often derived from politicians, that leads public funders to "focus on demonstrating quantifiable and easily understood results to demonstrate good use of tax payer's money" (Wright 2008, 1). Second, there is also a demand by private donors for fast and quantifiable, measurable results (Marten/Witte 2008, 21). As observed in a study published by the Global Public Policy Institute (ibid.), many foundations apply a business-like approach in the development sector and they increasingly focus on impact evaluation (at least at the rhetoric level, even if their funding practice does not fully reflect this ideal).[8] One leader of a consulting firm for philanthropic organisations is quoted as saying: "the generation we are dealing with today has an unending thirst and desire for sudden impact, they want results […] they acquired their wealth overnight and so they want to see their philanthropic dollars making a difference overnight. Organizations need to take a step back and educate donors about how difficult it is to measure results" (ibid.).

A crucial experience that is shared by most peacebuilders all over the world is that measuring impact – in particular positive results – and defining success is extremely difficult and challenging.

3. The Difficulty of Developing Criteria for Success

Getting a clear idea of their own outreach, potential and limits, success and failure is crucial for many peace organisations. But identifying criteria for success or failure remains a highly complicated and demanding endeavour.

The RPP process has suggested five criteria of effectiveness by which to assess whether a programme is having meaningful impact at the level of 'peace writ large':

1. the effort contributes to stopping a key driving factor of the war or conflict, or
2. the effort contributes to a momentum for peace by causing participants and communities to develop their own peace initiatives, or
3. the effort results in the creation or reform of political institutions for handling grievances, or
4. the effort prompts people to increasingly resist violence and provocations to violence, or
5. the effort results in an increase in people's security and in their sense of security.[9]

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8 It is reported that at least some critical voices are raised within the private philanthropy scene, arguing that "by focusing on measuring impact results to determine grant-giving, foundations are undermining one of their core comparative advantages, the ability to take risks" (ibid.).
9 Issue Paper on Criteria of Effectiveness, RPP, online at www.cdainc.com.

RPP's analysis and proposals are helpful in that they offer an incentive for self-reflection and review of the goals and strategies we set ourselves. In essence, though, the search for criteria to determine the effectiveness of programmes and evaluate their impacts has only just begun with the RPP process. Ultimately, stakeholders involved in peace projects must develop their own criteria by which to define the success of their activities and document this transparently. To that end, they must agree not only on general and overarching objectives but also on short- and medium-term project goals.

However, the quest for criteria and indicators should not be misconstrued as a kind of 'monitoring mania'. Determining how individual projects, measures, activities or events impact directly on social action and therefore on peace processes as a whole continues to pose problems (Paffenholz 2005, 25). Some studies conclude that impacts are almost impossible to quantify at the macro level (Church/Shouldice 2002/2003; Heinrich 2005; Paffenholz 2005; Smith 2003), which suggests that energies might better be used elsewhere. We must certainly ask ourselves, in all seriousness, whether improvements in peace practice can genuinely be achieved by donors and implementing organisations expending more and more energy on defining increasingly detailed and sophisticated criteria and indicators to measure impacts on 'peace writ large'.

Evaluations which combine quantitative and qualitative procedures for data collection can offer important entry points, but generally only identify impacts achieved in the immediate project context. The expectation that beyond this evaluations can draw well-founded conclusions about the benefits and impact of individual measures on the bigger picture, i.e. *peace writ large*, in a crisis region is not just overly ambitious (given that evaluations are usually limited in resources and timeframes): it is also questionable from a (funding) policy perspective. Peace actors engaging in overzealous debate about this issue should be clear that they are thus raising excessive and unrealistic expectations among donors about the demonstrability of impacts – expectations which can never be fulfilled, at least not within the framework of the short-term evaluations that the donors usually fund. As a consequence, new benchmarks to measure success are continually being established – benchmarks which the civil society actors involved in peace work will ultimately find almost impossible to live up to.[10] Smaller, community-based projects in particular are finding that their work capacities are increasingly being absorbed and overstretched by these activities.[11]

It is surely enough, instead, for evaluations to focus on the impacts on the selected target group or on a clearly defined local or regional context. These impacts can generally be monitored with at least some degree of reliability, provided that the requisite resources are made available for these monitoring activities. Furthermore, 'sustainability' should be dropped from the list of criteria for the evaluation of peacebuilding activities. The sustainability of 'peace' as a process or as a consequence of social action is not as simple to quantify as the sustainability of natural resources. Many peace processes are marred by setbacks before discernible progress is made or longer-term agreements can be put in place. Only in the rarest of cases are peace processes linear; on the contrary, they are almost invariably stop-start processes, characterised by progress and setbacks. However, this does not necessarily cast doubt on the quality of the individual measures involved.

10 On this point, see the comments made by Simon (2006, 87) on the structure of grassroots organisations.
11 One example is the 'project mania' and the reality experienced by local actors in Bosnia-Herzegovina; cf. Fischer 2006, 168.

Martina Fischer

4. Evaluation as a Planning Tool and Chance for Institutional Learning

If, on the other hand, evaluations are integrated into the planning process they can provide an impetus for self-reflection by the stakeholders concerned, act as a tool to help them improve the planning and implementation of peace activities, and, if appropriate, encourage them to change their strategies. Careful project planning is generally regarded as a prerequisite for good practice, and there have rightly been calls for donor organisations to provide their implementing agencies with training opportunities in this area (Paffenholz 2005). Only if evaluations are part of the planning process and all stakeholders are clear about the project objectives can any meaningful evaluation of their implementation take place. The same applies to the theoretical assumptions about social transformation which underlie almost all practical projects, but are rarely defined in explicit terms. Here too, an accompanying evaluation can help to achieve some measure of clarification.

Evaluations should not focus primarily on measuring the impacts of peacebuilding activities but should empower stakeholders to reflect on what they are doing and to carry out their activities mindfully. Angelika Spelten (2006) summed this up neatly in the title of an article: *Schon das Nachdenken über Wirkungsnachweis zeigt Wirkung* – "just thinking about demonstrating effectiveness has an effect". Project participants should be supported through joint learning processes, especially to develop a shared understanding of their own objectives within the team, to challenge the strategies selected, to set priorities under difficult conditions, to guarantee the coherence of and weigh up individual project elements, and to balance these against their financial and human resources. External evaluators can play a very constructive role here. Many projects find themselves in crisis because the participants lack the tools necessary for a self-reflection process; they may also lack a facilitator with the skills to cast an outsider's eye over the project activities and lead team discussions with the requisite objectivity and goal orientation.

5. Participatory Evaluation and Action Research

Nowadays, almost every study on the issue highlights the need to make evaluation processes participatory and, if possible, ensure that the process is accompanied by research. The question, though, is to what extent this aspiration is being fulfilled in current evaluation practice. Donor organisations, at least, must be made more aware that it is not enough to reward – with continued funding – projects whose progress is linear and which can demonstrate what are probably short-term measurable successes; it is especially important to fund projects which can justify why they felt compelled to review their methods and strategies and set different priorities. Here, there is close linkage with action research, which is also based on a participatory approach.

Designed for a longer-time frame, action research can provide valuable information about the opportunities for, and limits to, peacebuilding strategies. However, this is almost impossible for stakeholders to achieve 'by the by' in project implementation. Rather, action research projects must be organised as additional accompanying academic research.[12] The purpose of action research is to undertake comparative studies into the conditions and impacts of various forms of social action. It also aspires to influence social action; in other words, it is normative in focus. Its agenda concentrates

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12 Various articles in the anthology edited by Reason and Bradbury (2006) provide a good overview of action research; cf. also Reason 1994; Folger 1999; Kraus 1991; Ross 2000; Newman 2000 and the website of the Action Evaluation Research Institute (www.aepro.org). For information about Kurt Lewin's original concept, see www.stangl-taller.at/TESTEXPERIMENT and www.stangl-taller.at/ARBEITSBLAETTER/FORSCHUNG.

on specific social grievances. The main objective of the research is not to test theoretical hypotheses but to bring about practical change in the problematic situation which is the subject of study. This is viewed as a holistic social process: individual variables are not isolated and collected as 'objective data'; instead, data collection itself is interpreted as part of the social process.

Action research projects evolved in the 1970s, mainly in the university sector and in work with marginalised groups and urban districts, but also in community projects in Latin America, generally led by social psychologists. It involves the use of qualitative approaches based on empirical social research, including the evaluation of project reports, participatory monitoring, individual or group interviews with project participants and members of the target groups and surveys. The methods aim to exert direct influence on events within society. The researcher temporarily abandons his or her distance to the research object and is intensively involved, during certain phases, in the process being studied. The subjects being observed and studied are not cast in a passive role but participate actively in the debate about objectives, and in data collection and evaluation. For the researchers, a precise definition of roles and ongoing self-reflection are essential. Their distance to the subject of research must constantly be re-established in order to avoid any risk of over-identification.[13] Action research therefore not only attempts to accumulate knowledge and enhance understanding of the functioning of social interactions; it intervenes in a direct and practical way, and involves the actors being studied in the process on an ongoing basis through feedback of results. Academic findings are thus translated into practice, and research concepts and theoretical constructs are subjected to practical testing at the same time.

Not every peacebuilding measure can be accompanied by a comprehensive research project. Nonetheless, evaluation measures can and should be more than just an audit report to be filed away by donors and audit authorities. In terms of its timeframe and personnel resources, any evaluation of peacebuilding activities that is geared towards social learning should be located in the space between short-term evaluation and an ambitious multi-annual research project, should always accompany the process and be participatory in design (cf. Lederach et al. 2007). The continuous feedback of results to project participants, through feedback workshops and discussion of interim and final reports, is essential.

In order to improve peace practice, it is helpful – especially where complex interventions are concerned – if actors also address the motives and potential of conflicting groups and the power asymmetries existing in society, and do so through an empirically and theoretically based conflict analysis. The opportunities for, and limits to, external intervention and the capacities of local peace coalitions must also be realistically appraised. Only on this basis can a decision be taken not to implement a measure, if necessary, in cases of doubt. And finally, it is important to remember that it is not conducive, and not necessarily helpful for the peace process, to incorporate well-intentioned projects into ill-conceived international state-building strategies.

A highly important point that Fisher and Zimina made in their lead article is to very critically question the motivation of those engaging in peacebuilding and to analyse the values that are underlying their action. The different concepts of peace, conflict transformation, reconciliation, justice and security that guide peacebuilding efforts need to be made explicit and discussed. It is also crucial to critically reflect on and question the hypotheses of impact and social change that are underlying such projects.

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13 This takes place, as appropriate, through supervision and discussions with non-involved colleagues who critically appraise the project.

Martina Fischer

6. Back to the Roots – Reviving Critical Peace Research

Beyond action and evaluation research, however, there is a need for further fundamental research into peace missions which does more than focus on the practical issue of improving their effectiveness. Roland Paris has rightly and repeatedly pointed out that an overemphasis or exclusive emphasis on policy ("cult of policy relevance") can greatly narrow the perspective (Paris 2001, 44). Instead, theoretically based analyses are needed to reveal and in some cases challenge the ideological premises underlying international missions (which are generally based on Western concepts of governance, democratisation and economic liberalisation). Furthermore, the global governance structures which emerge in the context of these missions should be explored in more detail with reference to the theoretical approaches available in international relations and peace research.

Chances for improvement of global governance mechanisms are important issues for analysis. The outreach of different actors on distinct levels and the impact of their actions both on structures and processes also need to be investigated more deeply. More research is needed on the sequencing and timing of activities, on the quality of linkages between insiders and outsiders and how to harmonize their respective expectations. Contributions to the prevention of armed conflict and peacebuilding can only be effective if they are based on profound knowledge and scientific analysis of the causes and dynamics of violence, as has been mentioned by several comments in this volume. At the same time, preconditions for the success and failure of peace processes have to be studied.

Normative and critical peace research needs to replace analysis that is merely practice and policy oriented in terms of technical improvement of peace operations. Colleagues at the Tampere Peace Research Institute (Finland) have conducted a review of peace research by analysing the work published in the field's two main international journals, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* and *Journal of Peace Research*. They show how the "initial critical and creative spirit […] has turned into a 'normal' science that does not reflect on its basic categories or its role in society", and they state a need to "resuscitate Peace Research (PR) and revitalise it as Critical Peace Research (CPR)" (Jutila et al. 2008, 623). According to these authors, *criticality* and *reflexivity* are at the core of CPR. As a third cornerstone, *dialogue* is emphasized, which calls for a willingness to engage in inter-disciplinary exchange and to go beyond merely academic exercises, striving to stay in touch with society and to create dialogue "in a continuous search for a common idea of, for example, peaceful change" (ibid., 639). Critical peace research is a precondition for 'transformative peacebuilding'. If peacebuilders neglect or ignore dealing with these questions and instead focus on developing more and more detailed and sophisticated evaluation tools and criteria for impact assessment, they might fall into the trap of shifting further and further into technical peacebuilding. By following this track, they run the risk that critical self-reflection may also backfire and present an image of peacebuilders as those who are unable to achieve the standards that they have actively discussed and proposed.

(Hillary Crowe translated parts of this comment from German into English.)

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