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Peacebuilding can be defined as a process aimed at addressing deep-rooted causes of conflict and to establish a sustainable peace. While the term peacebuilding has become a mantra for international practices in transitional states, assessing the results achieved by peacebuilding-related practices is not easy. Nobody counters the argument that justice, development, or any other conceivable social good can enhance the resilience of peace and make a relapse into conflict less likely. Yet, how to define and measure these social goods and their improvement (or deterioration) in relation to peacebuilding efforts in a given context – in short, local peacebuilding effectiveness – is far from straightforward. Quantitative data, such as the number of cases cleared in courts or the change in average income, are frequently used as proxies. These figures are then sometimes refined through a qualitative outlook at country-specific factors.

While this way to evaluate peacebuilding may appear significant and reliable enough to deliverers of peacebuilding programmes, it may tell very little about how the programmes are experienced by their expected beneficiaries. And if experiences are not of “healing, reconciliation, peace, democracy, development, empowerment, justice or emancipation” (p. 2) or – to put it shortly – perceived as a further step towards peace, then how can a peacebuilding project be considered effective? A misleading evaluation may be dangerous not only because it may actually hamper peacebuilding, but also because it may reinforce implicit assumptions on the side of peacebuilders, who in turn may uncritically repeat their *modus operandi* (in terms of values, norms and practices) elsewhere. The non-neutrality of peacebuilding and the risks it entails is the point from where Gearoid Millar departs in his book, suggesting the adoption of an ethnographic approach to complement more traditional methods of peacebuilding evaluation (and design). It is not an exaggeration to state that the main merit of the book resides in proposing a practical way to address the oftentime-criticism of peacebuilding for not paying enough attention to ‘the local’.

The book is divided into three parts: introduction to the ethnographic approach; the four pillars of ethnographic approach; the details and challenges of incorporating the ethnographic approach. Part one recalls the shortcomings of peacebuilding (ch.1), questioning the validity of both peacebuilding goals and processes when not
properly attuned with ‘the local’. This section is then complemented with empirical data, drawing from Millar’s extensive field experience in Sierra Leone (ch. 2). The Author focuses on two peacebuilding-related programmes in particular – the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) for Sierra Leone and an agricultural foreign direct investment (FDI) programme operating in the North of the country. The peacebuilding relevance of the first is obvious, as TRCs are considered to be a tool to deliver justice and reconciliation, and to heal – as far as possible – psychological and social traumas related to the conflict. The FDI project assumes a peacebuilding relevance in the larger frame of a liberal basis of the economy. This, in the minds of its proponents, should be able to provide development, along with opportunities of economic self-sustenance and livelihood improvement, and hence contributing to a sustained peace and stability. In introducing these two cases, Millar highlights the peacebuilders’ assumptions and narratives. He then proceeds to question them in the following section, while he details the four pillars of the ethnographic approach.

Part two explains the ethnographic approach, dividing it into four pillars, and dedicating a chapter to each one. First, peacebuilding is reframed as experiential (ch. 3), a conceptual operation meant to confront peacebuilding expectations with peacebuilding experiences. Framing peacebuilding as experiential allows the bringing to the forefront of how peacebuilding is perceived locally. The following pillar – ethnographic preparation – is then used to understand why it is felt as it is (ch. 4). Ethnographic preparation, that is, gathering a deep knowledge about cultures, practices and ways of life of the context where peacebuilding is taking place, allows an explanation for the divergence between expectations and experiences. Pillar number three is about local engagement (ch. 5). In order to have a meaningful perception of a peacebuilding experience it is necessary to gather perceptions from a broader range of peacebuilding receivers, not only the local elites or those able to speak the language of the evaluator. Lastly, Millar recalls the technocratic turn that affected much of peacebuilding, both in the academia and in the field, effectively pointing out how this apparent technicality is far from universal or neutral, but very culturally (read Western) biased. This is where the last pillar – appraisal of one’s own implicit assumptions – takes its place (ch. 6). Millar does not shirk an emphasis on the importance of this step, described as “the foundation of ethnographic approach” (p. 99), since it is the one on which attuning peacebuilding to the local will ultimately rest.

The four pillars constituting the ethnographic approach are not described only in theory, but demonstrated in practice throughout part two, as they are applied to the TRC and FDI project in Sierra Leone. The author employed ‘free flow’ interviews to gather data on both programmes, noting the cleavage between the peacebuilding narrative and the actual experiences of intended beneficiaries. He applied his knowledge of the patron-client system in Sierra Leone, showing how this model of social relations can convincingly explain why both the TRC and FDI project had outcomes opposed to their intended ones, as they generated resentment and disempowerment. By involving both elites and non-elites in his interviews, Millar shows how experiences may diverge, hence how much peacebuilding evaluation may be biased by the demographics of the sample considered. Lastly, as he unpacks his own Western culture, Millar reappraises how certain values transparent to the observer, with their implicitly attached indicators, may be ultimately “misinforming and misleading” (p. 115).
The last part of the book is dedicated to analysing the challenges of the ethnographic approach (ch. 7), the limits of quantitative methods (ch. 8), and the potential that could be delivered by combining the two (ch. 8 as well). This section points out very convincingly how quantitative methods stumble in a variety of issue areas in post-conflict and transitional contexts, making them not as reliable as they are when deployed in the developed states of the global North. Drawing once again from his research experience, Millar recalls nine pitfalls where quantitative approaches fell in relation to the FDI project in Sierra Leone. This does not constitute, however, a manifesto about the intrinsic superiority of the ethnographic approach. Rather, it is a sober call for integrated peacebuilding research and assessment as “quantitative premises can inform qualitative methods and feed back into the general evaluation, and viceversa” (p. 153).

The concluding chapter (ch. 9) recalls the gap dividing scholars from practitioners, with the latter accusing the former of living in ‘ivory towers’. This accusation too often finds fertile ground in the “disconnected theorizing and overly normative institutional assumptions” (p. 162) that can be found in much of peacebuilding literature. Critical studies of peacebuilding suffer from this divide more than liberal approaches, as they tend to be poor in terms of workable tools and practical solution to the problems they raise. Millar makes an attempt to cover this extra mile, suggesting that the ethnographic approach should integrate with the whole intervention lifecycle; thus not only in the assessment phase, but also during planning and administration. The practical outlook permeating the whole book emerges clearly from his words: “I have no interest in purely academic debates regarding research methodologies. My interest is in the role that research methodologies and their results have on those who make decisions about funding, planning and administration” (p. 138).

Millar’s constructive criticism of quantitative approaches to peacebuilding design and assessment, complemented by his offer of practical tools, allows critical peacebuilding studies to transform into operative knowledge. This is what makes “An ethnographic approach to peacebuilding” mandatory reading for anyone – scholar or practitioner – involved or interested, at any rate, in peacebuilding fieldwork.