
Reviewed by Spyros Economides
London School of Economics

The central premise of this wide-ranging book is that while Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have become increasingly prominent international actors, especially in the context of post-Cold War ‘liberal peacebuilding’, they have also increasingly become part of the problem and not the solution. This process is characterised by McMahon as a ‘boom’ and ‘bust’ cycle: a lifecycle in which NGOs quite quickly lose their *raison d’être* and capacity to act as a catalyst for change in any given peacebuilding effort. While this book focuses on international peacebuilding processes in Bosnia and Kosovo, the author makes it clear that her central argument and ‘findings’ are applicable more generally.

The triangular relationship between NGOs, peacebuilding and the Bosnia/Kosovo experiments forms the core of the book. In setting the scene, the author goes down the road of abbreviated explanations of the emergence and nature of NGOs in the international system, the reason for the development and multiplicity of peacebuilding efforts by the ‘international community’, and background to the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo which are the case studies examined here. All necessary in one respect, but by attempting to do this in a truncated form I fear that McMahon detracts from the strengths of the book, by covering too much ground in a rather simplified manner.

The strengths of the book lie in two main areas. First, the analysis of the relationship between liberal peacebuilding in the post-Cold War world and the widespread engagement of ‘civil society programmes’ through NGOs. Here McMahon explores the idea that the ‘international community’ would encourage non-state actors, in the form of NGOs, to carry more of the burden of ‘advocacy’ and ‘service provision’ thus legitimising and empowering peacebuilding processes otherwise driven on by state actors and international institutions whose legitimacy might be questioned. Second, are the nuggets of gold which emerge from the extensive field work carried out in Bosnia and Kosovo which reveal some telling criticisms of the role of NGOs in the field.

McMahon is as critical of NGO-enthusiasts as she is of NGO-sceptics, and she paints a good picture of the context in which NGOs gained so much currency soon after the end of the Cold War. She argues, convincingly, that the post-1989 international environment increasingly became a ‘permissive environment’ for
the role and activities of NGOs. Post-Cold War instability, characterised by ethnic conflicts, complex emergencies, failing states and humanitarian catastrophes, allowed for growing international interventionism and more specifically what she terms ‘liberal peacebuilding’. Within this context the potential for NGO actorness grew and became central to many of the international involvements and interventions in post-conflict areas.

This is all very plausible and well-argued in the book. But with this argument come some weaknesses which stem from the perceived need to engage with a large spectrum of literatures and disciplinary approaches. For example, McMahon needs to engage with the nature of NGOs as organisations and actors if the central premise is to have any meaning, but what she provides is not very extensive. Indeed, she seems to go down a byway of criticising International Relations scholarship for the paucity of engagement with the importance of NGOs or even more superficially with the rather needless digression into a critique of realist interpretations on non-state actors. The point here is that by going down this route and providing potted explanations of the positions of certain ‘schools of thought’ she adds little to these academic debates and detracts from the strengths of her book. Similarly, digressions take place with respect to the accuracy of depicting post-Cold War conflicts as ethnic conflicts or much more importantly describing the nature of ‘liberal peacebuilding’ with reference to a smattering of ideas and authors. The point is either you delve deep into these arguments or you omit them: what were left here was unsatisfying as it seems rather limited.

As mentioned above, the case studies provide some of the most important and telling contributions that the author makes through this study. While McMahon’s analyses of the causes and nature of the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo are by necessity short and thus rather superficial, her extensive field work and interviews conducted in the region have resulted in a particularly engaging and enlightening set of observations about the role of NGOs in post-conflict peacebuilding in these two countries. In essence, while maintaining that NGOs played an important role in the post-1989 international system, especially in the field of conflict resolution and post-conflict peacebuilding, their role is often misunderstood and most importantly changed over time from being a positive influence to something much less than that.

It is in explaining this position McMahon comes into her own. Her various points are extremely well taken: I will just highlight four of her most important observations by way of illustration. Perhaps the most important of these comes early in the book when the author, seeking to find evidence of NGO ‘success stories’ leaves the reader with the rather depressing thought that it was far easier, throughout her travels in the Balkans, to find evidence of the opposite and leave her doubtful as to, ‘[H]ow this messy group of actors, scattered haphazardly around the country, actually helped advance peace and democratic change remained a nagging question’(p. 5). Here we see that the NGO world is not one of coherence and consistency; there are different kinds of actors and actorness in the NGO world which don’t necessarily coalesce into a rational whole of concerted action or geographical location. They spring forth as a result of both need and expediency but not always in logical and efficient terms.

A second general point which needs to be highlighted stems from the reliance of local NGOs on international funding, an intrinsic part of the boom and bust cycle which McMahon puts forward. When there is international engagement, and financial and technical support for the local NGOs, their service provision and advocacy may
have a greater sense of purpose and certainly be more effective and influential. But this contingent relationship with the international community is fraught with dangers and difficulties for local NGOs, in a number of different ways pointed out in this book. For example, there is a distinct inequality between ‘internationals’ and ‘locals’ in terms of resources and access which leads to a negative hierarchy and often a lack of co-operation in overlapping fields. Similarly, from one of the most striking quotations in the book it becomes clear that this relationship is often one of mutual exploitation where the ‘locals waste Westerners money, and they waste our time’ (pp. 13–14). This indicates a divergence of agendas where domestic actors see their international counterparts merely as a source of cash while the international NGOs show either ignorance or naivety of local conditions and imperatives and pursue policies which are of little or no consequence.

What this leads to is a bigger pair of concerns, one specific to the outcome of this unequal and dysfunctional relationship between the international and local NGOs, the other a more significant and broad understanding of the effectiveness of international peacebuilding efforts. In the first instance, the faltering relationship between the local and international NGOs can often lead to a general discontent and disenchantment with ‘liberal democratic peacebuilding’, as the process of external–internal interaction results in what McMahon refers to as a ‘disembedded civil society’ (p. 2). Liberal interventionism and the form of peacebuilding creates a whole raft of local actors whose reliance on external actors often leads to a disenchantment with their ability to succeed, but more importantly to a disconnect with the local context which they are supposedly supporting.

The second point is far weightier and is a constant source of criticism in all international efforts in the Western Balkans, including the most extensive and significant, that of the EU. This is most often referred to as ‘local ownership’. It is evident from this book that the world of NGOs is often characterised by the lack of local ownership of advocacy and support processes. Too much is expected of internationals and their leadership; often their resources are exploited, and moreover they are regularly accused of being heavy-handed in their interventions, and not cognisant of or attuned enough to local exigencies. In effect, local NGOs simply do not ‘buy into’ international initiatives or pull their weight in implementing them. This is a syndrome that characterises the totality of Western, and especially European, efforts in the Western Balkans: criticism of international efforts is easy but when there is not enough domestic investment in international efforts they are bound to fail, and not only because of the lack of effort or local knowledge of the external actors. There is a need for domestic responsibility and engagement with external actors which is not always forthcoming, and is a major contributor to lack of success in international peacebuilding and other such efforts.

In conclusion, one would say that this book contributes an enormous amount to our understanding of the role and activities of NGOs in post-Cold War international peacebuilding efforts, especially in the Western Balkans. While it sometimes strays from its central focus and engages in a few digressions which do not add much to the overall argument, it more than impresses in terms of field work and the analysis that emerges from this. McMahon offers an objective assessment of the relationship between local and International NGOs in the peacebuilding process which is both engaging and instructive.