ATOMISED AND SUBORDINATED?
UNPACKING THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL INVOLVEMENT IN ‘THE LOCAL TURN’ OF PEACEBUILDING IN NEPAL AND CAMBODIA

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Abstract
The local turn debate sometimes falls into the trap of romanticising the local, while vilifying international involvement in peacebuilding. Although this post-colonially informed argument makes immediate theoretical sense, there is a dearth of empirically driven comparative research which explores whether, and if so how, an international presence actually influences local peacebuilding efforts. In order to address this research gap, the present article sets out to study the execution of local peacebuilding programmes in two relatively similar cases where one (Nepal) has enjoyed little international peacebuilding presence, while the other (Cambodia) has seen a massive influx of international actors and funding in its peacebuilding endeavour. Our empirical material indicates that international support for the local peacebuilding process in Cambodia has bolstered it, while the locally owned process in Nepal has been far from successful in forging the conditions for sustainable peace. To fathom why these particular outcomes have occurred, however, the full answers are unlikely to be found by merely scrutinising whether the peacebuilding processes have been primarily internationally or locally driven. Instead, we suggest that peacebuilding outcomes are better understood by studying situated practices.

Keywords: peacebuilding, the local turn, vertical integration, security development nexus, Nepal, Cambodia

Introduction
Contemporary peacebuilding is commonly portrayed as being in a state of acute crisis (Mac Ginty & Sanghera 2012). Thus, it is argued, the dominant liberal peace model promotes approaches to peacebuilding which are inherently anathematic to local worldviews and everyday needs, as it primarily draws impetus from internationally derived, technocratic, ‘blueprint’ formulas for peacebuilding (Richmond 2009; 2012). In fact, the hegemonic international norms and practices underpinning these interventions are often identified as a core part of the problem for why peacebuilding is so often unsuccessful in forging the
conditions for sustainable peace. In order to rescue peacebuilding from its alleged crisis, a dénouement in the guise of ‘the local turn’ of peacebuilding has entered the scene, gradually establishing itself as a forceful notion within the academic and policy literature on peacebuilding (Donais & McCandless 2017; Öjendal et al. 2017; Paffenholz 2015). As such, it promises new approaches to peacebuilding where ‘the local’ — albeit a contested concept — is more involved, and where its agency is strengthened so that peacebuilding reaches the everyday of the people whose peace is to be built (Mac Ginty 2015). This includes a concern for issues such as basic needs and economic development, as the prevention of further violence supposedly rests upon interconnecting security and development processes (International Peace Academy 2004; cf. Chandler 2007; cf. Stern & Öjendal 2010).

Although the critique represented by the local turn can be conceived as radical, policymakers commonly agree about the general imperative of a ‘turn’ towards the local and increasingly seek more grounded peacebuilding policies when their mandate allows for it. This is evident in the burgeoning ‘Doing Development Differently’ movement, which calls for aid solutions to be rooted in local contexts and for their underlying power asymmetries to be addressed. Likewise, one might see the Sustainable Development Goals and the ‘New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States’ as global policy developments in sync with the local turn of peacebuilding.

From the above, it is apparent that the critique embodied in the local turn is firmly taking root both in academia and in the world of policymaking. As a consequence, international involvement in peacebuilding is increasingly problematised and indeed often seen as one of the primary obstacles to building sustainable peace. While this post-colonially informed argument makes intuitive theoretical sense, there is a dearth of empirically driven comparative research which explores whether, and if so how, the international presence — with its attendant hegemonic norms and practices — influences local peacebuilding contexts. In order to address this research gap, the present article sets out to study the execution of local peacebuilding programmes in two relatively similar cases where one (Nepal) has enjoyed little international peacebuilding presence, while the other (Cambodia) has seen a massive influx of international actors and funding in support of its peacebuilding endeavour. By making this glaring difference our analytical focal point, we seek to shed new — and empirically grounded — light on the role of international involvement in local peacebuilding processes.

In order to achieve this aim, the article proceeds as follows. First, we contextualise the call for a local turn of peacebuilding and identify two core challenges to successful local peacebuilding which are salient in the literature. These challenges — atomism and subordination — serve as the thematic glue binding our cases together. Second, we turn to our case studies and scrutinise them in light of said challenges. Third, we analyse the two cases comparatively, driven by the logic of a most similar systems design (MSSD) (Anckar 2008). As such, we suggest that any significant difference between Nepal and Cambodia in terms of how local peacebuilding programmes are able (or unable) to meet the identified challenges can — at least in part — be attributable to the impact of international involvement. Finally, we end by indicating the relevance of our findings for the future of the local turn debate and practice.

**Contextualising the Local Turn**

After the end of the Cold War there was a firm belief that liberalism represented the ‘end of history’ (Fukuyama 1993/2006), and that it could be fruitfully exported to ‘fragile’
regions of the world in order to craft peaceful and democratic societies. Thus, it was assumed that international peace and security would conclusively be enabled by the spread of democratisation, the rule of law, human rights, free and globalised markets, and neo-liberal development (Richmond 2006, 291).

However, liberal interventions quickly came under scrutiny as critics exposed the limitations of the liberal peace. Particularly, its institutional, top-down, state-centric, ideological, and technocratic biases were branded as problematic (Mac Ginty 2006; Richmond 2009). Moreover, the critique highlighted the often asymmetric power relations inherent in the liberal peace model, as it supposedly confers agency on ‘expert’ international interveners, while the populations intervened upon are rendered passive ‘recipients’ (Richmond 2009). Although liberal peacebuilding has progressively evolved over time (Paris 2010), its questionable results have left it vulnerable to fundamental criticism.

To mitigate the flaws of the liberal peace a local turn of peacebuilding has emerged, drawing strongly on the work of J.P. Lederach (1997). As such, the local turn stresses the imperative of connecting peacebuilding practices with diverse everyday realities and contexts in order to increase their quality and legitimacy. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of supporting the agency of local actors in shaping their own lives and circumstances (Donais 2012, 145; Sisk 2009). From this angle, internationally derived, technocratic, blueprint formulas for peacebuilding appear increasingly problematic, as more participatory and contextually sensitive involvements are preferred, where international actors serve chiefly as facilitators of local programmes, rather than as interveners enforcing peace through a predetermined formula (Richmond 2009; 2012).

While the value of embracing local perspectives in peacebuilding appears almost axiomatic at this point, there are still critical voices which challenge the imperative of local involvement by highlighting some fundamental problems. Two of these criticisms stand out as particularly salient in the literature, as will be elaborated upon below.

**Challenges to the Local Turn**

Local peacebuilding initiatives risk being *atomised*. In fact, one of the most common criticisms of local peacebuilding is that it tends to occur in isolation from other local, national, or international peace processes. In such cases, local dynamics fail to contribute to the synergetic effects that are essential to successful peacebuilding (Donais & Knorr 2013). Typically, local peacebuilding programmes exhibit worthwhile ambitions, proper execution, and excellent project results, but as Lederach (1997) pointed out — local interventions need to be vertically integrated and horizontally connected to the wider processes and actors in the peacebuilding endeavour in order to be significant in the larger scheme of things (Donais 2015). Moreover, breaking the common atomism of local peacebuilding programmes not only entails connecting them with other institutional entities, but also involves successfully meshing them with the everyday lives of common people (Marijan 2017).

Local perspectives, furthermore, tend to be *subordinated* to higher level political dynamics. Here, local actors appear vertically integrated, but they remain stuck in a distinctly subordinate position vis-à-vis higher level political interests. In many post-conflict societies this turns troublesome when national political elites remain divided and confrontational, in spite of a formal peace agreement. Such polarised national political dynamics frequently trickle down into local politics, and in those cases the space for localised peace
initiatives appears severely restricted (Öjendal & Ou 2013). This problem is all the more pressing in societies which have a history of top-down political leadership, including (former) communist regimes, neopatrimonial systems, and other strongly hierarchical political structures (Mannergren-Selimovic 2010).

**Introducing the Cases**

Nepal and Cambodia share a series of similarities which make them suitable for comparison within a MSSD: they have experienced deep-seated violence dividing nations and communities; they have come to a peace agreement from which sustainable peace is expected to be built; they have embraced local approaches to peacebuilding; and, lastly, they are both relatively poor and socially stratified societies located in a similar cultural sphere. However, the cases differ significantly when it comes to the international involvement in their respective peacebuilding processes. While Cambodia has enjoyed a substantial influx of international actors and funding, Nepal’s experience of peacebuilding has been characterised by considerably less international involvement, as will be evident in the case studies below.

The material from Nepal was gathered in early 2017, as 25 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with interlocutors in Kathmandu and Baglung district. The interviews focused primarily on representatives of local peacebuilding programmes in Baglung, but they also included common people, civil servants, and politicians in the same district. The material from Cambodia was gathered in 2015 and 2016 in six rural communes spread across the country. Civil servants with a long experience of peacebuilding were targeted, as well as key persons in the relevant local communities, resulting in around 50 semi-structured interviews. The interviews in both cases were qualitative, seeking a narrative of the interlocutors’ understanding of the processes, with a particular focus on the two challenges reviewed above in order to make the cases comparable.

**Nepal: local peace committees, politicisation, and lingering neopatrimonialism**

Since 2006, Nepal has been going through a transitional phase seeking to establish a viable, peaceful, democracy following the decade-long Maoist insurgency which began in 1996. In 2006, reacting to a royalist usurpation of power in 2005, a popular civic movement known as Jana Andolan II paved the way for the abolition of the monarchy, the reinstatement of multi-party rule, and eventually the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) (Von Einsiedel et al. 2012). Among its primary achievements the CPA formalised a permanent ceasefire between the warring parties and adopted an interim government and constitution.

Alas, Nepal’s political trajectory since the CPA has been anything but stable, with nine different governments ruling the nation between 2008 and 2016. Thus, national political dynamics may be aptly described as precarious (Blunck 2014) and Nepalese academics have recently argued that Nepal’s democracy has been hijacked by its political elites (Timalsina 2017, 86). One of the most contentious political issues in the post-conflict phase has been related to transitional justice. The majority of the conflict violations which occurred during the civil war remain unresolved, a matter which is only very grudgingly — if at all — being addressed by the political establishment due to its highly politicised nature (Impunity Watch 2015; International Center for Transitional Justice 2016).
In 2007, the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction (MoPR) introduced the Local Peace Committee (LPC): a nationwide peacebuilding initiative intended to mitigate conflicts on the district and Village Development Committee (VDC) level. The vision behind the LPC project was to make ‘the peace implementation processes all-inclusive, with specific emphasis on local participation’ (Bhattarai 2013, 2). This initiative — spanning 71 of Nepal’s 75 districts — represents the most far-reaching attempt at localising peacebuilding in the country. The LPC programme has been funded exclusively by the MoPR (Miklian et al. 2011, 295).2

The LPC mandate includes: monitoring of the implementation of the MoPR’s Relief and Reconstruction Programme; data collection on conflict-affected individuals; facilitation of conflict transformation, reconciliation, and trust-building; monitoring of social and political developments on the local level, and informing the MoPR of any local situations which might threaten the national peace process (Upreti et al. 2016, 10). Despite their rather ambitious mandate, Nepal’s LPCs have been criticised by academics and international NGOs alike, most notably for being heavily politicised, but also for largely failing to embrace their broader mandates (Carter Center 2009; 2011; Selim 2018).

While the above provides an overview of the post-conflict environment in Nepal, below we focus on the situation in Baglung district at the time of our fieldwork in early 2017. Baglung was moderately hit by the civil war (Informal Sector Service Centre [INSEC] n.d.), but it has been relatively peaceful since the CPA. Still, small-scale political violence has surfaced in the post-conflict phase, for instance during the Constituent Assembly elections of 2008 (Franklin 2008, 31). Baglung is, moreover, home to a large number of LPCs, whose work will be discussed in closer detail below. At the time of our fieldwork, there was one LPC registered on the district level and 52 LPCs on the VDC level in the district.

The local as atomism in Nepal

Our interviews suggest that the work of most LPCs in Baglung follows only a thin version of the broader LPC mandate. This entails that LPCs see it as their primary task to document the grievances of conflict-affected persons in the district. Thus, they record the alleged victim’s story, make an assessment of the credibility of the claims, after which they forward the case to the Chief District Officer along with a recommendation on whether said person should receive interim relief from the government or not (Interviews 9, 15 and 23 with LPC members in Baglung). While certainly an important contribution in itself, this rather narrow interpretation of the mandate misses some of the potential of the broader mandate, which empowers LPCs to engage in reciprocal dialogue with the MoPR about conflict-inducing processes in the district. We found no indication of this kind of deeper dialogue taking place between Baglung’s LPCs and the MoPR — nor any interest being expressed in developing it in the future. This passive stance sits somewhat uneasily with the recommendations in the local turn literature, where firm vertical integration is commonly treated as a sine qua non of successful local peacebuilding (Donais 2015).

While establishing richer exchanges between Baglung’s LPCs and the MoPR could hypothetically result in synergetic effects benefiting the overall peace process in Nepal, this may be restricted, inter alia, by the sparse financial endowments of the LPCs. For, as crudely noted by an LPC representative in Baglung, the bursary from the MoPR is not
The decrepit financial state may also help explain why Baglung’s LPCs appear isolated from the everyday lives of common people in the district, as these institutions provide few, if any, avenues for local development.

Training sessions on mobile phone repairs for financially marginalised people (Interview 5 with LPC members in Baglung) — alas, these initiatives appear both under-funded and rare.

The local as subordinated in Nepal

Another issue of concern is how independent the LPCs really can be, given that they are ultimately government agencies. This matter becomes all the more pressing knowing that the primary task of the LPCs in Baglung is to identify conflict victims, and that those responsible — directly or indirectly — for conflict violations remain firmly embedded in the national political system. Under these conditions, one wonders if the LPCs can act freely in identifying the conflict victims eligible for compensation, or if their freedom is constrained by political influence. Indicatively, this was a common criticism amongst residents of Baglung, who frequently dismissed the LPCs for being politicised entities — a view which is consistent with previous research (Carter Center 2011; Selim 2018; Upreti et al. 2016). Thus, interlocutors in Baglung commonly felt that obtaining justice and reparation for conflict violations was futile through the LPCs, as they were seen as intimately entwined with national political dynamics. Illustratively, a female shopkeeper in Baglung stated the following:

We cannot do anything through the LPC … the major problem is the political parties … in order to get support for our cause we have to be a member of political parties, and keep in touch with political leaders. (Interview 7)

Another interlocutor — a male journalist in Baglung — expressed a similar, albeit slightly more subtle, concern:

Many members of the peace committees are also involved in other forums, so they are not thinking about the relief and justice of the victims … many political leaders are involved in the peace committees — they are not responsible to the conflict victims and their families. (Interview 13)

Furthermore, the perceived politicisation of Baglung’s LPCs appears to reduce the appeal of their more developmentally oriented programmes to regular residents: ‘neighbours support each other, and do better without political involvement’, as was noted by a small business owner in Baglung, when asked about his lack of engagement with the LPCs (Interview 11).

How might we understand the alleged politicisation of Baglung’s LPCs? As insightfully explained by a Kathmandu-based academic cum interlocutor, Nepal’s political system remains strictly hierarchical to this day, as local political cadres are invariably faithful to...
the party whip. Consequently, whatever happens on the local level has to be sanctioned — if not directly ordered — by national political elites (Interview 25). Indeed, Nepal’s (neo-) patrimonial political structures have been outlined in a number of other studies, including Housden (2010) and O’Neill (2016). From this point of view — and bearing in mind the high political stakes of the unaddressed war crimes — the alleged politicisation of Baglung’s LPCs appears not only credible, but also directly shaped by higher level political processes. Thus, political elites interfere in the work of LPCs via local party cadres if LPC activities risk threatening their political interests, which could be the case if the ‘wrong’ conflict victim was identified. This is, however, not to say that Baglung’s LPCs are completely void of agency due to their politicisation (cf. Bhattarai 2013), but merely to suggest that said agency is often moulded in relation to national political dynamics. This argument will be elaborated upon in the analysis section below.

Cambodia: localisation of peace by default

Following genocide (1975–1979) and a prolonged civil war (1979–1991/1999), Cambodia was a broken society in severe need of peace and reconciliation. It was subjected to one of the first and largest UN interventions in the post-Cold War era, stretching from March 1992 to September 1993. It constituted a massive intervention with a huge impact in both the short and the long term (Lizee 2000; Öjendal & Ou 2015; United Nations 1991), and it gave rise to a flood of international peacebuilding initiatives.4

The intervention and its ensuing attempts at peacebuilding were highly centralised. Neither the peace agreement, nor its implementation, carried any provisions for local reconciliation, pacification of everyday life, participatory and inclusive politics, or the localisation of peace. Although the UN operation had staff positioned at province and district levels, they were given clear orders not to interact with local politics or even development. At the onset, the intervention was partly unsuccessful: swathes of the country remained at war; elections were messy, and the dominant party did not resign in spite of losing the elections. The civil war continued on the outskirts of the territory, and four years later the political opposition was chased into exile in a violent showdown, seemingly obscuring the hope for a sustainable peace (Chandler 1998).

With time, however, national politics stabilised in a semi-authoritarian fashion. During this period, the international community provided major resources for peacebuilding. A growing number of voices called for peacebuilding approaches to increase participation and broad-based agency. However, by 1999 ‘peacebuilding’ still remained an issue negotiated amongst national elites and international donors. Rather than involving ordinary people, peacebuilding usually entailed an elite rivalry for the spoils attached to various projects. Instead of deepening peace, the political system served to reinforce cleavages and block societal reconciliation (Öjendal & Ou 2015).

Gradually though, from the early 2000s, the various local peacebuilding programmes started to have an effect which increasingly received recognition: ‘People are free to express their ideas and criticise the leaders. Security within the commune has improved a lot, and we now have a much more peaceful environment’ (Interview Commune chief in Kampong Chhnang). This was eventually underpinned by the initially successful decentralisation reform, opening up the opportunity for everyday peace and local democracy from 2002 and onwards. However, this gradual success also calls attention to the challenges which ‘the local’ needs to overcome.
The local as atomism in Cambodia

By 2000, there were several substantial political processes growing from below in Cambodia. These consisted, for instance, of a reform of the local authorities and a gradual awakening of the localised civil society. Interest in democratic content, reconciliation, and agency were also slowly but broadly growing in rural areas previously seen as docile, lacking political awareness, ambition, and agency (Öjendal & Kim 2013). As expressed by a Village Chief in Takeo, ‘We completely want to solve everything in the commune. I don’t know how fair things are at the upper levels, so it’s better to take care of it here.’ Picking up on such sentiments, almost by default, the international community and the national government turned towards supporting local institutions and local democracy, while NGOs pursued more agency and empowerment-oriented localisation of peace. Up until the turn of the millennium, these were atomised and uneven processes, which were only modestly significant for the national development, but that too changed in the coming decade.

Significantly, in 1996 a major participatory rural development programme was initiated. It heralded a bottom-up approach and held high ambitions for participation and inclusive democratic practices. After initial success as an area programme which was only implemented in a small part of the country, a decision was made to scale up and turn it into a country-wide programme called Seila. This programme piloted a bold attempt at working on the local level and pursued a shift in values, government style, and the overall nature of the state–citizen dialogue, as well as channelling development resources to the local level. It embodied, *inter alia*, ideas and international norms of local elections, participation, and broad-based inclusion, reversing many features of local governance from the previous period (Öjendal & Kim 2006). Although drawing on local sentiments and capacities, it was almost entirely initiated and financed by the international development community.

The initially atomised Seila programme grew incrementally and by 2001 it had been transformed into a democratic decentralisation process, codified in law and championing its first local elections in 2002. Local elections have since been held every fifth year, producing multi-party commune councils which have worked in a spirit of cooperation and relatively good faith (COMFREL 2007). While this stood partly in contradiction to the semi-authoritarian politics at the national level, it was nevertheless rational for the dominant party to pursue such a process since it was easier to control voters in rural areas through soft power and their superior local networks.

Hence, what initially started as externally driven and scattered experiments gradually evolved into a part of a consolidated state structure which broke the isolation of local peacebuilding programmes and connected them horizontally and vertically. The weakness of this process was not its content, but rather its vulnerability to higher level politics, as we shall see below.

The local as subordinated in Cambodia

Historically, Cambodia constitutes a vertically organised society (cf. Chandler 1991) which was reinforced by communist party structures and its authoritarian politics. Information went up in the system, orders came down. Modern-day international interventions which focused on statebuilding reinforced this pattern. The subordination of local level dynamics to central actors in this system was close to absolute in the period...
spanning from the communist era of the 1970s to the international intervention of the early 1990s.

This would gradually change with the local reforms starting in late 1990s and accelerated with the democratic decentralisation reform of the early 2000s: ‘This was very different from the national elections, which to a large extent was out of reach from local officials’ (Interview Commune councillor in Battambang). Although neither universal across the country nor entirely consistent over time, the communes were less plagued by historical and ideological animosity. Instead, from the late 1990s, a deep pragmatism marked the political work, and although local politicians have operated under different party labels with agendas linked to those of their peers, they have sometimes sided with the local people in the face of outside repression and threats. Many of the local leaders have developed a sense of duty to take care of their local society and provide the leadership it needs (Öjendal & Kim 2006). Overall, local reconciliation and the political climate have been considerably improved to the extent that such improvement has been measurable in repeated quantitative investigations (COMFREL 2007; Öjendal & Kim 2013).

Still, many question the strength of the local to withstand the pressure from above (cf. Smoke 2013), as the power from above is constantly felt by local politicians.

[Local power] only exists on the paper. In reality, we don’t have it yet. When I attend training, they say power is shared with the local level. But in reality, high ranking officials see the commune [representatives] as non-sense persons who don’t know how to do anything. (Interview Commune chief in Kampong Cham)

The commune councils and their chiefs are key actors on the local scene. They typically express frustration, feeling they could do much more:

Five commune chiefs came together to write a proposal for road development, but this proposal became stuck somewhere along the way upwards. And if the proposal is not in the Prime Minister’s hand, you get nothing. (Interview Commune chief in Kampong Chhnang)

However, in the wake of more permissive and inclusive local politics and with the rising capacity of local politicians to manage differences, there are ample signs of agency, local initiatives, and an everyday dialogue between the local state and its citizens which is rendering councillors at the commune level an organic power, serving purposes of peace. This is also seeping into the everyday lives of people:

They [people] were very afraid [of authorities] before the commune reform. In the first and second mandate, they were still reserved but not afraid, and didn’t dare speak up face to face with authorities … People now are confident and aware of their rights. And it’s improving day by day. (Interview Commune councillor in Takeo)
In our interview series, commune leaders typically argued that the communes were now ‘pockets of peace’. The commune leaders univocally stated that serious political conflicts in the communes would stem neither from localised animosity nor from tensions in the local multi-party councils. ‘Decentralisation was good for reconciliation, especially among the different political parties … [but] there was widespread dissatisfaction with the national government’ (Interview Commune chief in Prey Veng).

Hence, in the minds of many commune leaders, if repression, violence and disorder were to resurface, it would be emanating from national elites, and it remained unlikely that it would be fed from below.

Analysis: Contrasting Nepal and Cambodia

Below we analyse and compare the two major challenges for the local turn as seen in the two cases.

The local as atomism

In Nepal, there appears to be a certain disjuncture between local peace initiatives and the overarching national peace process. This is evident, for example, in the lack of a deeper dialogue between Baglung’s LPCs and the MoPR, despite a mandate which in principle empowers the former to pursue such an exchange. In Cambodia, however, the initially atomised Seila project was eventually scaled up to a successful country-wide programme, thus indicating that local peace initiatives can meaningfully connect across vertical and horizontal scales if there is a sound plan and vision for how to accomplish it. The relative success of the Seila project is partially attributable to the fact that international donors designed and funded a programme which responded to a local desire for peace, inclusion, and ‘soft’ politics. This has not happened with the LPCs in Nepal, which remain under-funded by the MoPR and have not attracted any significant international funding. Hence, their ability to connect with other peacebuilding ventures in the country is limited, and it furthermore reduces the incentive that common people have for engaging with the work of the LPCs. As Baglung’s local peace committees are barely scraping by, the potential for them to serve as vehicles for local development is seen as non-existent by regular residents in the district. This may go a long way to explaining the lack of an everyday connection which Baglung’s LPCs apparently suffer from. In Cambodia, on the other hand, the Seila programme enjoyed sufficient funding (although in a limited number of locations), which arguably facilitated both its connectivity and spread across the polity, as well as its ability to resonate with local, everyday, lives. Subsequently, the decentralisation process came with some targeted funding for, and voice from, local interests.
The local as subordinated to higher level political dynamics

Baglung’s LPCs are commonly portrayed as heavily politicised entities, thus suggesting that they are closely aligned with the national political elites. Given the hierarchical nature of Nepal’s political system, the contentious relationship between political elites, and the fact that Baglung’s LPCs work primarily on the nationally divisive issue of identifying conflict victims, this seems like a credible portrayal. Under such conditions of ingrained national political antagonism, it seems wise to critically scrutinise the common assertion that local peacebuilding programmes should invariably strive to be vertically integrated (Donais 2015). Instead, we suggest that selective vertical integration might be a more appropriate guiding principle. This would entail that vertical integration remains a priority for local peacebuilding initiatives; however, such aspirations must be choosy in order for elite hostilities not to trickle down into local peacebuilding programmes. It might even be argued that a period of local atomism could be preferable in such instances. As such, local atomism may constitute a subtle form of political agency when understood in light of the nationally divisive political landscape of Nepal. Thus, one must be open to the possibility that agency can be exercised also through supposedly passive practices such as withdrawal and silences — an argument which is increasingly made in feminist peacebuilding scholarship (e.g. Simic 2016). By this logic, one could read the apparently weak vertical integration of Baglung’s LPCs as an expression of political agency. While this kind of strategic withdrawal may not directly contribute to the overarching peace process, it may still represent the most viable option for local peacebuilding actors under conditions of ingrained national political antagonism — at least in the short term.

Historically, Cambodia has likewise constituted a vertically organised political society. Hence, one might have expected to find that local peacebuilding ventures would be heavily shaped by national political dynamics here as well. However, in the case of the Seila programme, local communes appear to have developed a certain resilience to the contentious national politics. To some extent, this can be explained by reference to the nexus between peacebuilding and development. In Cambodia, the ample resources poured into the Seila programme initiated a transition from patrimonial political structures into a system not solely tied to traditional political hierarchies. Enforced liberalism and local business opportunities implied, furthermore, that the archaic patronage system was diluted, leaving space for ‘bossism’ — as also seen in other neo-liberal (-ish) countries in the region (Sidel 1997). Thus, the vertical political allegiances, which had played such a significant part in local politics and development processes in the past, lost some — but far from all — of their purchase under the new order. The same cannot be said of Nepal, which remains largely wedded to its (neo-) patrimonial political structures, as political life is still chiefly organised around individual leaders and patronage in a strictly hierarchical system. Thus, even though Baglung’s LPCs have seemingly distanced themselves slightly from the volatile national political dynamics, the absence of other viable options for local development has ultimately made it difficult to completely sever the strong vertical political ties which linger in local communities.
Conclusion: Towards the Local Turn as Practice?

The local turn debate sometimes falls into the trap of ‘romanticising the local’ (Björkdahl et al. 2016, 10) while vilifying the international. Our case studies suggest — unsurprisingly — that this is not always an accurate representation. Rather, we have highlighted how international support for the local peacebuilding process in Cambodia has appeared to bolster it, while the locally owned process in Nepal has been far from successful in forging the conditions for sustainable peace. In order to fathom why these particular outcomes have occurred, however, the full answers are unlikely to be found by merely scrutinising whether the peacebuilding processes have been primarily internationally or locally driven. Ultimately, such analysis rests on reductive binaries which say little about the ‘messy’ empirical realities of local peacebuilding programmes (Paffenholz 2015, 858). Instead, we follow the recent literature which stresses the importance of analysing peacebuilding as a situated practice — be it as experience (Millar 2014) or as the sum of its social relationships (Hunt 2017) — in order to understand why local peacebuilding ‘works’ in some instances, and not in others.

Furthermore, we have suggested that local agency in peacebuilding can take subtle forms, which need to be better conceptualised in the local turn literature. As such, we have indicated that strategic withdrawal from vertical integration could be one way that ‘the local’ exercises political agency under volatile national political conditions. External actors can play a productive part in supporting such agency by contributing funds so that local peacebuilders enjoy sufficient resources, thus rendering them less dependent on alliances with predatory national elites. In other words: ‘the international architecture is still required … as a check and balance against state power’ (Richmond 2018, 238). In order to identify such subtle local agency in the first place, however, external actors must be willing to engage deeply with diverse local peacebuilding contexts. This means a commitment to being there and to learning about — and from — local social and political dynamics. While such a context-sensitive approach is still somewhat rare within the international peacebuilding community, the growing appreciation of ethnographic engagements in the peacebuilding literature provides some cause for optimism.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
Acknowledgements

We extend our gratitude to four anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this manuscript. Moreover, we acknowledge the important contribution of research assistant Agnes Neu, whose extraordinarily rich fieldwork has informed the Cambodian case study.

Funding

This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council (VR) [grant number 2015-03611].

Endnotes

1 Nepal did receive some international attention in the early days of its peacebuilding phase. However, since 2011, most major international actors have withdrawn or significantly scaled down.

2 Since submitting this manuscript, it has come to the authors’ attention that Nepal’s LPCs have actually received some indirect international funding through the Nepal Peace Trust Fund and the Asian Development Bank. Still, this does not invalidate the comparative premise of our article, as there is ample consensus in the literature that said international funding has been sparse, and that it has invariably been channelled through the MoPR; thus ensuring that the implementation of the LPC programme has remained firmly with domestic actors. Hence, there remains enough significant differences between the two cases to warrant the comparative framing of this article.

3 As a case in point, the former Maoist insurgency leader ‘Prachanda’ has served as the Prime Minister of Nepal twice since 2008.

4 Part of the Cambodia section is a revised version of a text appearing in an open-access report published by the Expert Group of Aid Studies in Stockholm.

5 Although not within the time frame under investigation in this paper, it should nevertheless be mentioned that politics in Cambodia took a repressive turn in the autumn of 2017, which negatively impacted on the quality of local democracy and peace.

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